

YALE-UN ORAL HISTORY

Alvaro de Soto

Interviewer: Jean Krasno, Ph.D.

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Jean Krasno: Mr. de Soto, I would like to ask you some questions about the phenomenon called the "Friends of the Secretary-General." Do you recall when the idea of forming a "Group of Friends of the Secretary-General" began and how the concept was first created?

Alvaro de Soto: I recall it exactly. In December of 1989, in a discussion with a delegation from the guerrillas, the FMLN, that I had with them in Montreal (because they couldn't get U.S. visas) at ICAO [International Civil Aviation Organization] headquarters. They were exploring what it would be like if the Secretary-General were to become engaged in a mediator role or good offices effort in El Salvador. At this time, we were not involved yet. We had some activities in Central America, but had remained on the periphery in regard to El Salvador. This was an exploratory conversation. And one of the ideas that came up at this meeting that I had was whether it would ever be possible for the Secretary-General to create a group of countries that would act as a kind of support for the Secretary-General and counter-balance the political weight of the Security Council. They were nervous about the prospect that the Security Council might play too preponderant a role and bring pressure on the Secretary-General. Obviously what they

feared was that the U.S. which was at the time an ally of the El Salvadoran government, would take sides and put the Secretary-General in a position where he would have to take sides in favor of the government.

What they wanted to ensure was the genuine impartiality of the Secretary-General. So it was that it occurred to me that the Secretary-General might borrow on a device that is frequently used in inter-governmental bodies, which is the notion of "friends of the chairman" or "friends of the president." Very frequently, you have a stand-off, a deadlock on some issue in, say, the General Assembly or a committee of the General Assembly, where it is clear that you need to miniaturize the negotiating forum in order to achieve results and in order to get around the problem of everything having to be done in an unwieldy open body, given that all formal bodies of the UN have to be composed according to geographical representation. Because of this you don't always have the right actors. So one practice that has developed over the years is that sometimes the president, or the chairman of the committee will simply gather a group of friends. It is noncommittal on anybody. But he will choose them properly so that he will have inside the room, rather than outside, all those who he feels need to be a party to any deal that must be struck. He retains a certain degree of deniability to the extent that he can always say, "I was just meeting with a group of friends," hence, the expression "a group of friends." "Why can't I do that?" And there are many occasions where agreements that could not have been achieved in a formally constituted group or in a large gathering such as the 185 members of the General Assembly can emerge from such a format.

The FMLN had a far more complex idea, and they had several tiers in mind. In the end, what we decided was that the Secretary-General would gather friends about him; he would consult and use them as a sounding board.

JK: In your meeting in Montreal, you were there with some of the FMLN leaders. Was Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar there in this meeting at that time?

AdS: No, this was a very quiet meeting at my level. Actually, the fact that the meeting was held has only become known publicly very recently. It was semi-clandestine. I just, one day, boarded a flight to Montreal and arranged to have these people meet me at ICAO. I'm sure the intelligence services of more than one country know about it.

JK: Had Pérez de Cuéllar himself used anything similar to that prior to this?

AdS: Not to my knowledge. That is, certainly not *calling* it that. No, not like that. I don't think that it had, before that, been used by the Secretary-General. What you had is contact groups. For instance, the contact group that led to what eventually became resolution 435 of the Security Council concerning Namibia. That was a contact group; they weren't friends of the Secretary-General. They were self-created. The UN Secretary-General was not involved in that.

JK: Now let's pick up where you were going before. How were the countries selected? Did the Secretary-General have something specific in mind in what he was putting together?

AdS: We essentially had, I'd say, three levels. At one level, we had countries that had relations with El Salvador, but also had contacts with the FMLN, and that we could count on to lay down any interests that they might have in the outcome, any stake, and assist him impartially. They didn't have a stake in the outcome. They were not taking sides. And those were Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela, and Spain.

At another level we had friends that didn't appear in the limelight at any point but that were able to assist in different ways because they had influence on the FMLN either because perhaps they were slightly sympathetic to some of the grievances that the FMLN represented in the El Salvador conflict without being military allies or anything. You know, what I mean is Nordic countries.

JK: I had no idea that there were the different levels. I was only aware of the four originally.

AdS: This is what I want to clarify. The third tier were not really "friends" at all, but countries that had taken sides and that had a stake in the outcome, if only a political stake, not necessarily a strategic one and here there were three, very clearly: the U.S., the Soviet Union, and Cuba. But we had a different treatment of each of the three levels. One of the requests the Secretary-General received very shortly after the Montreal meeting. There

was a summit meeting of the Central American presidents, in Costa Rica, in San Isidro de Coronado. And there the Secretary-General got two requests: 1) please help the parties to get negotiations underway in El Salvador; and 2) please help us obtain the cooperation of countries from outside the Central American region whose assistance, or cooperation, or at least non-opposition, would be necessary for this thing to work.

This was harking back to the problems that the Esquipulas and the Contadora group had. Which is that they just kept out of the effort, the U.S. and the Soviet Union and Cuba. They made no effort to obtain their support. Now, of course, this was all rehearsed in the sense that the host of the meeting, President Arias, who was in touch with me about "What does the Secretary-General need in order to be able to take this on?" This is what he pretty much spelled out and they put it in. Then, when he [the Secretary-General] was approached by a letter from the FMLN and then, more formally in a visit from the president of El Salvador in January of 1990, requesting him to undertake this good offices mission. The Secretary-General sent me on a shuttling exercise which lasted two months, the purpose of which was drawing up a framework agreement which would essentially establish the rules of the game for the negotiations. And one of the rules that I had put in there was that the Secretary-General should be free to consult with whomever he chose amongst governments whether inside or outside the region if he felt that he needed to do so in order to assist in his efforts. Thus he wouldn't need to be doing it behind the back of anyone. This he took as a license.

Then, you prefaced your remarks by talking about the "group of friends." The "Friends" only became a group, and we only began to consult with them all together as a

group in about July 1991. Until then, we met, either the Secretary-General or I, separately and individually with each of the four.

JK: You had already selected the four, but as a group they didn't meet at first?

AdS: They didn't become a group until the fourth quarter, during the last six months of the negotiations. This was done quite deliberately because in the case of the four, they could all be relied on not to act in accordance with national interest, but to be basically impartial, and set aside any national interests that they might have in order to assist in the efforts of the Secretary-General. Nevertheless, there were certain nuances in their positions. In the case of Mexico, for instance. Mexico was, in a sense, a victim of the El Salvadoran conflict because Mexico became a highway for Salvadoran migration to the U.S.; also, the Mexican press was sympathetic to the FMLN.

JK: And the FMLN--didn't they operate in Mexico?

AdS: They had an office, and enjoyed a sort of political asylum. I suppose that it was an unwritten understanding though I'm speculating here. I don't know if that was the case. I believe they had an understanding that the FMLN would be allowed to come and go as they liked and they would do nothing to agitate any Mexicans that might have subversive intentions.

JK: Right. Then let me just ask you, while the group had been selected, after the meeting in Montreal, it didn't really meet as a group?

AdS: For a year and one-half.

JK: For a year and one-half. And so they had not really met as a group when you had the meeting in San José in 1990, when you came up with the Human Rights agreements. So had they played any role, though, at that point, in terms of being able to indicate that there was any pressure on the parties?

AdS: I'm exaggerating a little bit because actually I began to meet with them as a group a little bit earlier than that. More like April of 1991. But other than that, I would meet with them separately. In the case of Venezuela, for instance, you had an extremely activist President of Venezuela at the time, Carlos Andrés Pérez and it was essential to have him on board. I made a couple of trips to Caracas just to brief him.

JK: Another question that I was going to ask you was, were there key people—key actors in this?

AdS: Oh yes, absolutely. President Pérez was very much an actor. President Salinas de Gortari was not an actor and he didn't like to exert pressure. For him it was a question of principle and also he didn't want anyone to pressure him on anything so he didn't want to establish a precedent where he was pressuring someone else.

JK: But the parties could meet in Mexico comfortably.

AdS: Oh yes. The government of El Salvador didn't like it very much because the press was so anti-government-tremendously so. They hated it, but they agreed to meet there nonetheless. We had most of our meetings there.

JK: You mentioned that the president of Venezuela was very active.

AdS: *Very* active. He would pick up the phone and call the leaders of the guerrillas and summon them to Caracas. He would call the president of El Salvador and he would give him tongue-lashings. It was all right so long as he was doing it along the lines that we laid out for him. So I was painstakingly drawing up talking-points for him, or briefing people, trying to make sure that he was going in the right direction.

JK: So the role of the Secretariat is a key to keeping this going—keeping it on course.

AdS: Oh absolutely. This is a quintet with a very authoritarian conductor, but with a capacity of enforcement that was very limited. Colombia was a curious case because under normal circumstances, one wouldn't have chosen Colombia, because they have their own internal guerrilla problems, and they would have what psychiatrists call "projection." I mean they would tend to view everything from that perspective, as one would imagine. At the same time, Colombia had played an extremely helpful and active

role in insuring that the Secretary-General in 1989 was given a mandate by the Security Council encouraging his good offices. The Colombians strongly pushed for this idea in the Security Council and were able to shepherd a resolution to approval. It took them two or three months to get it. But they got it, finally, to fill the void because the Contadora group had essentially thrown in the towel.

JK: So was Colombia on the Security Council at the time?

AdS: In 1989, they were.

JK: So that was a key to have someone on the Security Council.

AdS: Yes. We engaged them as a friend because they were extremely helpful on the Security Council. I think they were still on the Council in 1990. They were very important and were really, very helpful.

JK: At some point I want to interview you on the agreement in San José, when you reached the Human Rights agreements, because that's very important. But now, in December of 1991, when it was the last hours of Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar's tenure, you were able to achieve a cease-fire agreement that was later signed in January. Was the Group of Friends helpful in getting the parties to agree to the cease-fire?

AdS: Yes, though they were mostly in the corridors, they were never present at the negotiations themselves.

JK: But they took place here in New York.

AdS: Oh yes.

JK: So would they meet with the parties somewhere in the building?

AdS: They sometimes met with them, but by-and-large, they were loyal and disciplined and met with them following the guidance that we asked them to pursue.

JK: Thank you very much. I hope we'll speak another time.