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From Nicaragua to 'Nightline'

How I 'incited a riot' against the Sandinistas

I shook my head, half amused, have amazed, when I saw my photograph on PBS's MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour last week and then on ABC's Nightline show. Here was the description of me: an American embassy official trying to incite anti-Sandinista demonstrators. What I was, and still am, is managing editor of this newspaper.

How it all began, and the role that several innocent congressional aides along with News-Post photographer Sam Yu and me played in this international story, still has my head reeling.

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The decision of U.S. Embassy officials in Nicaragua to attend an anti-Sandinista demonstration eight days ago — a decision that eventually grew into a straining of relations with that country — only came about at the last minute.

I was in Nicaragua, and was one of the people who talked with U.S. Embassy officials about going to the demonstration and about taking me along.

Nandaime, the small town south of Managua, is now a focal point of charges by the Sandinista government that the U.S. Embassy in Managua intentionally sent American officials there to stir up the demonstrators. It

didn't seem like that at all the night before.

On Saturday evening, July 9, the U.S. Ambassador, Richard Melton (who has since been expelled) had a dinner at Casa Grande, an opulent United States guest house on a hill overlooking Managua and a short distance from the U.S. Embassy. The dinner was arranged so that a congressional delegation could meet with Nicaragua's Independent Human Rights Organization. Invited were four U.S. congressmen: Rep. Thomas DeLay, a Republican from Texas; Rep. Beverly Byron, a Democrat from Maryland; Rep. Robin Tallon, a Democrat from South Carolina; and Rep. Barbara Vucanovich, a Republican from Nevada. Also along were five congressional aides, two people from the U.S. State Department, and myself and Sam Yu.

After dinner the meeting began on human rights, the reason for the congressional delegation to have spent July 8, 9 and 10 in Nicaragua. But we had heard a demonstration was planned for Sunday morning in Nandaime. Nandaime is a poor village in the hills. It is one-story buildings lining cobblestone and dirt streets, but it is also, we were told, a center of activity for anti-Sandinista groups. That Saturday morning the anti-Sandinista newspaper, *La Prensa*, had a banner headline encouraging people to go to Nandaime.

I was interested in going. So was Sam Yu. Several congressional aides also talked of going; they are a young, energetic bunch and thought the exposure to the demonstration would give them insight into human rights in Nicaragua. One embassy official said that going to Nandaime would be impossible; Sam and I talked of renting a car.

But when the aides — especially, Neil Dhillon, Mrs. Byron's aide; Read Carson, a legislative aide to Congressman DeLay; and Trish Brink, DeLay's press aide — showed interest, the talk turned to taking an embassy vehicle.

Originally we were told that embassy people don't go to rallies, but Mr. Melton, the ambassador, told us: "We always have someone at these demonstrations. We attend them all." He was planning on at least two embassy observers, he told us. Standing around the ambassador, we asked if we could tag along, and he said that was "fine."

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The only objection was over any of the four congressmen going. Mike Donovan, a State Department official from Washington who traveled with the delegation to Nicaragua, strongly urged the congressmen to not go to Nandaime. "You don't want it to look like you're backing or supporting their demonstration," he said after dinner. "Remember why you're here, human rights." Mrs. Byron echoed his feelings. "It happened to me before in Central America. You go to a demonstration and suddenly you find yourself in the middle of it and it looks bad. We can't go."

But the five aides could, and, along with one State Department person, three embassy officials, and the two journalists, plans were made to leave from Casa Grande the next morning. With a cooler of sodas in the back, we began loading ourselves and camera equipment into two embassy vehicles.

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The road was potholed and crowded; dozens of trucks and rickety buses, packed with people, were headed south. We watched Sandinista soldiers delaying some of the demonstrators on the way to Nandaime. Though they were packed on the buses — some hanging out doors — many cheered as they rode.

In Nandaime a short while later we spotted the extra embassy vehicle. It was parked discreetly on a side alley. In it were Congressmen Tallon and DeLay. Many of the demonstrators also saw them and some were taking pictures of the car.

In Nandaime a while later, we were in the midst of the demonstrators within minutes. The issue that crops up most often in the

accounts from the Ortega government is that the Americans in Nandaime were "chanting" and raising "clenched fists" and "encouraging" the demonstrators. The government-controlled Managua newspaper, *Barricada*, ran a photograph on Monday morning of two Americans raising their arms, and the cutline under the photograph said they were urging on the demonstrators. One embassy official, Robert B. Murray, was in the photo, along with Jim Kameen, an aide to Congresswoman Vucanovich and who actually had been interested in going to Mass that morning in Managua with Mother Theresa.

I remember on the drive to Nandaime that we were warned by embassy officials that our pictures would be taken, likely by the Sandinista press. Within minutes after arriving and walking along the dirt and cobblestone streets to where the demonstrators were gathering, men with cameras were taking our pictures. At one point, I was just getting to the front of the demonstration along with Ms. Brink and Mr. Kameen. Cameras clicked.

It was a congested, crowded and seemingly dangerous place. For me, as a journalist with no experience covering foreign news (my intention was to do a story on Congresswoman Byron), there was an uncomfortable feeling. The demonstrators could be anti-American because we had cut off aid to the Contras. The Sandinista troops could certainly be anti-American because we oppose the existence of their government. All five of the congressional aides were making their first trip to Nicaragua as were Sam and me. Repeatedly, we were told by Mr. Murray and others to "stay together."

There were thousands of demonstrators and each aide and Sam and I all had our own interests; within minutes we were separated. Standing on a small hill along the route of the demonstrators, Mr. Murray, Mr. Kameen and I saw Sam Yu and Reed Carson a short distance away, taking pictures, but separated from us by the crowd.



We signaled for them to come closer. We raised our hands and motioned for them to come toward us. Cameras clicked.

Several other times I would turn to look for our companions, and I could see the embassy officials, looking worried, searching the crowd for us. Whenever those in the group spotted another person, we would raise our arms and signal. We did that over and over and over. And I remember when doing it that people were taking our pictures. I watched them and even smiled at the cameras several times.

After about an hour, we got together again and climbed into the two embassy vehicles. We left the demonstration early (before most of the violence) because the U.S. military plane that brought the delegation to Nicaragua would leave Managua's airport at 1 p.m. On the way back we again joked

about our pictures being taken. As we got out of the embassy van, one official with us smiled and said of our trip to Nandaime, "It's been real, folks. We'll have to do it again sometime."

The group was lighthearted and certainly not overly concerned that anything unusual had happened in Nandaime.

The next morning, the photograph of Mr. Kameen and Mr. Murray signaling to Sam and Reed was on the front page of the paper. On Wednesday, Alejandro Bendana, the Nicaraguan secretary general of the foreign ministry, was on MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour holding a picture of me, Mr. Kameen and Mr. Murray and saying it was American embassy staff members inciting the crowd. On Thursday night, Mr. Bendana was on Ted Koppel's "Nightline" show and again showed the photograph of me and the other two. I was looking off the one side; Mr. Kameen and Mr. Murray were signaling with their arms — to Sam and Reed.

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Looking back on what has happened in Nicaragua over the past several days is confusing. We could not have believed that the morning we got into U.S. embassy vehicles for the ride to Nandaime that it would turn into the spark that would be ignited by the Sandinista government to expel the U.S. ambassador and seven other embassy officials, including two who were with us in Nandaime. As the list of sanctions came out of Nicaragua last week, I was stunned. Radio Catolica was being shut down; the delegation had met with the Catholic cardinal and talked about the radio station. *La Prensa*, the opposition newspaper, was being closed; the delegation had met with the publishers. Many of the arrested demonstrators were people the four congressmen met with Friday and Saturday.

"Most of the embassy people we were with were the ones pitched out," said Congresswoman Byron two days later. "Many of the anti-Sandinista people we talked with were arrested at the demonstration."

"We went down on human rights and this has grown and grown. We never could have figured it a few days ago."

News-Post Managing Editor Michael Powell, with photographer Sam Yu, travelled to Nicaragua, from July 8-10, to cover Congresswoman Beverly B. Byron's investigation into human rights violations there.