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Interviewee: George Vickers

Interviewer: Gabriel Perez

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Interviewer: First question is, basically, what motivated you to work in this region of Central America?

Participant: I didn't come to this as a Latin Americanist. I'm a sociologist, and my field was social movements. Intellectually, I got there a little bit by the fact that by the late 1970s, a lot of the most interesting social movements were in Latin America. The other line was really political. I had been very involved in the '60s, in the student, and civil rights, and anti-Vietnam War movements. In fact, I was, in 1983, just clearing the decks of some previous projects I had been working on to write a book on the Vietnam anti-War movement that I'd been collecting data on for a long time. Then the U.S. invaded Grenada, and I was convinced that this was a prelude to an intervention in Nicaragua. I came in through concern about where U.S. policy was going politically.

Participant: There was also a group of faculty nationally that had formed after the Salvadoran army occupied the National University campus in 1980. It organized on the West Coast first, it was called the Faculty for Human Rights in El Salvador. Essentially a solidarity movement among faculty for the support of the university faculty because the army occupied the campus for four years. I became involved in developing an East Coast branch of that, particularly after 1984, and involved with taking delegations of faculty and students down to the region to try to get direct experiences of what's going on, and that itself drew me more and more into focusing on the region. I began, partly just to avoid cognitive dissonance, to shift more and more of my own teaching and research into Central America.

Participant: It was a dual path. One was a political concern about how the United States was responding to the revolutionary processes there, the brutal massacres that were going on in the early 1980s in Guatemala and El Salvador, particularly and the gathering Civil War in Nicaragua, and intellectual interest in the nature of the movements and how the strategic balance and dynamic of insurgency and counterinsurgency.

Interviewer: Once you got on the ground in El Salvador, and I think you were saying that Nicaragua and El Salvador were the first countries you visited. How were any preconceived notions you had or preconceived notions that you knew were common in the US, how were those shifted or remained the same once you got on the ground and started collecting information, meeting people?

Participant: They shifted significantly. In the case of Nicaragua, by 1984, from where I came from in the U.S. setting, it was with a built-in sympathy towards the Sandinista Revolution and the promise that it held. I came in both quite sympathetic to it, but also interested in watching the dynamics. The more time I spent there over the latter half of the 1980s, the more I began to see both the problems of what happens when a movement becomes a governing party. It became more and more aware or apparent to me that the official explanations being offered by the Sandinistas of the U.S. being the only real reason why there was a developing country or what really wasn't an adequate explanation and that there were more and more campesinos turning against the revolution for a variety of reasons.

Participant: In El Salvador, it was, and in some ways, I think, emotionally, El Salvador had the biggest impact on me both because the people I met in the human rights organizations and revolutionary organizations and even people who were opposed to the revolution. Members of the oligarchy and leading families, on one hand, had fairly stereotypical ways of describing the world. But, also, you could actually see the ground truth of the fact that it was a very dynamic situation in which people were really afraid, on the one hand, that people in the oligarchy, in many cases, were Neanderthal in their views, although probably not so Neanderthal as the oligarchy in Guatemala. The strategic dynamic of the ebb and flow of insurgency and counterinsurgency was so dynamic that I would go there about every six months and the things would really change. It wasn't a static situation. I think I wrote an article probably every year from about 1985 on that said this year will be a decisive year in the El Salvadoran Civil War, and every year, I was right.

Interviewer: You mentioned Guatemala, so I wanted to ask this question. I know that your answer may be applicable in all three nations, but in Guatemala, particularly, to what extent was your approach interdisciplinary? The reason I bring Guatemala up is because there's such a myriad of language, sociocultural differences, ethnic variety in the country. Did you ever have to bring in other disciplines outside of maybe just political, or development, or sort of economic analysis? Did you ever bring it to the sociocultural elements or juggle language issues working in that country?

Participant: Yes, and I didn't speak any of the ethnic languages, so obviously, it was a factor having interpretations done. One moment that strikes me is, particularly, I used to use it in teaching because I had both slides and tape recording of being in Patzun, which was a village on the edge of Lake Atitlan where there had been a massacre. The meeting had been arranged by some of the folks in the Catholic Church there. Having a meeting with all of these women from the community. There were no men in the community because of the massacre, or they were off in the hills somewhere. On the one hand, they were all talking in, I'm not sure which ethnic group it was, but they were in these very colorful dresses and all in this sing-song voice that's recorded on tape, but what they were talking about was precisely the details of the massacre, taking their sons, and their husbands, their fathers.

Participant: The contrast both between the beauty of the scenery on the edge of Lake Atitlan in Patzun and the colorful, the way -- You couldn't tell anything, of course, by looking at anybody's faces. You couldn't read the expressions, at least I couldn't read them. The difficulty of translating -- We used to have a stereotype of the cultures of the three countries and would say, "If you wanted to have somebody to party with, you'd pick a Nicaraguan. If you wanted somebody to fix your car, you'd pick a Salvadoran. And if you wanted somebody to keep a secret, you'd pick a Guatemalan." In part because the counter-insurgent efforts of the army had been so much, and then the strategic defeat of the guerillas early on really meant that the repression was so present and so immediate that people were much more terrified and much more unwilling to talk. Then all of the language difficulties of people communicating.

Interviewer: Related to that, how much, and this could be for in either country, to what extent did you rely heavily on local knowledge or on-the-ground folks, or it be, they at a very local level, or leaders of political parties, or opposition parties? To what extent did you hand over the reigns of information gathering and analysis to them as opposed to?

Participant: Again, there are some differences between the places. In Guatemala, we really had to rely entirely on local knowledge. I guess, the role that I played, I wouldn't say is an academic entirely,

although it was partly that. I had ongoing access in Nicaragua to a fairly broad political spectrum. It partly was a fluke that in 1985, I think it was or 1986, when the National Assembly of Nicaragua was redrafting a new constitution, they created a constitutional drafting commission because there was a lot of fighting about it. It consisted of 11 Sandinistas and 10 anti-Sandinistas, opposition party members. They spent a couple of years drafting this. They created different working groups. One went to Eastern Europe, one went to South America, to travel around and look at different models of constitution. After they completed, and they looked at the U.S. Constitution as well. They prepared a first draft of the Constitution.

Participant: Arthur Kinoy and Sylvia Law in New York -- Arthur was at Rutgers Law School and Sylvia was at NYU -- helped to organize a gathering of 200 professors of constitutional law from around the United States and Canada. This committee came up to New York to meet with and get feedback on this first draft of the constitution. For reasons that aren't important but had to do mostly with the size of the loft that I lived in, we had a final dinner at my house for 200 people. Through that, I met not only the Sandinista leadership that were present for that but also a lot of the heads of the opposition political parties. In part, for reasons of politeness, whenever I would go down after that, they all considered me somebody they met, they were friendly with. They considered me somebody who was open to their point of view and I could always get meetings with them and actually was asked to help advise the Assembly on the drafting of the Constitution. I did have the role.

Participant: I relied very much on local knowledge on the one hand, but trying to do the analysis of putting together the different pieces, I think, was still, as is normally the case, it was my responsibility. It was trying to understand that there were different points of view and to get access to all those different points of view. In El Salvador, similarly, I had a fair amount. I had much more access to the U.S. Embassy and to the U.S. point of view on things. I could get briefings by the U.S. mil group and meetings with Salvadoran army officers, in part because Senator Dodd, who at the time, I think, was a representative, what was heading the Western Hemisphere subcommittee, was somebody that I met through some work and who would write to the embassy and asks them to help arrange meetings with me, with people in the government and with the army folks. I was able to get a fairly broad range of access that, in some ways, I think I got to hear in more detail the different perspectives and try to figure out what were the relative weights of the perspective.

Interviewer: Is that to say necessarily that things got easier on each subsequent visit. You knew more and more knowledge and you were able to get around more on the ground, of if you came back after power had shifted, new players entered the game, conflict had moved from one region to another, did you find that often? Or was it generally that each time you came back, you were more and more prepared?

Participant: I think the latter. I think you develop -- At first, going down with delegations was a very important way of meeting people because why would they just meet with me? But through that work, not quite consciously at first, but as I met more and more people through them meeting with groups of us. I kept coming back. After a year or two, was able to just have my own meetings and develop the degree of confidence with different people. You develop a set of informants who are fairly broad, but it's yellow. It's more personal relationship at some level.

Interviewer: Did those personal relationships shift a lot if you were speaking with political opposition leaders versus maybe independent observers, or then journalists, or students? Did you have to shift the way you collected information or spoke with them?

Participant: Yes. Although, part of the way I did that was by -- I would play the devil's advocate with the different people I met who were themselves on opposite sides. I'd say, "Well, your view is this, but there are people in the government who say that, or the people in the U.S. who would argue this, what do you have to say about that?" It's pushing them to develop in more detail and get beyond the stage of just generalizations.

Interviewer: If for some reason, you know, we could have some informal interview, if you want to go, we have to run out for some reason or again, noise happens, I'll cut it. My last question is, again, this is certainly, I'm sure, true in all three countries. The situation in Nicaragua is oftentimes viewed by outsiders as one of the most prolific examples of U.S. involvement. The Iran-Contra Affair and involvement is publicized almost even more than U.S. involvement in the other nations. Did you ever feel as an American there that you had a special role or you had to maybe shatter a preconceived notion either on the ground there in Nicaragua, or did you ever feel like people from the United States were questioning your role as an American going down there?

Participant: I think they were different in the different places. In the case of Nicaragua, I think the trick there was that most people assumed -- most Nicaraguans -- assumed that if you were an American down there in the country, you were a Sandinista supporter. For those who were not supporters of the Sandinistas, at first, it was very much a sense of suspicion and a certain standoffishness because they were assuming you were really there on the side of the government. It took some while to develop enough degree of confidence that --while I might be critical of U.S. policy, I wasn't necessarily a blind supporter of the government. In El Salvador, it played a little differently. I mean the suspicion was more.

Interviewer: I would ask you to stop just for one second just because the noise is, just want to make sure.

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