# YALE-UN ORAL HISTORY

Elliot Richardson

James Sutterlin, Interviewer

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**James Sutterlin**: Mr. Richardson, it is a great privilege for me to interview you today as part of the Yale-UN Oral History series. I would like to begin, since this will be centered on your experience in Nicaragua, in asking you just to give the background of your appointment by the Secretary-General, Pérez de Cuéllar, and why you were persuaded to take the job of Special Representative then.

**Elliot Richardson:** First, I don't know by what route he came to ask me to do it. It perhaps seems likely that my name was suggested by Alvaro de Soto who was then a very close advisor. Alvaro and I had worked together in the Law of the Sea conference for nearly four years. At any rate, I had no hesitancy in accepting the assignment when offered. And I have never had any doubt that it was right – it was, in fact, extremely interesting as well as instructive and ultimately satisfying.

JS: Did you consult with anybody on the American side, here in Washington, before agreeing to take this position?

ER: No. I consulted with some – after having decided to take it. When I asked this fellow if he would volunteer an answer to that, I was met with a remarkable degree of skepticism. The view of the, then, Assistant Secretary of State and the White House staff was that I was being taken for a sucker and that I was surely going to be conned by the whole process. I must say that I was rather amused by this. I wish I had a transcript of the meeting with the Vice-President and his staff. But obviously I wasn't disturbed by these reactions and, of course, they were laughing out of the other sides of their mouths by the time it was all over.

JS: When you encountered this skepticism here in Washington on the part of the Vice-President and others, was the skepticism toward the United Nations, as such, or toward the unlikelihood of Ortega agreeing ever to leave office.

ER: There was skepticism on three levels. Toward the competence of the United Nations, the Machiavellian capacities of the Ortega government and the assumption that I was a rather naïve do-gooder of liberal leanings who was a natural born prospect to be taken for a sucker in the circumstances.

JS: How much time were you actually able to spend in Nicaragua as Special Representative? You were not there all the time, I think, but you went frequently.

ER: I never added up the number of days. I went there first, I think, in August, shortly after the UN mission had been established there under the leadership Iqbal Riza when they had about a dozen or fourteen people altogether.

JS: That was UNAVEM.

ER: UNAVEM, yes. Then I went back periodically from time to time in the early fall, I think late fall, early winter. I would have to check for the time – just before the election itself.

JS: It's been said that, actually, the UN responsibilities there could be divided into three different periods in connection with the elections. First, the organization of the political parties and second the electoral campaign and thirdly, the elections themselves. Did you feel that you were able to be part of all three of those parts, particularly in the formation of the political parties.

ER: I am not conscious, myself, of having any role in the formation of the political parties. Whether Riza and his colleagues would feel that they have had, I don't know. I never specifically addressed that question. What was the significant thing about the early priorities, or one of them, was that we intended to make sure that the electoral process was fair and open from the beginning, that is, throughout the appeals to the electorate by the candidates and the parties. The mission embraced that aim and not merely the aim of assuring that the conduct of the

election in itself, the roll counting and so on were fair and accurate. So, a lot of what we did from the beginning was addressed to this. With Ortega, I commended him on behalf of the United Nations and the world community, generally, on his call for free and open elections and for their monitoring by the United Nations and spoke to him, from that point, in every future meeting with respect to things that bore on the conditions of the election. For example, one of the things we did was to visit the national radio that was also a television station and meet with the top bosses there. I addressed the question of access by the opposition party; went back to Ortega and got his commitment to equality of access. We had a lot of contacts with the official whose name I forget, who was the head of the Supreme Electoral Council and who was a very constructive part of the process – a strong, fair minded, figure, who dealt with us and his Commission members in this spirit from the beginning.

JS: His name is Mariano Fiallos, I think.

ER: We met with him on the first visit and then two or three times after that. They were clearly determined to do it right.

JS: I wanted to ask you that. Because I have talked with Fiallos who was the President of the Supreme Electoral Council. His position was that the UN monitoring and your presence were extremely helpful. Not so much, though, in telling them what democracy was because he knew that. Is this your impression?

ER: Yes, oh, yes. He was a man who, I think, clearly believed in the principle of democracy and wanted to try to assure it, so far as he and his commission could do so. So, we got the impression from the beginning that he welcomed our role and would do what he could to support it.

JS: That's what he has said also.

ER: There is no doubt about that. One of the significant elements of the whole picture was the decision of the provincial bodies, whose name, I forget also, that were dedicated to this purpose and we had – we broke up one of them – or not broke it up, but we had regional representatives in each province who worked very directly with those representatives. Every instance, for example, of a complaint about intimidation, interference in the registration, or distribution of literature and so on that went to them was followed up by us. The results were significant in creating a positive climate.

JS: In this sense, you believe that the UN role was very important in terms of . . .

ER: I think so and I think what particularly deserves emphasis is that we saw the honesty of the vote count as merely the last step in the process in which the candidates and the parties had had a fair opportunity to be heard and reach the electorate and I think we achieved that. Along the way, we created mechanisms

that would assure fairness of the vote that were, I think, totally foolproof. I don't know whether you saw the piece in the *New York Times* a few days before the election in which I was quoted to the effect that "not even mayor Daly would be able to steal this election." That was true. I don't need to elaborate on those letters as I am sure you have had full access to them. I think that one of the things that we did, for example, was to – I went to Ortega and told him that I thought it was inappropriate that there should be signs on behalf of his own party and re-election, on government property. He agreed and took them down.

JS: What was your appraisal of Daniel Ortega?

ER: I thought Daniel Ortega was a guy who believed in the – to a significant degree, at least – in the ideals of Marxism. He had come to power in a society where clearly the oligarchy of the rich occupied a position totally incompatible with any sort of egalitarian or democratic ideals. The Marxists have traditionally been authoritarian, if only because the policy to which they were committed was as a practical matter, unachievable, except through the exercise of authority. In many ways I thought he was a rather direct and even simple man. Not stupid but not devious. I think he thought he was honorable and certainly in my relations with him he was. We are getting ahead of ourselves, in a way, but while we are on that – when President Carter and I went to see him the night before – the night of the elections – to try to appeal to him to accept the then evident outcome. I would have to say that the situation was painful to him and shocking in some ways but

that he felt moved to do what he thought was the right thing, given his role initially in calling for the election. That fact, of course, was stressed. We might add, just for the record, that when early in the morning he conceded defeat, I immediately sat down and wrote him a letter in Spanish, in longhand. I had to get some coaching in Spanish. It said, in effect that, "any Central American dictator can assure his continuity and power but that it takes a man of larger vision and greater character to see both the appropriateness for the expression of popular will and to have the strength and magnanimity to accept it." And I said, "if you had merely been another exemplar of the traditional Latin American model, you would quickly be forgotten. Whatever your future, your action today will be remembered for generations to come." I think that was an appropriate thing to say.

JS: Absolutely. That letter is not in the files, as far as I know. I've been through all of the files. I wonder if a copy was made.

ER: I don't know, but I hope he kept it.

JS: I mean on the UN side.

ER: Oh, I don't think I thought about making a copy. I did it very early in the morning in my hotel room and put it in an envelope and had it taken to him. I don't remember whether I had a copy made for myself.

JS: I'm glad we have this on tape.

ER: You know, going back to the beginning, one of the very first people I met in Managua was a businessman, who had done a lot of business in the United States and was generally regarded as the leader of the Americanized or American leaning business community there. I've forgotten his name, you may know it. He told me that he did not think that Ortega would accept a negative outcome of the election. I started from then on, whenever I dealt with one of Ortega's chief lieutenants — there was one in particular whom I worked on — to convince them of the proposition that he would be far bigger man if he did accept the outcome than if he didn't. I'd like to dredge up the name of the man. Iqbal would remember.

JS: I'll ask him. The one who was – you don't mean Mrs. Chamorro's son-in-law, Antonio Lacayo, who was one of the people.

ER: He was the chief lieutenant of Mrs. Chamorro.

JS: Oh, you mean the people who worked with Ortega.

ER: Yes. One was a very bright man who had advanced education in the United States.

JS: Alejandro Bandaña. He went to MIT.

ER: Bandaña doesn't sound right. I think I did meet him but that doesn't sound right.

JS: Very articulate, perfect English, went to MIT and someplace else. Clearly on the left side. Left, but also very, very aware of the United States and democratic principles.

ER: You know, the interesting thing is that this is not exactly in place, but I went to the big rally in the stadium they have. It was supposed to be for Ortega and it was striking that the level of enthusiasm of the crowd was so noticeably tepid and Ortega's speech got so little response. You know, there were two people, one of whom traveled with me part of the time to the Mesquito Coast? — a senator from Connecticut – It was Dodd. We several places there went out on a river in a dugout canoe, at one point. We met with a number of those people. Dodd was quite sure that Mrs. Chamorro was going to win. The other American who was equally sure – that was – I have a block on names – the congressman from New York who was upset by the House mail scandal. He was an extremely capable man.

JS: He's from upstate New York, I think.

ER: He also – but I concluded that what happened was that – you know, this is something I learned in the army, when I was in basic training. I mean I really saw – and it was an indelible lesson that it's a great mistake to correlate the lack of education with the lack of intelligence. I had basic training company colleagues who had never gone beyond the fourth grade and our instructors were mostly MD's and many of them were just as well able as I was to assess who were the most reliable, trustworthy and informed instructors. I think what happened was that Ortega campaigned against the United States and Chamorro campaigned with the overt support of the United States and here were these people who were suffering from a radical drought sometimes estimated as 90 per cent in their share of the GDP. They said to themselves "Hey, why should we keep on the guy who is hated by the United States instead of electing the one that the US likes." I think that's what happened.

JS: You think that the United States, in that sense, did play a role in the election.

ER: Oh, yes. In that sense, yes. I think the ordinary people added it up right.

JS: In that connection, did you have any contact at all with any of the Contra leadership?

ER: Not really, I think I may have met one of them. But I was never approached by any. On the Chamorro side, Lacayo was the person I dealt with most often. I met

her [Mrs. Chamorro] two or three times towards the end. I wasn't very much impressed with her – on the whole. I didn't think she really had quite the capacity for the job but she was being taken on. I liked Lacayo a lot.

JS: But he eventually broke with her, I think – after she became President. If I could go back to the Contras for a minute. Was the Contra movement, as far as you could see, associated with the United States entirely?

ER: Well, I'm really not in a position to answer that question, but certainly such impressions that I had reinforced that assumption. You mentioned [---unclear---] I had known him earlier in connection with a project of the New American Dialogue on Panama. A very fine man, I think, but it is sort of odd to think of him as having had a Cabinet role. I've forgotten what his title was.

JS: I don't know either. He had a high rank, I know that.

ER: He was a nice man. We went to see the Cardinal, at one point. We thought it worthwhile to give him a sense of the procedures we had put in place to assure a fair election and a particularly large turnout. Toward the end, there were a lot of observers. You asked about the UN and the OAS. The OAS was jealous of the role of UNAVEM and never came close to the capacity that was represented by UNAVEM people. I haven't said much about the UNAVEM people. I'll come back to that. The OAS had a bunch of reservists, but that's about all. They were

not particularly active in the efforts to ensure the fairness of the process, itself. They didn't have anything like the capability of the people of UNAVEM had – it was absolutely first rate. It's irksome to read allusions to the incompetence of the UN which I saw contradicted there and I saw contradicted again in Namibia and in Iraq.

JS: At the last Baena Soares, the Secretary-General of the OAS, was actually there, I think, for the election.

ER: He was there like Carter, with all due respect. I must say I would be interested if you could ever get a clue from your friends at the UN whether they thought that I let them down when I did not challenge Carter in his decision to take the dominating role at the final press conference. I just didn't have the stomach to take on the ex-President – but the fact is, of course, that he and his colleagues had almost nothing to do with the election. But you would have never known that to hear him talk about it. I'm serious about that – I wondered whether de Soto, for example, didn't think that I "chickened out."

JS: I never heard him mention that. Nor did I ever hear Pérez de Cuéllar mention that. Of course, Pérez de Cuéllar wasn't there, but . . .

ER: Did you see my letter to Pérez de Cuéllar?

JS: Yes, I did. It's an excellent letter. That is in the records. I can tell you, for your background that he came to select you on his own; it was not Alvaro de Soto. Because he felt that it was very important – maybe this was a misreading on his part of Washington, but he thought it was very important to have someone of high reputation who would give credibility in case Ortega won. Because most of the UN people thought Ortega was going to win.

ER: I think most people thought that. I think my general credibility was greater than it was with the some of the Reaganites. But, I was certainly never one of them and they knew it.

JS: You had to deal some with Mr. Aronson, right, in the State Department? I think he was the Assistant Secretary. I believe he also was dubious of the UN role.

ER: I wrote a couple of letters to them about the situation. Have you seen those?

JS: I have seen some. There is one, I think, to the Secretary of State.

ER: I thought I wrote one to some – someone wrote me a very snotty letter. Full of simple-minded assumptions about what a sucker I was going to be. Have you seen that one?

JS: No, that I haven't seen. That's not in the record.

ER: I'll ask Marguerita if she can find it. Let's not use the word bureaucrat pejoratively, but I think being a good bureaucrat is a high art. I consider myself one of the better practitioners. There is nothing I enjoy more than moving forward on the merits in a manner that confounds the cynics and the smart-asses.

JS: In that connection, there was the problem of the congressional committee that wanted to come to Nicaragua and Ortega would not agree to that, I think. Do you remember that? I think you had to deal in Washington with some people to try to straighten that out. Bush was very directly involved and was insisting that this . . .

ER: Some came, you know. But, yes as observers. One of the people who was windy on the evening of the election was Emil H ? of New York. We were worried about how Ortega was going to take this. But I really don't remember much about the Congressmen.

JS: Were you able to observe the other UN operations, the so-called CIAV, which was involved in the reintegration of the Contras. That came a little later, I suppose.

ER: No, I didn't. I think Iqbal did though; he stayed on and had lots to do there. I think he worked remarkably well, as far as I know. Let me just say about Iqbal

that I never worked with a man who held his own under such total discipline, so complete. In fact, he made you feel that he really had no interest at all other than trying to insure the best possible outcome on the merits. He did not include his opinion but I found that if you conveyed a readiness to listen, then he would voice it, very candidly and directly. When he did voice it, it was invariably worth having. He was – I don't know exactly what his own role was in this election with his staff, but I know it was considerable and they were all highly capable people who worked well together. He made very clear his appreciation of them, of what they were doing in pursuit of the effort as a whole. I found him to be one of the most capable, decent, thoughtful colleagues that I ever worked with, any time, anywhere.

JS: He certainly gave that impression in Nicaragua. The people I talked to – they all had the highest respect for him, on both sides. There was some – I got some reports that a good many Nicaraguans felt that the OAS, in the CIAV operation, were somewhat partial to the Contras because they were – I don't know why, but then there was this impression. Did you pick up any of that? Did you have any sense that there was a distinction between – I mean, the fact that the OAS was not as competent, was one thing, but that they were less impartial?

ER: I can't honestly say I had any feeling.

JS: I want to go back to something that you said before we were on tape. That is about Humberto Ortega. Would you say again what you said before, your assessment of him?

ER: I had to see him on the question of control of the military and what would happen if Chamorro won. Would there be and so on and so on – and on that, I found both him and Ortega, I mean his brother – were more responsible and responsive than I thought they might be and, of course, I did my best to build up the international and historic significance of what they were doing. Humberto seemed to me more direct, more responsive, more fair-minded, than I thought he would be. Where, as I said earlier, that I liked him, I mean by that I thought I saw the whole individual who was dedicated to the things that his personal loyalty and his ideological leanings demanded. What you saw was what you got.

JS: It is a particularly interesting point because quite a number of the officers in his army had been trained in the Soviet Union. I find that a very interesting thing. The army was loyal, so to speak, to the principles of the election.

ER: Well, you know, I was recently Chairman of the American Dialogue Task Force on Cuba. As it turned out we only got to Cuba once. When we got there it was Oscar Arias who cost us a chance to see Castro, whom I really would have loved to see and hear him talk. Well, Arias insisted on paying a personal call on the most outspoken dissident, still at large, and then came out of the meeting with this

guy and had an impromptu press conference in which, of course, he was highly critical of the regime. I guess Castro was very annoyed by this and although the person who was detailed to us, as our escort, I'm sure tried to get us on to see him. Interestingly enough, the very Monday that I got back to the office that I had a visit from the head editor of the Human Interest section, virtually apologizing, and offering me and my wife a trip, a free trip to Cuba, in which we would be assured of seeing Castro. I only mentioned that because of all the talk about the evil empire, and of course it was an evil empire in many respects, but it leaves out a dimension – are you aware of my recent book?

JS: No, I haven't seen it. How long has it been out?

ER: About a year ago.

JS: A year ago? I'll read it. No, I have not seen it.

END OF SIDE 1 OF TAPE

START OF SIDE 2 OF TAPE

ER: Let me read a section. History's most important revolutions are inspired by new and powerful ways of affirming human worth. The New Testament is a momentous example – others are the Declaration of Independence and the

Communist Manifesto. Although utterly different in origin, purpose, style, and philosophy, all these changed the whole course of history because each in its own way lifted the spirits of ordinary people everywhere by telling them words never before spoken: that they were important. Ironically the Communist manifesto set in motion the forces that led to the imposition of those very regimes, the regimes – the totalitarian regimes that led to the Cold War. When in 1848 the manifesto called on working people to unite in overthrowing all claims to the superiority or special advantage of one human being over another, it too spoke to the aspirations and sense of individual worth. The revolution to which the manifesto appealed would be the prelude to the reign of liberty. "In place of the old bourgeois society with classes and class antagonisms there will be an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." Around this development would emerge a just society and so on and so on. Then it [the book] says "but no regime that acquired power in the name of this ideal could pretend for long to be engaged in the task of creating heaven on earth. The necessity for coercion in carrying out the abolition of private property opened the door to dictatorships not of the proletariat but of brutal oligarchies. Having suppressed human rights in the name of equal shares of poverty Communism's eventual but inevitable collapse was brought about by long suppressed yearnings for the feeling of dignity it originally promised. And so, in the end, the Manifesto failed because it promised too much."

Well, it's a great mistake not to see, even today, in Cuba, the surviving force of the idealism that Castro awakened and may still, himself, partly believe in. A lot of people there do believe in it. I don't think that Ortega has the intellect that Castro has but I would credit him with thinking when he started that he was going to help the people.

JS: The situation in Nicaragua was so bad that this was certainly a logical consequence.

ER: It is clear in my view of Cuba that the single most powerful force sustaining Castro is the US embargo. The guy who told us that in most clear-cut terms was the Papal Nuncio.

JS: Could I go back just for a minute to the night of the election when you spoke to Ortega and also to Mrs. Chamorro? Was it your impression that the quick count that the UN did was the first indication that Ortega received that he had lost?

ER: Yes.

JS: Because Humberto Ortega told me that there were other sources of the same information coming in and that he had told his brother.

ER: Well, I don't know. They had their own sources that could be. I think they had their own kind of quick count. They would have been concurrent.

JS: Did he seem surprised when you told him?

ER: No, I can't say that he conveyed surprise at that moment. He conveyed the impression of a man who had been run over by a truck. In that sense, that something he hadn't expected had occurred to him. But, he was no longer thinking in terms of surprise, at that point.

JS: What about Mrs. Chamorro when you spoke to her? What was her reaction?

ER: She was very happy about it. But I don't think she had much of a clue as to what was going on, anyway.

JS: Pérez de Cuéllar, in speaking of her, has commented that she is no Maggie Thatcher.

ER: No. I would say that again. A nice woman, attractive, charming, and so on, but.

JS: Did you have occasion to discuss, with her, her decision to keep Humberto Ortega on to head the army?

ER: No. As it turned out, I never got back for the inauguration. Bush had approached me in November 1989, about representing him in the then, new, multilateral assistance institute in the Philippines. I had to go to the Philippines at that very time, I forget why. I'm sorry I didn't [get to the inauguration]. I think I gave the impression that I had sort of walked off but it was not a lack of interest. But, between you and me it was nice of Millbank and Tweed to give me a place to work and some occasional interesting legal projects and I've been here a remarkable length of time now; I came in the fall of 1980. But in that period, from my point of view, much the most interesting and satisfying things that I've done are the assignments to Nicaragua, Namibia and Iraq and the Philippines and continuing involvement as I've had with the Law of the Sea. You know, I wish I could get across -- and I know you were having some opportunity at Yale to get across to young people that the rewards and satisfactions of working for public interest are unbeatable by comparison. I have a quote in here from – you know who Paul O'Neil is?

JS: Yes, of course.

ER: Here, this is a chapter about bureaucracy, I think it is, or about public service. I'm talking about some of my favorite bureaucrats. When I was at HEW, in the division of the OMB that handled our budget, — the head of that division was Paul O'Neil a career public servant who became Deputy Director of the OMB under President Ford. On leaving government early in the Carter administration

he went to work for the International Paper Company as its Vice-President for Corporate Planning. Well, five or six weeks after Paul O'Neil joined International Paper, I had lunch with him in New York. I asked him about his new job. "It's interesting and I like the people," he said, "but you can't believe the top-heaviness, the delays, the overlap and the waste they have around there. We wouldn't stand for it in the government." Now, this didn't come from an ex-civil servant who found himself ill-suited in the world of business. Within a few years, Paul O'Neil had become the President of International Paper and two years after that the CEO of ALCOA. But I called Paul and asked him if he had any problem with my using that quote. He laughed and he said no. Then he said, "But even now, at ALCOA, it still is not as satisfying as what I did in the government."

JS: I don't want to keep you any longer. This has been extremely helpful and I think it must give you some satisfaction also to get some of these things on the record, Is there anything else on your mind that you would like to get on this?

ER: Nothing that I can think of now. I have a bad memory.