

## **El Salvador Trip Notes by Rick Steves, December, 1991:**

(This is a rough copy of my journal from the two week Center For Global Education tour I took with 22 others. For simplicity and for the safety of some of the locals we met, I've made minor changes in a few names, places and times. We very likely will sponsor a return trip for 12 days in December, 1992. Call me at ETBD for more information. Any part of this journal may be reprinted. Thank you for reading about my experience in these countries--Rick.)

### **Culture Shock without Jet Lag: Flying South**

On the drive to the airport talk radio entertained normal folks mourning the imprisonment and suffering of white hostages in Lebanon and dealt with the problem of making after-Thanksgiving left-overs more interesting. First World loved ones wondered why anyone would go to the risk and expense of visiting El Salvador and Nicaragua. I was reminded that I have a wife and children. A trip down there was risky.

The Houston airport lobby, filled with Salvadorans, was a third world anti-chamber. Men sported new boom boxes and women carried flight bags on their heads. I was charmed by their beautiful kids, but wondered where they get their money? Boarding the plane I passed a family in first class who paid a campesino's annual wage for the option to fly on that side of the curtain.

It took thirty minutes for the flight attendant to get everyone straightened out - people in the right seat, bags properly stowed, overhead lockers finally squeezed shut. The problem was the norm. Our flight landed on time.

Hot and muggy, we disembarked to be greeted by El Salvador's most famous poster child: the one-legged "the innocent victim of the leftist guerrillas." She hadn't moved since my visit three years ago. But a new guy stood next to her, a poster of ARENA party president Cristiani. It will be interesting to see just how El Salvador's "fledgling democracy," as our embassy calls it, has grown since my 1988 visit and in the two years since the far right wing ARENA party assumed power. There is a tense, fragile but hopeful truce in the air and we sailed right out of the airport, through the throng of craned necks and black heads and into the street to meet our guide. He had seven busy days of meetings and experiences lined up for our group of 22. This was "educational tourism" and the class was "problems, poverty and politics of Central America." Part one was El Salvador. Next week we'd do part two: Nicaragua.

### **First Day. Liberation, Opium and Orphans:**

We started our Sunday visiting a liberation theology church in a poor neighborhood of San Salvador. Local children learn the bible through third world eyes. When asked in what form Jesus was sent to them, they answer "poor." This is the church of the "popular class"...standing room only under corrugated tin and dangling neon. The paper doves on the wall are named "Justicia" and "Amore".

In the rebel offensive of 1989 this church was bombed. The new church was built just outside the community but this is a base Christian community, the briquettes of the popular dissent, and they insist on worshipping inside their neighborhood. This is their reality. Their life is faith based. If the priest wanted anyone to preach to, he would have to preach inside the community.

Churches that are part of an organized community are persecuted. This church, San Salvador's oldest and most active base Christian congregation, has lost over 620 martyrs, all slain since 1980. After the bombing it was too dangerous to worship here so they went into their "period of pilgrimage" moving weekly from home to home.

Standing at the back of the church, my eleven year old girl friend in a white dress, big brown eyes and a ponytail tied in pink tugged on my arm and introduced me to the portrait of "El Signor" above us. Romero, the assassinated archbishop, hung next to portraits of three of the neighborhood's martyrs. The paintings, riddled with machine gun holes, showed the anger this poor community aroused.

El Salvador's largest coin is worth a dime. The offering was only coins. A soldier, equipped with two years' wages worth of uniform and weaponry stood outside, low profile but very much there. As the congregation stood I could count all 24 of our group. Even Art was tall in this crowd.

After the mass we met with some women church and community leaders. Their favorite book was the Acts of the Apostles and they modeled themselves after the first Christian communities. "The gospel is to be practiced, not just read. Then it becomes the living word." Their one message to us: "our beloved El Salvador needs you to help stop this war."

After lunch we had a free hour at the hotel. Two blocks away a stadium was filled and festive. A fundamentalist revival, government blessed and well-funded, was packing them in. Ushers in bright outfits and big smiles, a powerful sound system, pop music and all the escapist theology out-stretched arms can handle. Religion in the squalor of Central America can be a powerful opiate. When the Catholic church went popular, "sects," as the locals call the charismatic, fundamental-type churches that remind the poor that your rewards await in heaven, appeared to fill that void. The message: "We are not of this world (but vote for me anyway)."

Later that day we drove out of town, into a conflictive zone near the Guazapa volcano, to a Lutheran-sponsored orphanage. We celebrated the mass with the teachers and children of the orphanage. Eucharist of tortillas and wine from a Cinzano bottle. Afterwards the kids entertained. The tots doing jumping bean-type dances to tunes called "the frog" and "Everybody loves bananas." They wore green shirts, given to them as the class of the offensive of '89. (There is a new wave of orphans after each offensive in this civil war.) The war is pervasive here. Even the kid's Christmas songs talk of happy days when the war is over.

### **Martyred Nuns and the '89 offensive.**

December 2. Eleven years ago today three nuns and a lay worker (all US citizens) were stopped by the military on the way into the capital from the airport, taken down a side road, raped, tortured and murdered. We drove to the spot for a memorial service presided over by six priests including a bishop from California.

Maryknoll sisters played guitar and sang as Gringos and locals remembered. Small guitars, sweet voices, the tropical drone of bugs, and a percussive of machetes hacking sugar cane in the distance. Sweat dripped about a drop every ten seconds from the bishop's chin as he reminded us that it is great to die for truth but it is also great to live for it.

I could only imagine what these trees had seen on that horrible day. Today the weeds were trampled not by soldiers, rape and nuns but by pilgrims remembering this event in solidarity with the continuing struggles of the Salvadoran people. Passing the peace of Christ on this spot was powerful. Each hug and handshake said clearly peace with justice. This was our third communion in two days--it had me wondering about spiritual diabetes.

Back at our hotel we met with an Englishman who reports for the BBC, NPR and the Washington Post. He explained that in 1988 the international community told the FMLN (leftist guerrillas) that if they win the war there would be no money to run and rebuild the country. The FMLN realized a negotiated settlement was the answer. The Offensive of 1989 effectively disproved claims from the right that the left was losing steam. The guerrillas carried out the offensive to win respect at the negotiating table. They nearly won the war.

Americans who were in San Salvador during the '89 offensive tell fascinating stories. Our guide was going home on the eve of the anticipated explosion. He forgot the beer, drove a block to the store, got out of his car, turned around and the previously empty street was filled with fully armed guerrillas. He crawled under his car, waited out 30 minutes of gunfire, noticed that the lady in the shop was actually still open, bought the beer and went home to sit out the rest of the battle. A Center for Global Education group, just like ours, had just arrived and spent four days holed up in our hotel. The reporter remembered going into the rich neighborhood and running along side members of the coffee elite fleeing with Gucci bags filled with their belongings saying, "We can't kill all these people. We have to

negotiate."

The new US policy in El Salvador is one of neglect and how to get cleanly out of this mess. Locals know that the post war battles will be a political. The FMLN knows its only future is as a political power rather than a military one. (Not an easy transition for the hardened commanders in the hills). The population (right and left) is of a mind set to oppose whoever (right or left) blocks the move towards peace. Colin Powell recently reportedly told foot-dragging right wingers that a tropical storm can be even worse than a desert storm.

### **Be a patriot. Kill a Priest.**

We visited the Democratic Convergence party headquarters -actually in the government now with 8 of 64 seats in congress. Three years ago their leadership was in exile for their own safety.

A deputy explained to us that it's clear now to most that negotiations, not war, is the way. The Oligarchy-backed far right military faction wants to cause chaos to derail negotiations. Even Bush himself sees he can only loose by maintaining a communist focus in El Salvador. Remember the standard insult from the right around the world is that the others are communists. With the end of US money in sight the right must deal with reality...and that's the people of this country. The chiefs of the army are nervous. El Salvador armed itself because political spaces were closed. That is changing. As a people we want to show the world a political El Salvador, able to solve its problems peacefully.

About 80% of Salvadoran activists are Christian. Faith powers them - even in the FMLN. El Salvador's rich history of martyrs led to this moment of negotiated peace.

The growth of sects is a problem throughout Latin American. It's a political, and not religious problem, imposed upon us from the North. It stops people from being involved in political action. Many are financed by US AID. Our local Christian TV station was brought to us with US AID money.

Next we crossed the hall and the political spectrum to meet with the far right Arena party. As I pressed the deputy on if the government is able to control the army to Christiani's satisfaction, a shady character appeared in the back and our guide decided we shouldn't pursue this topic. He had seen this guy at many of his meetings.

Then we drove through the elite class neighborhood to the lush and cool haven of learning, the UCA (University of Central America). This wasn't so cool in the offensive of 89. It was here that the Jesuit leadership of the school, six priests, were murdered. We visited the spot and heard the story, seeing gruesome photos and relics of the violence: a Bible ripped in two by machine gun bullets, a scorched portrait of Romero with a melted frame, another portrait with a bullet in the heart, and the rose garden planted on the spot of the murders by the caretaker whose wife and daughter were also killed so there would be no witnesses.

At the campus chapel next to the graves of the Jesuits were crosses of other nearly nameless victims of this war- names and dates of death on crosses, stacked like folding chairs against the wall, a quiet audience next to the much-visited graves of the six Jesuits. At the entrance of the chapel reads two famous Romero quotes: "With the people of El Salvador it's easy to be a good pastor." And "if they kill me I will be resurrected in the people of El Salvador." He knew when the military circulated slogans like "Be a patriot. Kill a priest." that they weren't kidding around.

That night, to shake things up a bit, I ganged up with seven others in two cabs and went to the Sheridan Hotel (scene of the famous guerilla attack embarrassing the Yankee green berets in '89) in search of local elites or First World agents of oppression. The place was pretty dead. A security guard followed us around until he figured we were too stupid to be of any trouble. We settled into the bar for rum and cokes, recognized, even here, as Cuba libres. We practiced saying CIA in pig latin. I said I was with the YMCA. We decided a fun way for peasants to play pranks on gringos enjoying "homestays" is to bed them down on the spot the family cow is potty trained on. I am working on a cure for US AID (Acquired Independence Deficiency) and pondering the relationship of the massacres of '32 and the early '80s to the Biblical Jubilee year.

Back at our hotel a dance was going on. It was the finale of the hair-styling convention. Imagine that, a hair-styling convention in El Salvador. Four of us talked ourselves in without the \$10 cover and were immediately adopted by the nicely coiffed and dance-hungry ladies.

### **Salvadoran history lesson:**

1522 - Land discovered by Europe, given to Conquistadors. Indigenous groups had communal system, no concept of land ownership.

1821 - Independence of local land-owners (Criollos) from Spain

Wealth came from crops:

Indigo - first plantations. Made purple dye.

Cacao - next big cash crop

Coffee - third stage, in the 1850s. Coffee grows well where cacao and indigo didn't, in the highlands. Unfortunately, this was the only affordable land left for people to live on. This very profitable "brown gold" takes three years to mature so it's impossible for the hand-to-mouth peasant to get into it as a business. Coffee only needs two to three months of labor a year so peasants will by definition be under-employed.

1881 - The Oligarchy declared all non-coffee land was rightfully the state's. The state then sold it to the highest bidders. There was no mass up-rising as El Salvador's infamous "14 families" emerge. These were mostly Europeans getting in on the bottom floor. (Christiani is Italian. His wife's family was German. They were among these).

1881 - National Guard (which the US funds today) was established in this same year. The roots of today's wealth and problems were planted in these coffee fields.

1929 - A first world depression is a third world cataclysm. Wages and employment fall with the market.

1932 was a horrific year. Four percent of El Salvador's population was massacred as Indians organized with urban communists (whose leader was an intellectual named Farabundi Marti). Anyone in Indian clothes was killed. The uprising, with lousy organization and communication, was a total flop. It's called the Matanza (bigger than a massacre). 40,000 were killed in five days. To be an Indian was a crime (even today, you'll see no Indian dress). Marti was executed. The National Guard, in synch with the latest European styles, wore fascist uniforms. For the next generation, peasants looked only at the ground (a stark contrast today).

1950-1970 - Cotton and sugar cane became the new cash crops.

1970s - Export crop system collapses. With the help of Marx in the cities and liberation theology in the rural areas, the peasants organize. The stooped peasant was tired of carrying the weight of two repressive institutions - the Oligarchy and the church.

In Liberation Theology the priest is necessary primarily for sacramental purposes. He is directed from below. Because of liberation theology, peasant raised his eyes. The FMLN (the Farabundi Marti National Liberation Front, named after the early organizer who was executed in the Matanza of '32) was formed to work on the land distribution problem.

### **Colonial Theology (pre-Liberation Theology Catholicism):**

1. strict separation of heaven and earth, bodies and souls
  2. stressed individual rather than community needs.
  3. wealth was a blessing, poverty was God's will. Don't question it. Slave ships were named after Jesus and the saints.
  4. stressed obedience to authority, church and political.
- Salvation was determined by your acceptance of your place.
5. when you die - heaven is great. That's all that matters.

The roll of the priest is to help assure your salvation along these lines. Only in '65 after Vatican II did things change. Bibles became available in Spanish. People read the word.

About this time, many Christian workers came to Central America after Castro, enthusiastic soldiers in the fight to stop the spread of Communism. Ironically, their first hand

experience with poor communities led them to get liberation theology rolling.

In Liberation Theology all have dignity by being creatures of God therefore society should be structured to give that dignity.

Liberation Theology rescued Jesus. The Virgin Mary was the prime focus in traditional Latin American outlook. Traditionally, women in church could identify closest with the pain of a woman whose son had been crucified.

In Liberation Theology, Jesus lived out the faith to its ultimate consequence and was killed. He challenged all aspects of life - like Romero, Jesuits and Base Christian leaders. These people are manifestations of Jesus.

"Gospel" was a word used in Roman times for a political message, a military propaganda term of the Roman army. The cross announced Rome's "good news" that another subversive had been done away with...a Roman victory. For Christians to use the Gospel and the cross was a radical turning of the tables.

### **Methods of Liberation Theology:**

- 1: Analyze and reflect on your life situation socially
- 2: study scriptures in light of this and in search of direction.
- 3: take action.

Base Christian Community success is based on real participation and the solidarity of the communities.

Vatican II decided that the church must be in this world. "How can the Bible be relevant to modern world of progress. The Medellien conference of Latin American bishops in 1988 followed this up asking the Bible can be applied to the oppressed and poor world.

1. Institutionalized violence (landlessness and structural hunger) is as sinful as individual violence.
2. Neutrality is impossible. If you're not involved, you're involved.
3. The Bible preaches a preferential option for the poor.

The answer the "You're not of this world" argument, interpret this as one can stand up to and not conform to the dominant culture.

### **New Hope Close to the Ground in El Salvador by Rick Steves**

The world is full of islands, sunny but not fit for cruise ships. Only "educational tours" visit the less idyllic corners of what we too optimistically call the developing world.

Landlessness is the weight which has kept peasants down throughout history. Land is life in Central America. And land is the necessary focus of any "reality tour" of Latin American.

I spent two weeks in El Salvador and Nicaragua. To visit the land reform battle front, we drove two hours from San Salvador city through army checkpoints, over bombed-out bridges--heavily guarded and precariously rebuilt--into the "conflictive" zone of Usulután. Our target was a refugee community of about six-hundred people. Like a fifth of all Salvadorans, they fled the bloody death squad 1980s. After ten years of exile in a peaceful unclaimed corner of Panama they returned to their homeland. Their camp was becoming a town. Its name, Nueva Esperanza, or "New Hope."

We met with the community leaders in their outdoor chapel of San Romero de America. (Locals aren't waiting for the Vatican to saint their patron, the Salvadoran archbishop who was assassinated by the army.) The community lives off a little international charity and what they can grow. They all eat equally, spending the equivalent of \$4000 (\$7 per person) a month for food. Money needed to finish the homes must be spent on milk for the kids and the sick. They hope to buy cows soon. Meat was a once a month treat. But lately that's not possible. Poor as they were, they still provided a warm welcome. A lady brought a crate of Coke on her head as we listened to the community's epic story. As we opened our Cokes our host joked, "We're here to serve the client."

The Salvadoran government is threatened by "non-government organizations." Even today, it calls most "NGOs" communist fronts. It allows refugee repatriation only to those who abandon their community, and are willing to be dispersed one family at a time. Most communities insist on staying together. "In El Salvador if the poor don't struggle, we die."

As a council person explained the problem of land reclamation, like a slow moving lasso, it surrounded us. A cowboy-looking messenger came with urgent news. The dreaded National Guard was moving a new neighboring community of refugees out of the land they claimed. The people of Nueva Esperanza needed to stand in solidarity at the crossroads to head off the National Guard and convince them that the new group could stay at Nueva Esperanza. The leader requested our presence. This village, which had nothing, automatically mobilized to help 150 strangers who needed land. There was no question, they would stand up to the National Guard and then take the refugees in--a refugee camp within a refugee camp. The popular class of Central America has only one weapon: solidarity.

This upped the anti considerably and we suddenly saw ourselves slipping from concerned students to active participants. Group dynamics kicked into high gear. All of us wanted to help. Many felt a need for a quick gut fast solidarity response. Others were more careful. As our guides discussed the appropriate action to take, a breathless woman with long straight black hair and a blue shawl arrived. Her message: the National Guard had taken the community's leader (a one-legged man, whose physical condition was evidence enough that he was a former FMLN guerilla) and five Europeans (detained and charged for "inciting land take-over and violence against the army"). But the community was allowed to come to Nueva Esperanza...a victory for now.

Then, just as we realized our dilemma on whether or not to act was solved for us, over the clearing streamed 150 refugees: men, women, children, all carrying their worldly belongings in corn bags that read USA. Little girls with loads on their heads marched as adults. They calmly set up camp, hitched hammocks, comforted babies, and got out the tortillas as the United Nations observation jeep rolled in.

The community held a fascinating pow wow - cowboy hats, machetes and ragged jeans. The children played quietly and waited calmly--not traumatized, just waiting again for the bus to justice. A deep purple sunset was the warm-up act for a sky full of stars and the chirping of countless crickets. Nueva Esperanza housed 150 refugees and 25 gringos graciously. To make the new-comers feel more welcome, the villagers gave us the town hall filled with mattresses and spread the refugees out among the community families. The open air church was filled with hammocks. Most of our group slept in the hall. I dragged my mattress out under the stars, a decision that seemed great until the wind sent the temperature down. Satellites blipped across the sky, a constant reminder that there was a First World looking on.

Roosters from all corners howled competitively through the night. At one point a human on a radio seemed to be singing with them as an operatic accompaniment. Pigs roamed threatening to snuggle. I was so cold I might not have argued. A black silhouette dog pranced in and out. A child coughed through much of the night.

At dawn the roosters seemed to taunt each other... I can't heear you. Fires crackled and the community began to stir. Watching one particularly organized family set up was impressive. Their platform was filled with roosters, dad rolled up the ground clothes and stowed the hammocks, as mom carried water from the well. Corn hung from the leafy roof of their shelter, fire wood was stacked neatly, and two boys listened to the FMLN radio report with all the interest of a gringo commuter checking the traffic report. I could see clearly the popular foundation of a revolution that has survived even against the ingrown ideology of the USA (and \$4.5 billion of military aid). These people don't ask for the American dream (as El Salvador's US-backed ARENA party so eloquently told us). They don't apologize. To them, land and peace are the staples of a decent life.

A villager narrated the community story (a modern-day Exodus) as told in the church mural: with the need to bury Bibles, the murders, exile in Panama, the return--with this mural, plank by plank--the new land, the assassination of Romero, and the "nueva esperanza." As children watched and listened, the seeds of much future folk lore were planted. Some day, when the war's over, life will be good in Nueva Esperanza.

(Rick Steves, author of Europe Through the Back Door, recently returned from a tour by Augsburg College's Center For Global Education in Minneapolis.)

### **The Jesuit on a motorcycle**

Driving out of Nueva Esperanza, the local priest rode his motorcycle in the safety of our international wake. In the middle of nowhere on a long and rutted muddy road, the Marines stopped us and eyed the priest. The major insisted, in fluent English, that he come with him. The priest explained he was legitimate priest of this parish and blocking him was unconstitutional. They talked soft and frank. Ten camouflaged marines armed to the teeth and 24 gringos in tee-shirts and cameras stood by. I was five feet from the major as he told the priest, "We don't need this shit. Stay in your country. This is our place." (We passed an armed American advisor at the next bridge, who was apparently welcome to meddle). Understanding the power of our presence, we stayed and waited things out. To see the steel nerves of the priest and the macho power of what the locals call "insecurity" forces square off was more thrilling than I can explain. After searching our buses (we had bags of the five interationales who were arrested yesterday) we were on our way. The priest was allowed to follow us...this time. He was making a point that according to law, the armed forces cannot intimidate campesinos in their daily routine by stopping them and asking for their identification papers.

### **US EMBASSY in San Salvador:**

We visited the fully airconditioned boonsborough of Capitalism behind the most fortified wall in El Salvador. Nothing but the best for the forces of freedom and liberty. Promoting democracy is making the third world safe for investment. (It's amazing to me that an American who worked here could read this and perceive it as complementary.)

During our meeting the American official explained that the US embassy is here to help US companies looking for a market. This is a positive time, a time of negotiations. In spite of his bureaucratic kind of detached compassion and his pure party line, he spoke with more flexibility and understanding than I heard here three years ago. He actually admitted that the popular armed insurrection was justified from 1930 until 1987. But now, with a negotiated settlement possible, continuing the war is wrong.

### **The Salvadoran Pentagon:**

The publicity man for the Salvadoran army started his talk saying that the Salvadoran army is so good on human rights that when their war is over, it can help UN forces. He reminded us that "a rapist or thief will still be a rapist or thief after joining any army. Education is the problem."

He showed a disdain for the "popular" (Catholic) church explaining that these days priests are too materialistic and forget the nature of spiritual bread. He sounded relieved to report that the sects, "who feed the soul and leave the body alone" are growing fast.

"Land is not a problem. The real challenge for the Salvadoran society is to create jobs and develop respect for private property. No where on earth has land reform resulted in any progress. If we give every family land soon we'd all have about as much as the tile I'm standing on to live on. Why not build factories?" I thought, refusing to see campesinos need for land is like expecting American Indians to just go to the factory. "Okay, here's your starter kit. Now fit in."

Showing the army's sensitivity to world opinion, he complained, "The whole world screams at us if we stop a priest from being political." He added, "And CISPES is just a front for a world wide communist conspiracy." Just like three years ago, the army representative made a point to single out CISPES as the most effective solidarity group in the USA. "How could little El Salvador struggle against such a huge organization as that which supports CISPES? Only with the help of the US government. But we want peace. Violence begets violence. We'll even negotiate with the FMLN to bring peace."

When asked about the five arrested internationales..."if you were caught pushing the campesinos to land take-overs you'd be in big trouble too. They are self-deporting today." (great double speak.) Our country is plagued by what we call "return ticket revolutionaries."

In each of these meetings with the right (US embassy, ARENA, the local military) I felt

like a kid given one wack at the Pinyata of political truth. With a large group, it was frustrating to have only a question or two, especially when the politicians were so adept at dodging questions.

### **Interviewing the FMLN (a week later in Nicaragua)**

A small wiry, nervous man, who kept rubbing the fingers that stuck numbly out from his too tight cast and who's eyes darted about as if he was expecting an ambush said we could tape record but please no photos. He was a 35 year old biologist from University of Central American in San Salvador. He was able to meet with us openly as a member of the FMLN only because we were outside of El Salvador. It was a thrill for all of us to actually talk with a member of El Salvador's leftist armed resistance.

He welcomed us by making it clear that the FMLN always recognizes the difference between governments and their people. Below are a few quotes from our interview with him:

The situation right now in Central American is that every country is basically in line with the neo-liberal policy of the US. Neo-liberalism proposes to overcome economic injustice of the region but it ignores the roots of the problem: economic inequality, lack of democracy and poverty.

The conflict in Central America is not created by the USSR and Cuba. For two years the USSR is basically gone, Cuba is in economic crisis and the Sandinistas are out of power but the struggles in El Salvador and Guatemala continue. The USA still cannot accept that a revolution can have internal roots.

With the fall of socialism, the US is changing. It sees the structural roots of poverty, which the FMLN is fighting, as hurdles to peace. Unfortunately this is ten years late. 175,000 have been killed in Guatemala, 70,000 in El Salvador and 50,000 in Nicaragua. This is a lot of death in a small region based on the US fear of communism. Now they have decided that the threat is not there.

The best contribution that the USA can make is to allow people in Latin America to solve their own problems. We are political adults here.

Poverty here is deep and widespread. Over 50% of the people are in extreme poverty. In Guatemala 2% of the people own 60% of the arable land. 60% of the adults are illiterate. These societies have failed. Capitalism here has failed as dramatically as socialism has failed in Eastern Europe. But the US press gives us publicity only when there is a war.

In Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras the military forces are the power behind the "democracy." Real democracy here requires demilitarization. There has been a change in El Salvador lately in most sectors. Salvadoran society cannot bear the weight of the military and still succeed.

We are realistic. We are fighting the rear guard of the USA. It has sustained the El Salvador military and can easily continue. For instance, one day we gunned down six helicopters. It cost an enormous amount of lives, munitions and resources and the mission was planned for months. It was a brilliant success but within two weeks there were twelve helicopters in their place. Negotiation is more rational. In '89, the US had 70,000 men ready in Panama. Their intervention, had we pushed our offensive to military success, would destroy El Salvador. Many civilians would die. In El Salvador, 70% of the war casualties are non-combatants. The FMLN cannot be adventuresome. We are not at war because we like war but to achieve justice. Right now in the world, the left understands that financial support will dwindle. Negotiation is the rational answer.

I could be a geologist with a home, a job and a family but I chose this struggle. The University is the natural entree to this struggle. After seeing two El Salvador elections won by the opposition and stolen by the military, like many, I joined the FMLN.

Today, the FMLN has veto power in Salvadoran society. We have enormous popular support. There is hope from moderate president Cristiani backed by modern-thinking business elements that a consensus with the FMLN can be found. People are seeing that only a government with that broad base of support could effectively rule a peaceful El Salvador.

While industrialization may be the long term answer it cannot happen without land re-distribution. 60% of Salvadorans are farmers. They need a life before they can consume.



Today the land is poorly distributed. 54% of the capital is in 5% of the people. The FMLN respects problems that East Europe, Cuba and Nicaragua had with their socialist models. We understand that market forces must be respected. We are looking for a model with pluralism and justice. We'd like socialism as a moral base with a capitalist motor.

The result of the negotiation may turn the FMLN into a legal and unarmed political party. The most difficult part will be integrating the FMLN into the armed forces. Nicaragua has done very well in this respect. Its army is down by 75%. Today in Nicaragua an amazing thing is happening: a leftist (formerly Sandinista) army is supporting and protecting a US-backed government. The Sandinistas recognized that you can't start from zero with each election. The army is an institution which protects the government and state. The key is to allow the politicians to fix the problem rather than having it fixed by politicized armies.

95% of El Salvador is Christian. Liberation Theology has given religion a powerful push into politics. They legitimized the armed struggle. But they are a force for peace too. The Jesuits told the FMLN there was no possibility of victory by war and we would have to negotiate long before the rest of us realized that. The murder of the Jesuit leadership of UCA was a great loss. The fall of the Berlin Wall coincided with the Jesuit murders. In the third world these two events are of about equal historical importance.

Electronic preachers have a clearly defined agenda. Removing people from politics is their politics. But the sects are not considered a real threat to the forces of peace with justice.

The key to all the debate among the left today is how much freedom will the USA give us. Central America is the USA's back yard. Recently the US has used Honduras as a dumping ground for their toxic waste. We are second class people. Our alternative tho that role is war. That is what Viet Nam, El Salvador and Nicaragua are all about. Why must the US have no exceptions to its plan (Cuba). Not all can think alike. In parliament you have left and right. Is Central America really democratic if we must all follow the US party line. In the USA there are only two parties. And 33% voted in the last election. And Bush wants to teach us about democracy. This black and white, bad and good conception of the world makes life in the third world difficult. We see clearly the devastating result of Nicaragua's attempt at independence. That is the reality of life south of the USA.

Peace is coming in El Salvador. That I think is irreversible and more necessary than ever. The tendency is for Central American to be forgotten in peace time and just left with its poverty. Please don't forget us.

## **El Salvador Final Analysis**

### **Five most powerful forces in El Salvador**

force:      source of power:      accountable to:

1. USA (including 1,000,000 Salvadorans in USA)

Military and economic might. Accountable to its electorate and business

2. Armed Forces

Empowered by the Salvadoran constitution and USA money. Accountable only to the USA.

3. FMLN

Empowered by the people and the teaching of liberation theology. Accountable to the goodwill of the people.

4. Oligarchy

Empowered by its land, tradition, the army, and the church hierarchy.

5. The Salvadoran government

Empowered by its constitution, its electorate, and the USA. Accountable to the USA.

Money sources in El Salvador: 1-Salvadorans in USA

2-US aid

3-coffee and exports

the tax base is tiny  
Money sources in FMLN: taxation of land controlled  
rich locals  
international solidarity groups

In FMLN territory, landowners get an annual letter explaining how much they'll pay their workers and their tax bill. If they want to grow crops, they'll meet these obligations.

This is the analysis of the leading UCA Jesuit. In a fascinating group think process, we arrived at his same conclusions. I figured the Oligarchy was #5 because the value and extent of their holdings is dropping, the military is becoming an elite class because of all their corrupt wealth, and because some democracy is being forced upon the country even now. All agreed that the Oligarchy is on a downward trend.

The leading Jesuit (who was one of the six murdered and considered the leading proponent of liberation theology) explained that power sectors of Salvadoran society must concern themselves with the USA's military and economic might. In war those with arms are next. US armed alleys are stronger than the FMLN. War has really messed up the Oligarchy. Only government is not independent anywhere. The Constitution gives power to others. FMLN collects taxes.

The church is conspicuous in its absence. It's too divided to be a power. In 1980 95% on the people were Catholic. This is splintered now with the church hierarchy and the sects on the right and the liberation theology and base Christian communities on the left.

The Intelligencia was murdered. And most of the 80,000 disappeared are from non-government organizations in the popular movement--all the union, human rights, teacher groups that are the peaceful voice of opposition. They are now meeting as the Permanent Committee of the National Debate. With peace, they will coagulate and, according to the Jesuit, they are the hope and on the rise.

Taking at break for a swim on the vast and nearly empty sandy beach of the Pacific coast we could only see the potential of a happy land. Body surfing, we did battle with the crashing waves. The waves, like the obstacles that seem to keep coming into the people's path, were relentless. But on the crest of an unusually big wave I saw, in the thin nearly transparent slice of water that zips along the top, a fish swimming gracefully ahead of the breaking crest and into the sunset.

## **Nicaragua Trip notes, by Rick Steves, December 1991**

### **Issues in 1991:**

While the US-backed coalition UNO government under Violetta Chomorro rules, many are frustrated by the effectiveness of the popular army, under former Sandinista Humberto Ortega, in protecting the gains of the revolution and frustrating attempts to recoup losses among the industrial and landed elite.

The speed of privatization is a major issue. Just how much and how fast should cooperative and worker-owned industry and farms forced back into the more efficient realm of private enterprise.

Land reform and the undoing of it is a major hot point and could very well be the explosive issue as the 120,000 small family farms created by the Sandinistas are threatened by the returning big land owners.

The FSLN (Sandinista party) continues to be a force with about 40% of the parliament. While Mrs. Chomorro rules, the Sandinistas have enough votes to block any changes to the constitution. Much can be done with a simple majority however. The FSLN has assumed the role of the loyal opposition and the army is trying to become institutionalized as a non-political organ of the government.

The 14 parties that made up UNO were united only in their hatred of the FSLN and

the warmth provided by financial support of the USA. Now that FSLN is out of power and the USA is not as interested, UNO is ready to crumble. The far right wing is opposing the Chomorro wing. Chomorro is just an image of reconciliation and a tired figurehead. Her son-in-law really runs the show and is the most powerful man in Nicaragua.

Nicaragua's Parliament after the 1990 election:

UNO - 14 parties, 55% of vote, 51 seats

FSLN - 1 party, 41% of vote, 39 seats

### **La Purisima - the purest Virgin**

La Purisima is a uniquely Nicaraguan festival on December 7th celebrating the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin. In 1988 I celebrated Purisima in Managua. Back then it was the capital's party of the year with everybody who was anybody frolicking through the streets. Now, under UNO, Purisima is no longer a big deal in Managua. So, we drove 90 minutes to Leon, Nicaragua's third city, a stronghold of Sandinism and a very Marian place, for the best La Purisima festivities in the country.

In Leon we met with an old woman who was a long-time FSLN supporter. She used to run a safe house for the guerrillas. She explained that La Purisima, with its huge insulting paper mache dolls of aristocratic ladies, was historically the people's protest against the Spanish elite. Indians could express their repulsion with humor and be safe. Mary was ever present as the protector of the people. "That's why we have such a devotion to her." (Europe celebrated the "Carnival" during its feudal age for the same reason, as a safe and anonymous way for the low class to let off steam and express their frustration at the ruling elite.)

This biggest holiday of the year is the Nicaraguan equivalent of trick or treat, a time when it's great to give and it's great to receive. Children go from participating house to house and say "What is the cause of so much joy?" The resident says "The conception of Mary" and gives out presents or sweets. "Hooray for the Virgin" is the delighted response.

Our host gave a good liberation theology explanation of the Latin American love of Mary. "Jesus reminded those who worship Mary that more blessed than Mary who carried Jesus in her womb are those who hear the word and put it into action. We can't be so pure, we can't be the mother of God. What we can do that Mary did is hear the word and act. Mary is not a Goddess. She came from simple people...people just like us.

The festival is kicked off in front of the cathedral, an imposing place dark with tropical rot on the outside, bright with Catholicism on the inside. The cathedral seems a bit grand for Leon. It was supposed to be constructed in Lima, Peru. Even before Dan Quayle, colonialists got these countries confused.

At 6 pm the bishop, with a gaggle of government bigshots, makes a statement and yells the first "What is the cause of so much joy?" Then the bells peel, fire crackers roll like angry tumble weeds through the streets, children launch bottle rockets from their hands and families pour through the streets trick or treating. Wide open houses shined with lighter-than-air decor honoring the Virgin Mary.

With my phonetic cheat sheet, I chimed, "Kien cowa tanta alley gria." It worked and I was given two ugly but tasty thumb-sized bananas. (Norte Americanos who like bananas come home with an understanding about the trade off in the banana business between good looks and good taste.) The cathedral square was the magnet for all the strolling families. Sculpted lions looked terrified on their pedestals. The striking contrast to El Salvador was the complete absence of police or soldiers. I didn't see a gun all night.

For some reason I skipped a cool beer in our hotel's leafy courtyard for a trip into the throbbing disco across the street. My glasses fogged up the moment I entered. Sweat sloshed across the floor. Just walking through it, the dribble draining down my spine wet my pants. The wall danced with giant MTV images of great Spanish language pop stars' love ballads and the latest American rock. This was a hot spot in a hot spot. Getting out was like making my way through an over-crowded bus rolling over a cliff.

The next morning we had a little time to wander. At the train station people waited

like produce behind chicken wire walls. There was one class of train car--literally cattle class with wooden slats to keep people either in or out. Concession stands were balanced atop wandering heads.

A street raffle entertained the crowd in front of the station. I helped out, hamming things up with the mic to help the man sell his tickets. Three cordobas (50 cents) for 5 raffle numbers. He called on me to dig into the big tin can and pick a numbered Coke cap. I drew 159...my number. The crowd seemed entertained as I waded through the prizes and chose a big desk clock shaped like a wrist watch--so tacky it will end up in my office.

Back at our hotel we met the Assembly of God dental crew which flew down from various southern states to spend a week doing dental work. Nice, I think. But they were oblivious to the local politics. They were worried about Managua's riots two weeks ago but had no idea what set them off (the right wing bombing of the left wing hero's tomb). I couldn't help but visualize the priest on his motorcycle surrounded by Salvadoran military at Nueva Esperanza. Two styles of Christian compassion.

Driving back to Managua we passed the most fortified building in Nicaragua, the American Embassy. I couldn't help but shout "What causes so much joy?"

### **Low Intensity Conflict:**

#### **Five Nicaraguan images reflecting today's reality:**

1. A 75 year old ice cream cart man proudly practicing his letters between sales. He's learning to write.
2. When asked if he was able to get credit under Somoza the small time vendor just laughed.
3. The childrens' choir applied three times for visas to perform in the USA and three times they were turned down. They performed in Canada instead.
4. Just before the a key congressional vote in mid-80s, Contras were sent deep into the country on a suicide mission to illustrate to the American public that they were committed and that the Sandinistas were a real threat. They were slaughtered. Congress voted for aid.
5. Exhausted by the psychological strain (sonic booms, threatened invasions, etc) of low intensity conflict, the American went to the beach for a swim. As the surf crashed over his head and the water rolled off his face he saw four US warships stationed just off the coast.

### **Questions about American Foreign Policy:**

How could El Salvador's government be acknowledged as a democracy and not Nicaragua's in the 1980s?

How do we justify the use of terror tactics.

Why does the USA undermine every regional peace initiative.

Why is Nicaragua such a threat.

Why does the USA target liberation theology and support the fundamentalist sects.

A national security state has been our preference since WWII. These are states in which:

1. The military is the highest authority within a country
2. Democratic elections are viewed with contempt. Democracy is a bonzai tree. It looks nice on the window sill, but if it grows to big you cut it back.
3. The military is an important economic and political actor and has power beyond its weapons.
4. Capital needs to be concentrated in the hands of a few for freedom and development.
5. There are enemies everywhere. And life revolves around these enemies.
6. Any means you use against these enemies is justified.
7. Secrecy pervades the government. Death squads roam after dark. Reagan issued 275 secret NSC directives.
8. The church must work within a defined role.

"There was a massively popular revolution in El Salvador and we had no other choice." - How an official at the US Embassy explained the 1980 to 1982 terror, accidently showing his cards.

### **Five ways for a Central American government to become a target of US foreign policy:**

1. If you awaken a strong sense of national identity.
2. If you are redistributing wealth from rich to poor.
3. If your rich don't rule.
4. If USA does not control the army.
5. If your progressive church aligns itself with forces for social change.

#### Examples of Low Intensity Conflict:

- The US defines its people as enemies. "The US people and the press lost Vietnam."
- Psychological war experts are targeting US public. They created the "Office of public diplomacy" under the NSC.
- The Contras were a military force designed to destroy Nicaragua economically, not win militarily.
- The Panama invasion just before the Nicaragua election was a strong reminder of what the US can easily do if necessary.

#### **In the 1980s we managed the:**

1. Greatest transfer of money from 3rd to 1st world ever.
2. Greatest transfer of money within USA from the popular class to the elite.  
In 1980 1% of Americans had 20% of the country's wealth.  
In 1990 1% had 44% of a smaller pie since Japan had taken much also. The sad joke is on the lower 99% of Americans.
3. A huge transfer of wealth from USA to Japan and Europe
4. The US military is at its zenith. As in any country with a lopsided economic situation, this is a necessary development for future internal security. By the way, deception is more important in democratic countries than in totalitarian ones.

International monetary fund (IMF) and Agency for International development (AID) are the leading police forces in the world.

Their command is "export, export, export and make opportunities for foreign investment."  
The IMF is dominated by the USA. Votes are weighed according to contributions.

#### **Recent "neo-liberal" initiatives in Nicaragua:**

Privatization of industry and education

No public health

undoing land reform

communication is used to stoke material appetites

food aid for apathy through conservative churches

An agency has been created rewrite history (e.g. to document only FSLN atrocities).

drop world court decision

propping up Godoy and the far right under Chomorro.

(for more information on Low Intensity Conflict, read War Against the Poor by Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer.)

#### **Market Survey in Managua's biggest market.**

Breaking into four small groups, each with a translator and survey sheets, we went deep into Managua's "Oriental Market," the best place to meet the "unorganized poor." We interviewed various small business people. The market is a vast field of shaky tarp-covered stalls selling everything from beans to TVs. The typical vendor here gives a new meaning to the term "small business." Each night many can tuck their "shops" under their arms and walk home.

Back home we compared notes. Of 20 surveyed, 18 had no political preference and two were UNO. None supported the FSLN. 80% said they were doing worse economically now

than last year. UNO has cut wages and employment so the new unemployed are now in the market selling. And there are fewer buyers than ever. Before there was plenty of demand and no supply. Now there's plenty of supply, but no demand. New supermarkets were cutting into market. A good income was \$100 a month. Many hoped to make much less.

This is the unorganized poor. They generally voted against the FSLN but now Chomorro has not done her promises. The political apathy or reluctance to show one's political colors was striking.

### **Commandante Fireplug:**

Our next visit was to a shanty town of repatriated Contras. They prefer to be called the Resistance. We met with a Contra Commandante named "Fireplug" in Spanish (long after Fireplug was etched into the journals of our minds, our translator confessed this was a mistranslation of sparkplug). Fireplug was a passionate and articulate man in a wheelchair with a belly hanging out from his too small tee-shirt and a urine-filled catheter bag hanging out of his shorts. He enjoyed the wheelchair equivalent of a chauffeur. Fireplug was accompanied by a man who proudly introduced himself as a former Somoza national guardsman.

Our group filled Fireplug's house - dirt floor, fresh cut wood siding, under a corrugated tin roof with black tarp walls defining interior rooms. The community had commandeered water and electricity and seemed to operate on the barest of resources but with pride. Children played while women washed clothes and dishes in outdoor tubs. Barbed wire defined each family's claim to land and kept the family chicken in.

Fireplug told us that the UNO government was the same as the FSLN. Violetta's there, but it's still FSLN. He was bitter about the USA's support. The USA supplies the money, we supply the cadavers. We're subjects of the USA. When they're done with us we're abandoned...tossed out like old bones. Philosophizing further he said "Nicaragua must have a rich patron, either the US or USSR. I'd support anyone over the FSLN. But this government isn't much better. Around here they say governments are the same old dog, only the collar changes."

"Here in Nicaragua you have to be either right or left. The FSLN forced their communism on us. It doesn't fit our culture. We Contras were around well before US support. The US used us to stop communism but we were created by the people. If we had won with arms we'd be in control now. The US wanted us to negotiate without victory. We were abandoned because we had too much popular support. Our own leaders betrayed us. Peace with hunger is no solution. Negotiations were the "stab in the back". If I wasn't an invalid, I'd be out there with the re-Contras. We all know that the best communist is a dead one.

Yes, we're a client state of the USA but I'd rather be under the USA than under communism. Wherever the US boot lands it leaves a dollar. The US will accept anything but a red Central America.

About human rights. War is war. There are no crimes in war. It's your life or theirs. I believe the CIA killed (Contra chief) Enrique Bermuda. He's been CIA all his life. They couldn't control him.

### **The Promised Land**

Next we visited another new suburb, a Hooverville of 475 families living in a field of cardboard, tin and scrap lumber huts that looked much like Fireplug's neighborhood. Chomorro promised these people land. All they have received is a fight over this unused bit on the outskirts of Managua. They call their town "the Promised Land."

A community leader explained that 80% had no jobs. The police, who are more repressive now than before the elections, said they give Managua a bad image and to find a park or live in the streets.

The community council, a non-governmental organization, is working to formalize the people's rights to this land. UNO considers NGOs "communist fronts."

Our guide was a teacher. He makes \$70 a month. AID's condition for loans is that the government must cut its payroll. That translates into the laying off of about 75% of the

teachers. Supposedly those who remain will make a better income. This year students had to pay for books for the first time. AID is offering what's called the "golden handshake," \$1000 to \$2000 severance pay for government workers to voluntarily give up their jobs. Teachers are now in the Oriental Market selling TV antennas and soap.

It seems that these people have given up on politics. There is no hope from UNO or the FSLN. Their only hope is grassroots community organization.

I asked the leading question, "Is it generally understood that the IMF is a clever way for first world to take money from the third world? The locals answered yes. When I asked if you have to be a clever third world person to see that, they said "no." I answered you have to be clever in the first world to see that.

### **Managua's UNO city council**

We waited an hour for three UNO city administrators to meet with us. The air condition was on strong, we were served Coke and Oreos as they began their talk by telling us "you are in the Central American country of Nicaragua. Its capital is Managua, where you are now..." They were arrogant, flip and avoided answering any of our difficult questions directly.

AID has given them \$4.2 million. He refused to discuss what strings were attached. When we referred to the squatter towns we had visited they explained that these are deceptive. "You see, many, if not a majority of these people are going around claiming many titles. They were in actuality landlords." When I repeated his answer to affirm my understanding that he was discounting the homeless problem he said simply, "That's right." I was rolled out of the room in a carpet of exasperation.

### **Sightseeing in Managua**

Twenty years after the earthquake, Managua is still a vacant lot, a concrete ruins, a one-story city. Two buildings, the Intercontinental Hotel and the Bank of America, stand tall as Texans over a million people who've never ridden an elevator. Ruined buildings were vacant three years ago. Today they are black tarp condos. Winding through the potholes of Simon Bolivar boulevard, named after the man who freed Latin America from colonial Spain, we passed more monuments than buildings. We also passed the assassination spots of Sandino, Chomorro and Bermudez on our way to the recently bombed tomb of Carlos Fonseca, the founder of the Sandinista party. Progress seems stranded in a mine field. Political passion and memories of oppression are strewn like body parts of this sad country.

Retired FSLN soldiers were voluntarily standing guard to keep Fonseca's tomb safe against the assumed wishes of the Managua's far right UNO mayor, Aleman. The soldier we interviewed explained that the mayor put a memorial to a member of the Somoza military band in the garden of Fonseca's tomb. Sandinista's took it down. Right wingers then blew up Fonseca's tomb. And the city erupted into riots. The mayor's office was burned. The black remains of two burned up trucks still litter the history stained main drag that used to be called Somoza.

On the square, the ghostly shell of the national cathedral, who's clock still reads 1:30 from the 1972 earthquake, mourns what was its city. The cross on one spire dangles broken and the black and red FSLN flag flies furiously from the central saint. Just a vacant lot away lies the ignored and weed-eaten waterfront of a dead lake that swallows a million poor people's waste.

### **The fibrillating heart of a banana republic's economy**

David Dye, an independent economist and long time resident and student of Nicaraguan life met with us in our dining room/study hall. He explained the latest on this ramshackle local economy.

### **Three Hopes After the Election**

1. A fast transition from war to peace.

In the war time over 50% of the national budget was sucked up by the war. Now

military spending has dropped from 45% of the 1989 budget to 16% of the 1991 budget.

2. Change from instability to economic stability.

In 1988 Nicaragua set a new Western Hemisphere record with 33,000% inflation. In 1989 it was better at "only" 1700% but in 1990 it rose again to 13,000%. Like Germany in 1923, the Sandinistas were paying war-related bills by printing money. The new government employed a classic IMF fix--cut wages, cut employment, cut government expenses. In 1991 they finally had it down to about 30%. The economy is now stable but the political costs may be high.

3. Recovery from long economic decline.

For seven years in a row the Nicaragua GNP declined. 1980 - \$900 average yearly income. 1990 = \$500. While the drop in the value of export crops made this a regional problem, Nicaragua was by far the worst off. In a recent press conference UNO bragged that the 1991 growth would be zero - a real accomplishment.

In the Somoza days, a small elite and middle class lived North American standards off of an export-based cheap-labor economy. The revolution addressed the needs of the bulk of the population with its "mixed economy" but suffered from FSLN mismanagement, the war with the USA and the USA's effective embargo. Now, the UNO government has moved to a "Neo-Liberal" model in the belief that a third world economy must work within first world parameters and the best way to lift the poor is to let the rich run the economy more efficiently, as only free enterprise can.

The guiding principles of the revolutionary economy (1979-1989) were:

1. To change the economy fast for the poor. In order to do this the state must guide and produce. FSLN had a naive faith in government as an efficient producer. FSLN failed here and Nicaragua is stuck with many good intentioned white elephants. UNO government relies on privatization. In the name of efficiency and to attract investment, the state must divest itself of revolutionary holdings.

2. FSLN believed that fast popular change needed entrepreneurial opportunities outside the elite. In an attempt to create a new entrepreneurial class, they democratized the economy, let workers run factories, offered easy credit (with hyper-inflation and almost no foreclosures) to the little guy, and created over 100,000 small farms by giving over 5,000,000 acres to formerly landless farmers. UNO believes entrepreneurial talent resides only in the proven business elite. And that elite isn't helping Nicaragua by living in Miami.

3. FSLN believed that to favor popular classes, the free market needed to be controlled. Prices needed to be set and regulated. UNO says the economy operates efficiently only with market dictating prices.

"Structural Adjustment" through programs like AID and IMF have been very strong since 1985 throughout the 3rd world.

Exports boomed from 1950 through 1980. In the 80s, exports stopped and oil prices went way up. This resulted in skyrocketing debt and a third world crises. Diversification was needed. Costa Rica now does strawberries and macadamia nuts. AID is helping Nicaragua grow cantaloupe. "Maquiladora," first world branch plants set up to enjoy cheap labor and easy environmental restrictions are the coming thing. UNO is banking on this in Nicaragua. With 57% unemployment, as in Nicaragua, this is politically popular. AID is quick to remind Nicaraguans that if they don't work for Guatamalan wages, Guatamalans will get all the work.

All this is based on the assumption that the only way for a poor country to dig itself out is to fit into the first world economy.

### **UNO-style Structural adjustment requires four features:**

1. Reduce burden of government on the economy.

Neo-liberalism calls for smaller governments with less taxes, smaller payrolls, a shift from social investment to production investment and less regulation. Small farmers' basic staples



were subsidized. This has stopped and peasants are poor, landless and fall into "wage economy". The direct effect is a large urban under-class and more poor cotton pickers. Credit to small farmers virtually disappears. 80,000 peasant family farms were getting government aid under FSLN. Now only 15,000. FSLN loans were wiped out by inflation so they stoked inflation. The rationalization for this "Neo-liberalism" is efficiency. The actual result is the reconcentration of land into a landed elite.

2. Liberalization of Economy--do anything to stimulate competition.
3. Privatization of industry and agriculture.
4. Open the economy to foreign investment

### **US AID in the former IBM building.**

We went through the typical tight security of any place representing the USA government to meet with the local director of the US Agency for International Development, Janet Ballentine. My body knows now whenever it feels air-con it's right of center.

In her briefing Ms. Ballentine explained to us that this is a time of promise. It's not all doom and gloom. \$552 million has been invested in rebuilding Nicaragua in 1990 and 1991, a large amount for a country of 4 million. Most of that simply powered this broken economy with oil, fertilizer and wheat. "The courage of the folks who elected UNO deserves to be supported."

UNO inherited a distorted economy. Labor costs here are double that of Guatemala. Our charter is to "level the playing field" so we can develop a market economy. (In other words, she was admitting that to compete in the existing structure, you can't exceed a bare subsistence wage.)

In answering our questions she explained that the "golden handshake" (voluntary severance pay option) will cut out 150,000 state workers. Major accomplishments are controlling credit, the money supply and inflation. The Sandinista's didn't do so much land reform until they lost the election. Then they had their pinyata. It was the great Nicaragua land grab. When I asked about the 100,000+ family farms created in the early 80s, she wrote that off as insignificant. (100,000 out of 1,500,000 people in the countryside is about one out of every three families.)

Ballentine acknowledged that the problem was from the conflict of two reasonable rights: right of firm defendable title to land and right of the tiller to a piece of land. The lack of respect for firm title to land has scared away the investment necessary for agricultural recovery. "Sure, everyone needs land. But how much is enough."

Somoza got too greedy. He's no longer around. So now they (the poor) are determined to get land. In a comment that seemed to tip her hand, she noted that the economy is agricultural and will remain so for at least five years.

### **The Sandinista Party**

Next, we bussed to the FSLN foreign relations department and met with a young man who, in order to practice his English, insisted on having no translator. Our meeting room was a simple concrete meeting hall with a large portrait of Sandino behind the front table. A dingy black and white of the ten commandantes in happier times, just after the Sandinista triumph in '79, hung like a comatose revolution in the back of the room.

He very humbly and honestly appraised the ten years of Sandinista rule. They dropped illiteracy from 70% to 12%, offered free education to all, and allowed the popular class to organize. (Not even the Sandinista's remember to credit themselves from freeing Nicaragua of Somoza.) The problems they had with the US government were caused by their Marxist influence, they worked for a truly independent economy, and they "exported revolution" by helping El Salvador's FMLN.

They lost the election because they neglected the countryside peasants and some of their leaders developed an arrogance of power. "We forgot our roots and distanced ourselves from the people." The draft was very unpopular and people believed Bush when he promised that the war would last as long as the FSLN stayed in power.

But the party is changing. The FSLN, not the USA, gave democracy to Nicaragua. We

didn't fight to go from one dictator to another.

UNO has given Nicaragua stability, peace, more commerce, no inflation, no negative growth. But, from a social point of view, life is not good. Education is no longer free. And the poor will go without schooling. There is no investment in health and no interest in cultural activities. UNO does its pinyata better...it looks legal. For instance, the man who's doing the new passports will earn \$800,000.

Historically, there has been no room for division within the FSLN. The old guard is still fighting Somoza. It's not democratic. The Chamorro split is a shame. Nicaragua needs unity. The FSLN will be blamed. The FSLN wants stability and democracy. It is accepting UNO's economic package and doesn't even want the government leadership now.

"Please don't forget Nicaragua. We are not fighting the USA. We are not killing each other in the mountains. We need help not because we are revolutionaries but because we are human."

### **The finest hotel in Matagalpa**

For our peek at rural Nicaragua, we drove three hours north into lush mountain country, to the town of Matagalpa. As we parked under the barely readable "Hotel Ideal" sign, our guides smirked "tonight we'll be sleeping in the finest hotel in Matagalpa." We swaggered past the girl selling Chicklets through the swinging saloon-type doors and into a lobby that echoed "out of business" with each footstep. Four motionless turtles decorated a pale blue concrete pool. I could tell they were real by the smell. Maybe real dead but still real. The receptionist was watching TV. The picture was just clear enough for viewers to understand that a rotund white Santa Clause was drinking Coke in a palatial only-in-dreams-or-the-USA suburban home with the perfect family peeking down on him from the top of the stairway--a white Christmas in any weather. Well, it's morning in North America, but Coke still hits the spot in Matagalpa.

My room, number 6 according to the orange crayon on the door, was nice enough. The peely ceiling was the next best thing to a canopy bed. They had no plumbing but that didn't matter since it's Wednesday and that's a no water day in Matagalpa. The only liquids available, beer and Coke, were imported. (Part of the new world order is free trade.) The Coke's are bottled in Costa Rica. Nicaragua's national beer, Victoria, is now "canned and brewed" in Monroe, Wisconsin. In capitalism you make money any way you can. If a third of the family's income is squandered on beer by the dad, the least neo-liberalism can do is make sure it's marketed cleverly and imported.

For breakfast we shook the ants out of our pants and went to the nearby Restaurant of the Unknown Soldier run by the mother's of the heroes and martyrs (a group we'd be meeting with shortly). Breakfast "number one and only" was rice mixed with beans, fried plantains, scrambled eggs, tortillas and toast with black sweet coffee, coke or red pop. The toast was so dry it turned into dust in my mouth. I knew better than to ask for butter or jam. The salt shaker lid fell off with the first shake. Luckily the salt was stuck solid to the bottom. The Pepto Bismol wrappers in the ashtray reminded me how lucky I was to be healthy. A poster of Ben Linder riding his unicycle with a "Stop the war before it starts" sign shared the wall with other martyrs. His grave is on the edge of town, the first civilian American casualty of the Contra war. Black and white portraits of courageous soldiers against Somoza were yellow on the wall.

Looking through the dusty glass louvers and the rusted chain link screen, which now protects only chipped china and a few dusty condiments in the best restaurant in town, the view was children selling newspapers, the broken monument to Carlos Fonseca (the hometown boy who founded the Sandinista party) and the graphic picture of the a country ground down by the American fear of communism. A dark haggard man stood silently near the window. He didn't need to beg. He got a rice and bean tortilla sandwich. I got a memory I'll never shake.

### **From an interview with the UNO mayor of Matagalpa:**

"76% of Matagalpa voted for UNO. Today the people on the street are happy about

the peace but would say they are worse off economically now.

When pressed to say something positive about the Sandinistas he said the FSLN taught us the difference between right and left dictatorship. We now know the evil of left as well as right. The FSLN also taught us to work more closely with the people. He had no criticisms about the US involvement here. About Ben Linder (the young North American social worker who was killed near Matagalpa): some said he was working for our community, others said he was carrying a gun.

US AID is helping lots but the money comes too slow and in the wrong way. We need dollars and the freedom to use it to make employment. All three UNO people present agreed that the Somoza system was more benign than the FSLN. The war was provoked by the Sandinistas for economic and political reasons. 50,000 died and the country was destroyed. I criticize the USA because in '83 Reagan said he wanted not to put out the FSLN, just to keep them busy. Because of this, the war took seven years.

I would like to ask the USA to run out all the Nicaraguan doctors. We need them here.

### **Rich farmers to war widows**

Again our encounter with the right was with callous and flip people. The poor, especially when organized, were a nuisance...an obstruction to prosperity. From there we went to the mothers of the heroes and martyrs of the revolution.

Before we had even emptied our bus applause poured out of the tin-roofed hall filled with war widows and their children. Walking in I felt desperately needed--like a wealthy young man who never visits his destitute grandmother. The walls were hung with portraits of courageous women and their lost sons, fathers and husbands. As we sat there was a thunderous drumroll and the sky opened up. And water trickled from the corrugated tin into buckets.

This was the local chapter, 600 strong, of a national group. They are strong supporters of the Sandinistas and keep vivid memories of the "War of Liberation" alive. They were wearing their tattered best clothes and explained to us how "We struggled side by side with our children to see a free homeland. For years, the Contras destroyed everything the revolution accomplished.

Now we have peace, there is no embargo, and the shelves are full. But we have no money. This government is like Somoza's. Land is being taken back. Chomorro won by fraud. The CIA gave her money to buy votes. They won by promising no draft but it was they who waged the war in the first place. We will defend our rights, and all that we learned from the FSLN. We will fight with the workers and peasants with strikes until our rights are recognized. It is more sad to die in the streets as a beggar or drug addict than in a struggle for freedom."

"So you can understand how life is here for us, I live on a war widow's pension of 75 cordobas a month (\$15). This year for the first time we must pay 10 cordobas a month for each child in school. With three children, that leaves me 45 cordobas to live on. Then they also charge us for pre-registration, for report cards and for diplomas. When I try to make some money by selling things in the streets, the mayor says "no selling in the streets." My daughter has a nursing degree from Cuba. Degrees from Cuba are now worthless and she has no job.

I don't have a president--this woman. My president is Daniel. He's an honest man, a man of the poor. We used to see the peasants on TV. But today we are an ugly part of Nicaragua. We see only the capitalists. We will continue the struggle our children taught us. Even though we are old.

Things are not good now. Alfredo Caezar (fast-rising leader of the right wing faction of UNO) gets campaign money from the CIA. The killing continues with the re-contras. Anything that smells of FSLN is shut out from aid and opportunities. Only those coming back from Miami will be educated, not the poor. Large coffee owners are in business to send their kids to US schools and buy the latest cars. And they mess up the environment.

The biggest and shadiest tree left by the ten years of revolution is the farmer's union

(UNAC). But a drought could come. The organization of big business and big landowners (COSEP) is now funded by the USA. The dog dances for whoever has the money.

But we poor women have strong spirits. The revolution will return with God's help and the Virgin's. Violetta's democracy is out of touch with the poor. Daniel is the president of the poor."

As I surveyed the 40 tired-of-fighting faces with deep dark seen-it-all eyes, my spirit drooped--like the limp children on their laps.

They gave testimonies and explained how they work together. When I asked about the employment created by a recent AID project (\$85,000) giving a new street to Matagalpa the energy level in the room picked up like the hair on a mad cat's back and the several women replied that no Sandinista families saw any employment, only UNO people. To this government we're not human. Two old women here died of starvation. We complained and our mayor said "that's two less plates of food needed." That's the aid we get.

The markets are filled with foreign things and our eyes get very large. One thing is very clear. Prices are rising but not our income. They say there is no inflation but our buying power is down. Sugar, rice, beans...all the things that the poor eat...are nearly double the price of a year ago.

The Mothers of Heros and Martyrs were an emotional high point of our Nicaragua visit. They were nearly too tired to be desperate. They made it clear that they needed us. They gave us a huge applause and mixed us all up so we could all hold hands with each other as they said a prayer. Sixty people saying the Lord's Prayer in English and Spanish at the same time was a verbal drumroll of faith and hope.

### **UPANIC- Nicaraguan Big Business**

What is UPANIC? That's what big business does when the FSLN takes power. We visited the organization of big business men and they were in all respects--save their concern for the poor--big. Their hairy knuckles and glittering rings gave me the Somoza creeps. A painting of a large coffee grower from Matagalpa who was gunned down by the Sandinistas looked down on our meeting.

They started their talk with "we assume you want all of us in this Western hemisphere to have the common denominator of democracy and peace. There has been a small improvement since the election but the damage of ten years of FSLN misrule is still a major problem stalling our economic take-off. Agriculture owners were hardest hit by Sandinista regime. Our hope was that the new government would undo the FSLN land grab.

There is a myth in Central America that economic and social injustice causes revolutions. It's not fair to compare us with rich nations. We weren't as bad under Somoza when the Latin American norm is considered.

When I pressed them, they wouldn't talk about Somoza excesses--just Sandinista. The people were tired of 40 years of Somoza dictatorship but after the FSLN experience we found something worse. We were forced to live off of international charity and money laundering. This is not a solid basis for an economy.

The Sandinistas were initially supported by Cuba and your peanut farmer, Carter. In one way or another the USA and USSR had to fight it out. We were the necessary battleground.

The FSLN (Sandinistas) can only exist in disorder and anarchy. Today it is the FSLN army that keeps the government from applying the law. Stability is required and the only road is neo-liberalism.

The war was not won or lost. The election brought mediocre change. The FSLN is actually still in power. The US support of the Contras was more than good. It was an obligation if we were to defend the ideology of democracy.

His talk was punctuated by lots of heavy sigh realism: "Unfortunately, in this world..."

When asked if US AID developed dependency he explained that economic independence is impossible. AID develops the private sector to produce. The only bad thing about AID is that it is basically for the private sector but the Nicaraguan government eats it all up. Dependency is healthy and necessary. Internal corruption is the problem. This

government is playing with fire--the USA the richest and most powerful country in the world. You've got more than your share of beggars to maintain within your own borders. Who's your new candidate, Duke or Buchanan? He's right. America needs to look out for the 50 states.

When asked about money laundering they said "We can't talk too strongly about this. The Mafia aren't politicians, they'll kill you. All Nicaragua is one big business of superfluous goods. But there's more money than you can imagine in this country. Businesses are popping up impossibly. Where there's money, it's laundered money. These businesses make it clean."

Chomorro has a good understanding with the FSLN. If she steps down vice president Godoy takes over. With Godoy there would be complete change and a conflict with the army. In reality the army would not let Godoy take power. It would turn its back and let the people run wild. Umberto Ortega, today's Somoza, would help these people and the government would be the hostage of the army. The problem is that Violetta has not developed a presidential police. With a Sandinista police, the president is ineffective. But little by little the forces of Sandinism have been and are being eroded.

### **Tour Wrap-up**

Center's teaching is based on Paulo Freire's model:

Education begins with experience, then analysis, then action. Action continues the cycle with more experience and so on. If action is not taken, learning is truncated. The poor are a real part of society. Their experience must be incorporated into societal progress.

### **How has this trip challenged me personally?**

It's much easier not to delve into things. Ask the people of Munich in 1940 about Dachau. The average American is a latent US AID worker. If he stays ignorant he supports AID. If he learns, he believes in AID's commitment to neo-liberalism.

For the same reason that free market economies become powerful, free market thinkers wield power. The truth without power is like swimming in a flushing toilet with a life jacket.

I'm standing on the rim. The sun is out and I've got some munchies and a nice drink. Will I jump in, swim with the truth or cling to lies and ignore the reality of half of human kind. The Third World is better called the Two-thirds World, or, better yet, the "Real World."

As a Christian, I know the truthful life is not ignoring the oppressed. But as a First World Christian there are plenty of comfortable alternatives. The answer is the Mother Theresa approach. Make eye-contact with the homeless, do what you can. Don't despair if the job is eternal.

### **What insights has this trip given me into issues in our own society?**

El Salvador is a high contrast heat sensitive photo of the USA. The powers and needs and pitfalls are no different in the USA than in El Salvador. If the powerful can keep the powerless complacent through comforts they will. But there are uglier means to the end of maintaining a lopsided economic situation.

It must be a lot easier to correct trends earlier than later. As a Salvadoran warned, "When governments are allowed to abuse people far away, they develop a capacity to do the same thing to their own people. The tide is rolling in on the poor and civil liberties.

### **After two weeks and two thousand dollars...my conclusion:**

That's a lot of time and money to spend not finding the answer. But I did learn a lot about the Central American question. It's frustrating to bring home a clear picture of life under the USA but no clear marching orders.

In comparing this experience to my educational two week trip three years ago the fundamental issue is still land. In Central America, land is life. The average peasant has no land. I'll give hope the benefit of the doubt in El Salvador and I've affirmed my anger at the USA's power to destroy a country that tries to be truly independent, as Nicaragua did.

Nicaragua is on the verge of "africanization," a term first world economists use for a

third world country becoming such an economic basket case that it's not worth even controlling.

The value of Nicaragua's strangulation is that the armed forces of the Salvadoran popular class, the FMLN, learned that their victory would bring a similar fate upon their country. The USA will not tolerate any nation not playing by its rules in its hemisphere. The people of El Salvador understand the veto power both the USA and the FMLN hold over their lives. And the people, including most forces of the left and the right want to negotiate an end to their civil war while there's still a country to rebuild. It will be rebuilt within parameters set by the USA, but since the cold war is over and the American appetite for further Central American adventures is weak, the popular class will be allowed some real political space.

What can the USA do to help Central America? Given the track record of Yankee help, the simplest answer is to just get out. Central America doesn't want wars, dictators, Cuban missiles, or poverty. They are political adults and should be allowed to find their own answers. Ugly as land-reform is to the first world land owner, landlessness is the root of the region's poverty and thus its unrest. And the region's foreign debt makes any real growth impossible. Interest alone on many "banana republic" national debts is more than their entire export earnings. The money, loaned from first world elites to their third world counterparts, will ultimately have to be paid by either our working class or their peasantry. The dictators and their cronies who borrowed the money are mostly long gone. The money that wasn't squandered on corrupt and worthless-to-the-local-people projects in those countries is now in Florida or Switzerland (with many of the original borrowers). For first world consultants to fly in and find ways to squeeze this money out of the poor masses is futile, counter-productive for all involved, and unjust. This debt was corrupt from the start and should be forgiven. As a tax payer, this is one scandal I'll happily cover.

And for a real win win solution, rather than force the "American dream" on campesinos, we could mellow out and learn a little from the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan dream.

### **Home to Miami**

The flight was over-booked, which seemed logical given the future I see for Latin America. It is a powerful feeling to be able to step into an America-bound airplane and mull over just how much of the Real World's problems I want to fit into my life. Of course, I have my troubles and problems. But, if I choose to be honest, the worst of my problems would be a blessing to the normal Latin American. The Central American lady next to me had cute little Christmas bells painted onto her fingernails. So did her daughter. We're all going home to Miami.