

DEDICATED WOMAN

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In the summer of 1985, the House of Representatives was poised to vote on whether to continue the Boland Amendment, which prohibited the U.S. government from aiding the Contras, the group fighting to overthrow the left-ist government of Nicaragua. Two California congressmen, Democrat Vic Fazio of Sacramento and Republican Bill Lowery of San Diego, undertook a fact-finding mission to Central America, to inform themselves and their colleagues about whether to uphold the Boland Amendment or to allow aid to flow to the Contras once again.

A group of California private citizens was assembled to accompany the two congressmen, underwritten by the San Francisco-based Columbia Foundation, which wanted to broaden the understanding among public opinion leaders about the situation on the ground in Central America. I was among that bipartisan group, as were pollster Merv Field, attorney Bill Coblentz, the late publisher of the McClatchy Newspapers, Jim McClatchy, and then-finance chair of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Nancy Pelosi.

Our 10-day trip took us to El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras, as well as to Mexico City to meet with exiled Central American political factions. Our brief immersion into Central American politics made a deep impression on all of us. We met with the Sandinista leaders in Nicaragua – including President Daniel Ortega, who has just been elected to

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serve a second time as president of Nicaragua. A Sandinista general took us to the northern front, skirting bomb craters in the roads, passing burned-out buses and the smoking ruins of villages where daily battles between their forces and the Contras were waged. One night we met in a deserted schoolyard with Nicaraguans whose human rights had been violated by the Sandinistas, and heard stories of young boys kidnapped into military service by the Contras.

In San Salvador, we visited a hospital ward full of amputees – soldiers and civilians who had stepped on landmines planted by left-wing guerrillas. We also hiked to a mountain town and heard testimony from relatives of residents who had been rounded up and killed by the Salvadoran death squads. We met with U.S. military advisors in Honduras, including a tough veteran of every insurgency since Vietnam, whom we dubbed “Nails-for-Breakfast.” They were training anti-leftist forces throughout the region. And in a safe house in the suburbs of Tegucigalpa, in a room tastefully decorated with automatic weapons hanging on the walls, we

met with the leadership of the Contra forces.

It was evident from this meeting and our observations in the war zone that the Contras were operating with abundant weapons and ammunition, despite the cutoff of aid from the U.S. When we asked them where these came from, they replied, mysteriously, “We have many friends.” We returned to the U.S. puzzled about this apparent contradiction, but the riddle was solved when we learned that the White House had been secretly assisting the Contras through the Iran-Contra deal.

Even though I have worked with her on other matters since, it was on this intense visit to the war-torn region that I formed my lasting opinion of my fellow traveler, Nancy Pelosi, whom Democrats elected in November to be speaker of the House of Representatives. Here are my impressions. She is compassionate – when our group was initially frozen with horror at the sight before us, she was the first to move over to a hospital bed in San Salvador to comfort the young soldier with the remains of his leg encased in a rude wooden splint.

She is intelligent and insistent, peppering those we met with pointed questions, pushing them on sensitive issues like human rights. Even before she was an elected official,

Nancy showed the poise indicative of her future leadership role, choosing to represent the group in a meeting with President Ortega when most of us were more interested in a gee-whiz field trip to the northern front with the Nicaraguan military.

But a certain picture stands out clearly in my mind from that trip 21 years ago. One night, in Managua, Nicaragua, our group returned to the hotel around 1:00 a.m. after a late dinner. There were no telephones in the rooms, and phone service, in a town where the main cathedral still crumbled roofless after an earthquake 13 years before, was spotty at best. But there was Nancy, who had skipped supper, in the middle of the night at the pay-phone bank in the deserted lobby, calling back to the U.S. to reach those with whom she had Democratic Party business. She is incredibly disciplined and dedicated to her work as a public official.

Nancy Pelosi’s qualities – compassion, tenacity, dedication, hard work and gracefulness – will raise the standards of both effectiveness and courtesy – not to mention style – in the House of Representatives. Nancy, we’re excited for you, and we expect great things from your leadership of the House. Ω



Photo courtesy of Nancy Pelosi