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TRIP REPORT OF CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION  
TO THE CENTRAL AMERICAN REPUBLICS  
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Filed by Representative Dave McCurdy

The problem we all talk about is Nicaragua. But the problem is much broader; it involves all of Central America. We ignore the broader problem to our peril.

A delegatiopn of 13 House Members, including four from the Committee on Armed Services, visited the five Central American republics this month and spoke with all five presidents, including an hour-and-a-half with Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega.

We found virtually unanimous agreement among the presidents of the four democracies -- Costa Rica, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala -- that:

- 1) There can be no long term peace and stability in Central America unless and until all five countries are democracies;
- 2) Pressure on Nicaragua is an essential if the Sandinista regime is ever to agree to pluralism;
- 3) Latin American and European governments aren't helping promote pluralism when they aid Nicaragua while ignoring the four democracies; and
- 4) The United States must not be so blinded by the Nicaraguan problem that it allows the three fledgling democracies -- Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala -- to flounder.

Democracy in Central America

Costa Rica has been a democracy -- with no qualifying adjectives whatsoever -- since 1948. For four decades we have been trying to enduce the other Central American republics to move toward democracy and pluralism. It is a form of American intervention, but the kind we ought not to shy away from. In the 1980s, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala have elected presidents freely. Uniquely in history, four of the five republics are democracies. As convinced democrats ourselves, we ought to keep this fact in the forefront of our thoughts.

Nicaragua, of course, has also held an election. But it is impossible to call Nicaragua a democratic state in any real sense of the word. Block committees are not the stuff of a pluralistic society. Asked directly if he would allow the opposition to win power in a free election -- yes or no -- Daniel Ortega waffled for several minutes, then said the opposition would be permitted to take power if it could win, and finally concluded that the right of the Nicaraguan people to institutionalize Sandinista rule should not be abridged. This is a perversion of democracy.

The four democratic presidents recognize that there is an inherent conflict between their democratic ways and the messianism of the Sandinistas. A theme that recurred in the separate interviews we had with them was that, in the words of El Salvador's President Jose Napoleon Duarte: "We (four elected presidents) all believe Central America will not have peace unless all five countries are democracies."

#### The need to pressure Nicaragua

There was remarkable unanimity about the need to exert pressure on the Sandinistas if we are ever to expect any concessions from them on pluralism within Nicaragua. I should make clear that none of the presidents openly advocated American aid for the Sandinistas. They generally viewed that as a domestic American issue in which they wished not to be ensnared. But they were vocal about the need for pressure, arguing that the Sandinistas would not advance toward pluralism and free elections out of the goodness of their hearts. As President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica said, "I told Ortega that the difference between you and us is that we are ready to become the opposition."

The presidents cautioned us about getting hung up on the Contra aid issue. We were urged, for example, to assist the democratic opposition that still exists inside Nicaragua.

#### The need for other countries to act

Perhaps most interesting was the frustration of the presidents with democracies in Europe and Latin America. One president spoke quite bitterly about Sweden for providing aid to the Sandinistas but not one penny for his own democratic state.

The presidents were quite clear about the need for more democratic governments to exert pressure on the Sandinistas instead of cossetting them. Needless to say, much of the cossetting is done by our allies.

As President Arias of Costa Rica said, "Ortega's not willing to dialog or negotiate unless there is a lot of political pressure from everybody -- not only the Contadora countries." And President Duarte of El Salvador said, "We need more pressure. We could use European pressure."

Arias was especially firm on the need for other countries to get involved. "I invited nine Latin American presidents here in May to convince them we could not allow Marxism to stay here," he told us. "If the only one interested in change in Nicaragua is the United States...." He then shrugged his shoulders and looked up at the ceiling, leaving the sentence unfinished.

#### The importance of the four democracies

Costa Rica is an established, secure democracy. The others are not. President Arias described the other three as "very fragile and weak and vulnerable."

President Vinicio Cerezo was most direct in urging us to keep our eye on the big picture. He said, "It is more important to consolidate the four democracies, but all the talk is about the \$100 million for the Contras."



It was also made clear to us that the recent shift to democracy in some of the countries was based more on the desire for assistance from the United States than a philosophical commitment to democratic practices. One president cautioned, "If we don't get that support, maybe opinions will change."

President Arias also warned us not to consider that democracy is accomplished simply by the completion of free elections. "Democracy is not an end in itself," he said. "We have shown Costa Ricans that we are more efficient. We can have social justice with little cost at all." The message was clear: we must help the democracies to make democracy pay off in social and economic terms as well as political terms.

Yet, the economic situation in Central America is a tragedy. The region hasn't really recovered from the post-1979 recession prompted by the hike in oil prices. The lack of security has prompted a vast capital outflow, which President Arias estimated at \$20 billion. Aid can't do the trick alone. Various presidents alluded to the key need for investment and trade opportunities. But aid is important. A little cash goes a long way in the small economies of Central America. And it tells the people of the democracies that we are putting our money where our mouth is; we are truly supporting the cause of pluralism in our hemisphere.

#### Other observations

I've heard a great deal of talk about the four democracies being pushed around by Nicaragua and fears expressed that they might sign a Contadora treaty that allows the Sandinistas to rake in all the chips. Let me make clear that this is a wholly irrational fear. None of these presidents is a fool; all are impressive, intelligent, thoughtful democrats. We heard Fourth of July speeches that would bring tears to your eyes -- with one big difference. These men aren't just mouthing traditional sentiments when they speak of democracy. Many of them and their friends paid dearly in earlier years for their advocacy of democracy and pluralism in the face of repressive military regimes. On this trip we saw only one military uniform -- and Daniel Ortega was wearing it.