

## Transcript of Chuck Kaufman's webinar presentation on US interference in Nicaragua's elections – July 18, 2001

Thank you Barbara. My talk today is limited to US **electoral** interference since the 1979 Triumph of the Sandinista Revolution whose 42<sup>nd</sup> anniversary we celebrate tomorrow. There are new webinars each month covering other aspects of Nicaragua-US relations. I recommend you tune in regularly.

Let's start with the first democratic election in Nicaragua's history, that of 1984, organized by the Council of State which had ruled since the 1979 overthrow of the dictatorship. Although eight parties or coalitions of parties ran in the 1984 election, when the Sandinista victory began to look inevitable, the Reagan Administration forced the leading coalition of right-wing parties to pull out of the race, giving the US the pretext to refuse to recognize the results. Other international observer groups found the elections to be primarily "free and fair."

So already in 1984, we saw the United States place itself as the final judge and jury as to whether or not an election was legitimate. Legitimacy is not based on the facts or conduct of an election, but solely on US foreign policy objectives. So an election in Venezuela called by Jimmy Carter the best election ever monitored by the Carter Center can be delegitimized by the US and corporate media whereas a corrupt election like that of Honduras in 2013, where I myself witnessed vote buying and changing vote totals can be declared free and fair by the State Department's stenographers in the corporate media.

Delegitimizing elections is one of the primary **overt** tools used by the United States to subvert democracy around the world. Covert actions are outside my mandate for today.

But the 1990 election in Nicaragua is where the US game plan for electoral intervention was written, perfected, and victorious. It is the game plan that has been used overtly to distort elections not just in Nicaragua, but around the world. Allen Weinstein, a founder and theoretical planner for the NED, noted in a 1991 interview with the Washington Post, "A lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA."

US elites have no respect for democracy at home or abroad -- especially abroad. Henry Kissinger lifted the curtain of illusion and told us a snippet of truth prior to the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende in Chile: "I don't see why," Kissinger said, "we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its people. The issues are much too important for the Chilean voters to be left to decide for themselves."

Weinstein was talking about the National Endowment for Democracy which was created by Reagan in 1983 and expanded by Bush Senior, Clinton, Bush Junior, Obama, Trump and now Biden. Nicaragua in 1990 was its first victory. Through the use of money and pressure, the US took advantage of Nicaragua's lack of laws controlling foreign money in its elections to create a unified 13 party anti-Sandinista coalition united behind the

candidacy of Violeta Chamorro, widow of the martyred anti-Somoza newspaper publisher, Pedro Joaquin Chamorro.

The US then spent more per Nicaraguan voter than in 1988 George H W Bush and Michael Dukakis **combined** spent per US voter in our presidential election. At the same time the US warned Nicaraguan voters that the Contra War, which had cost them 40,000 sons and daughters, would continue if Daniel Ortega won reelection.

You can bet your bottom dollar that the US quickly declared the 1990 Nicaragua election to be “free and fair” when Chamorro won. I have always thought it interesting, and it is seldom noted, that when Daniel Ortega placed the presidential sash over the shoulders of Violeta Chamorro, that was the first time in Nicaragua’s history that governing power passed peacefully from one political party to another. The supposedly brutal autocrat Daniel Ortega achieved the first peaceful transition of power in his nation’s history.

Let’s talk a minute about the National Endowment for Democracy and its primary funder, US Agency for International Development. USAID, over the last 40 years, has been converted from a brick and mortar foreign aid agency to the coordinator of foreign election manipulation, which the US calls “democracy promotion.”

The NED is made up of four core groups – The International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute are affiliated with the two political parties. Warmonger John McCain was chair of the IRI until his death in 2018, and Clinton Secretary of State Madeline Albright is the long-time chair of the NDI. The AFL-CIO has its own affiliate, the American Center for International Labor Solidarity also known as the Solidarity Center and to round out the engines of empire, the Chamber of Commerce has its affiliate the Center for International Private Enterprise.

NED operates its own grants and also makes grants to its sub-groups like the IRI and NDI which they then administer. It’s a pretty sweet money laundering scheme which they call “democracy promotion” when it is actually just the opposite.

When we at Alliance for Global Justice first started tracking NED and its affiliates, it was easy to see what they were doing because it was right on their web pages. But especially after we helped reveal their role in the quickly reversed 2002 coup against Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, they began hiding the names of their grantees and disguising where the money is going by making it through regional grants.

One way to follow the money is to track their job announcements. Whenever there is an election Washington wants to influence, NED, IRI, NDI, and USAID job ads start to appear about a year earlier.

When I led a pre-election delegation to Nicaragua in 2006 to investigate US interference in the election that returned the Sandinistas to office, we met with an International Republican Institute staff member. She told us, “The relationship between the US and

Nicaragua is like that of a parent and a child, and a son should not argue with his father!"

The National Democratic Institute and the IRI both ran a lot of the trainings of students and youth in Nicaragua prior to the failed 2018 coup effort. There is still too many in the US progressive movement convinced of the reality of the fake social media videos the opposition was taught to produce in those "democracy" workshops.

The AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center, another core group of the NED, has been heavily involved in destabilizing Venezuela, but has not been involved much in Nicaragua so in the interest of time I'll skip over them and the Center for International Private Enterprise.

USAID, NED, and its core groups also focus on funding opposition press. In Nicaragua, media ownership is concentrated in the hands of the Chamorro family and Nils may have more to say about that.

Following the electoral defeat in 1990, Nicaraguans suffered through 17 years of neoliberal governments that indebted them to the international financial institutions, destroyed the rural economy forcing workers into sweatshops, ended government subsidies for food, education, and health care. Grinding poverty and hopelessness replaced the pride and hope of the revolutionary years.

Daniel Ortega probably won the 1996 presidential election. The US funded an electronic system to compile the votes from the various municipalities and voting tables which gave highly questionable results. I was told personally by one observer that he overheard former Costa Rican President Oscar Arias say that Costa Ricans would never have accepted the results of the election. It was also said that Jimmy Carter told Ortega that he had to accept the results or be responsible for another Contra War.

The election of 2001 was again held under conditions controlled by the US and the International Monetary Fund and Daniel suffered his third defeat in a row. But it should be noted that throughout these dark years of neoliberalism the FSLN remained the largest party in the National Assembly where they were able to stop some of the worst depredations of what Pope John Paul called "savage capitalism."

By the 2006 election, Nicaraguan voters had been suffering under neoliberalism for 17 years with infant and maternal mortality skyrocketing, the rural peasant economy moribund, education too expensive for tens of thousands of families; prescriptions were free in the health care system, but they had no medicine, and electricity was available for scant hours a day.

The voters had had enough and Daniel Ortega squeaked into office with a bare plurality of 38%. That is the election I mentioned meeting with the IRI representative. Our delegation also met with US Ambassador Paul Trivelli. Trivelli had failed his assignment to unify the right behind one candidate and he equally failed to learn who we were. He proudly told us that he had between \$12-\$13 million to spend on the election. We had a

press conference at the end of the delegation and revealed both the IRI's contempt for Nicaragua and the ambassador's admission of blatant interference. I like to think we played some small role in the Sandinista victory that year.

Daniel Ortega was re-elected in 2011 and 2016 each time by greater majorities as government policies have restored the economic and social rights of the people, reinvigorated the rural economy, restored labor rights to garment workers, restored free education and healthcare and gave Nicaragua the fastest growing economy in the Americas prior to the US-backed failed coup of 2018.

The US did not recognize either of those elections as legitimate. As in 2006 US ambassadors failed to unify the right around a single candidate and had to settle for destabilizing tactics and lies in the corporate media as they have had to do with this year's election. Nils will talk about that.

I know I'm over time, but I do want to say that US election manipulation in Nicaragua would be so much less effective if it were not for the so-called left in the US which time after time act reinforce the objectives of US imperialism by swallowing the US narrative hook, line and sinker. We on the anti-imperialist left have to do a better job of educating our base and promoting a competing narrative of economic justice, respect for sovereignty, and peace. Follow us on AfGJ's web page [www.AFGJ.org](http://www.AFGJ.org), subscribe to the weekly NicaNotes blog, and join the discussion listserv [Nicanet@googlegroups.com](mailto:Nicanet@googlegroups.com).

Barbara, back to you.