

Confronting Sandinistas on The Streets of Managua

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For the memory of history, I wish to recount the events that occurred in Managua, Nicaragua on Tuesday the 26th of April. There had already been two days of violent street demonstrations centered around three universities and orchestrated by the Sandinista Party. Private buses and government vehicles had been burned and several policemen injured, two of them seriously. Public transportation had been paralyzed for two days and smoke from protestors burning tires in the streets wafted above the city

On the surface, these demonstrations were protesting a US\$ 3 cent rise in the price of public bus fares triggered by the recent surge in world oil prices. But there was much more behind this than appeared on the surface. The demonstrations were a carefully crafted trap designed to lure the government into overreacting and use this as pretext to spread chaos around the country.

The outlines of the trap started to become clear when I convened a round table discussion to look for solutions to the problems brought on by the rise in oil prices. Two leaders did not show up to this meeting, and both were members of the Sandinista Party; one who is a rector of a university and the other a well-known student leader. Instead of being at the discussions, they were out organizing the street violence.

We soon learned more details of the Sandinista plan. After a few days of street protests, the Sandinistas would convene a march on Tuesday April 26 directly on the Presidential grounds, ostensibly to demand “a dialogue” with the President. In reality, they hoped to push through the police lines and attack the Presidential Office Building.

They hoped to provoke the police to use live ammunition to defend the Presidential Office Building, or the calling out of an Army special reaction force. In either case the objective was to create “human rights violations” from a “blood thirsty” government and use the incident to spread protests and chaos throughout the country. Sandinista organizers in the provinces outside Managua were lying in wait for the march on the Presidential Office Building to provide the spark.

I have read that complex problems most often require simple solutions. I sat down at night on Monday April 25th with my most trusted advisors: my wife Lila, a son and a grandson. Together we reached the conclusion that an “audacious gesture of complete surprise” was required.

The next day, as the protest got two blocks away from the Presidential grounds, I announced to my startled cabinet that I would be going out to meet the protesters and inviting their leaders to join in a dialogue. My chief bodyguard immediately and vigorously protested. I told him this was needed.

The members of my cabinet, the bodyguard, my son and I drove to one block away, got out of our vehicles and walked towards the violent crowd that was trying to override the police force. I was walking in front with my bodyguard, with my ministers ten paces behind me. This gesture of an unarmed 77 year old president calmly advancing towards the rowdy protest completely disoriented the protest organizers. They did not know how to react. Some members of the protest started throwing rocks and bottles of water and launching homemade projectiles at us.

I reached the protesters, held my hands out to them and made a public call for the four main protest organizers to join us in serious talks to discuss the issue of public bus fares. With the rocks still falling a group of anti-riot police stationed a block away came to cover the return to our vehicles. There was only one casualty, not serious, my son, who was hit in the head with a rock and unconscious was taken to the military hospital.

The entire nation had witnessed the incident on television. Within twenty minutes, the streets were vacant and the burning of tires and vehicles had stopped. When I returned to the Presidential Office Building, my wife was waiting for me. She said, "I knew God would help us and all will come out OK." The next day all the major leaders signed an Agreement on the issue of bus fares. The protests ceased and buses rolled once again in the streets of Managua.

As president of Nicaragua, I am opposed to what the *Economist* magazine recently labeled an "unholy alliance" between the leader of the extreme left, Daniel Ortega of the Sandinista Party, and the leader of the extreme right, ex-president Arnoldo Aleman of the Liberal Party. Aleman is currently serving a 20 year sentence for corruption related charge. I am sure this alliance will continue to launch fresh attacks on democratic institutions and democratic procedures in my country. But with God's help we will be able to overcome all attacks to democracy as they arise.