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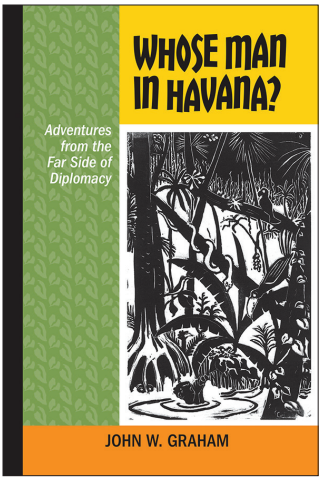

WHOSE MAN IN HAVANA? ADVENTURES FROM THE FAR SIDE OF DIPLOMACY by John W. Graham

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BOOK TWO

History is little more than the register of crimes,
the follies, and the misfortunes of mankind.

—Edward Gibbon,
The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire

In late 1992 I left the Canadian Foreign Service and began a second career with international organizations.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Stepping Back from the Precipice

This story is about a deeply troubling election – the most troubling that the Organization of American States had encountered up to that point. In April 1994 the secretary general of the OAS appointed me to lead the OAS observation mission in the Dominican Republic. I was at that time the head of the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy in the OAS. This was a Canadian-inspired and Canadian-funded innovation, and I was its first incumbent.[1]

Because I had been ambassador to Venezuela and non-resident ambassador to the Dominican Republic from 1988 to 1992, I knew many of the players and was expected to have some knowledge of the intricacies of Dominican politics. It says something about how little I knew that, before leaving our home in Washington, I told Judy that I would be back in three weeks. That was the first of May. It was almost four months later that I returned to Washington.

I don't think it was naïveté, although I have certainly been guilty of that, but there wasn't one among us – neither an observer, nor a senior Dominican politician, nor a member of the press – who forecast that summer's extraordinary sequence of events.

This was not for lack of warning signals. The previous presidential elections, in 1990, had concluded in acrimony after incidents of violence,

confusion, bad organization, and accusations of fraud. Dr. Joaquín Balaguer was eventually declared the winner. Following pressure from the opposition parties, Jimmy Carter, who had come as a mediator, and others in the international community made recommendations for a major overhaul of the election process. These were accepted by the government and by the Dominican Electoral Commission (JCE). Advice was forthcoming, some paid for by Canada, but, as my team soon discovered, very little of this advice was implemented. Efforts to bring problems to the attention of the JCE were met by accusations of "intrusion." International advisors were criticized for their "aggressiveness." Meanwhile, the JCE informed the public that the preparations for the 1994 elections were "progressing well."

At this stage neither I nor my team scented fraud. Political interference, yes, because a majority of the magistrates on the JCE belonged to the government party, the Reformistas. The first person to speculate that fraud might be in the cards was the Spaniard Vicente Martin, an international consultant whose job was to advise the JCE's computer centre. The more he learned the more he was alarmed, and his knowledge was alarming the Reformista magistrates. Martin was getting too close to the heart of things. He was excluded from most of the computer centre's activities. Martin was withdrawn from the country when he began to receive anonymous death threats, and he was soon followed by two other consultants who were concerned about their safety. Vicente Martin was replaced by a Puerto Rican, Jorge Tirado, an army veteran who always dined in Santo Domingo with his back to the wall to allow him a clear view of who was entering the restaurant – a habit he had acquired in Vietnam.

It was into this incendiary environment that the International Election Observation teams came in the first week of May. The OAS team had twenty-seven members; the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), led by Charles Manatt, a former chairman of the US Democratic Party, twenty; and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), led by Stephen Solarz, a former New York congressman, twenty-six.

Within days of our arrival the political temperature rose. The Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD), the principal opposition party, expected that it would go into the elections with a significant lead. However, national opinion polls indicated that the results would be very close, and this had the effect of cranking up doubts about the competence of the JCE,

allegations of predetermined fraud, incidents of violence, and corrosively bitter negative campaigning. The PRD leader, Peña Gomez, a Black man of Haitian ancestry, was accused of being unstable and a participant in Satanic cults. But it was President Balaguer who played the Haitian card most effectively. His bizarre concoction was that foreign governments, allegedly the United States and Canada, were plotting to force the union of Haiti and the Dominican Republic as a means of resolving the endemically chaotic Haitian problem. Peña Gomez's Haitian blood became a regular Reformista theme, and he was accused of being the agent of this plot and the person who would implement it if elected president. Grotesque caricatures of Peña circulated. As tensions rose, so did concern about the possible breakout of widespread violence.

Increasingly important as time went on was my connection with Monsignor Nuñez Collado, Rector of Madre y Maestra, the Catholic University. Monsignor Nuñez had been the moving force in Dominican efforts to reform the electoral process. Another important ally was Danny McDonald, commissioner of the US Federal Elections Commission, who had been inserted into the OAS team by the US ambassador to the OAS, in part to keep an eye on me. The clandestine side of this scheme rapidly collapsed when McDonald and I discovered shared interests in cigars, rum sours, and humour – and became friends.

Election day was clear and warm. It began deceptively well. The passion generated by this contest pushed the numbers even beyond the usually high Dominican turnout. In fact, the turnout was extraordinary, later calculated to be 87.4 percent, by far the highest turnout in Dominican history. These numbers are absolutely unheard of in the more jaded democracies of the North. In any event, the early morning produced few problems and no violence. Cheered by the reports to this effect, I set off to visit a few polling stations in the capital.

At mid-morning I was in a slum quarter with Danny McDonald when the cell phone began ringing with calls from several observers. One of the dark scenarios projected by Vicente Martin was materializing. Large numbers of citizens were being turned away because their names were not on the voters list that had been delivered by the JCE the previous day and that had replaced the voter's list in which their names appeared. NDI and IFES were soon reporting the same phenomenon.

A meeting of the three headquarters teams was hastily assembled and an urgent appointment with the JCE was requested. This was finally granted at 2:40 P.M., by which time a clear pattern of disenfranchisement had been established. On behalf of the three observation teams, I explained our findings and asked the JCE to extend the polling hours beyond the six o'clock closing and to authorize voting by those whose names were on the earlier list. The monsignor, the US embassy, and others were making the same démarche. By the time the JCE reluctantly agreed to extend the vote, it was 6:13 P.M. and the polls had already closed. Some polls reopened, but the damage was done. The predetermined fraud had succeeded by a whisker. The JCE reported that Balaguer had won by a margin of 22,281 votes over Peña Gomez. It was later found that over twice that number had been disenfranchised.

Temperatures rose, crowds gathered, and violence was expected. In this situation the verdict of the International Election Observation teams became increasingly important. The leading members of the three teams met regularly over the following days. A key issue among us was not whether to point to problems and irregularities – we all agreed that this must be done. The debate was about whether we should openly indicate the possibility of fraud in our communiqués. NDI wanted to move in that direction. My position and that of IFES was that while fraud was almost certain, we could not at that stage prove it, and in a highly polarized and incendiary environment we should be careful not to allow our statements to raise passions to the point where we would contribute to social combustion.

Post-Election: Dangers and Dilemmas

The press in Latin America and the United States picked up on the discordant sounds. Editorials in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* expressed dismay, and urged the Dominican electoral authorities to conduct a thorough and transparent investigation. Writing for UPS from Santo Domingo, the American journalist Georgie Ann Geyer opened her piece saying, "It may not be the dirtiest election in Dominican history [but] it is also possible that my cat, if put in an aviary, will embrace the birds."

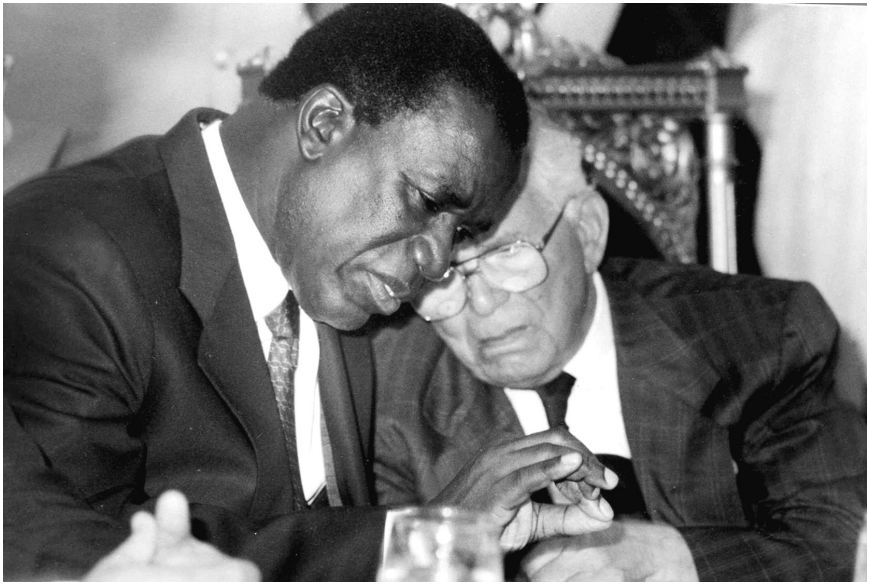
From election day, and onward for the next three months, all of us who were engaged faced the challenge of seeking redress, and the means of such redress for an election that appeared almost certainly stolen by fraud. That was one challenge. The other challenge was to do so – or more precisely to persuade the Dominicans to do so – without shattering the increasingly tenuous stability of the country. The two challenges were inherently in conflict. My goal, shared by Monsignor Nuñez and by US Ambassador Robert Pastorino and his successor Donna Hrinak, was to find and tread the narrow path that might lead away from the abyss.

An immediate issue was the reaction of the PRD. By the end of election day, the party was convinced that the election had been stolen by Balaguer and the Reformistas. The risk of civil convulsion was rising, and the conclusion of many that the army's loyalties were divided was unsettling. Concerned that the safety of their team was at risk, the head office of NDI in Washington ordered all of its observers out of the country forty-eight hours after the election.

Peña and Balaguer

I had met Peña before the election, but it was our first meeting after the election that was the most memorable. Phones rang, senior advisors rushed in and out of his offices. Emotions were inflamed. Some members of the PRD were advising Peña to allow the party to take to the streets and show its real strength. Parts of the city were to be torched. Fuelled by his own anger and frustration and wounded by a vicious campaign, Peña was torn between giving in to the pressures for direct action and inevitable violence on the one hand, and holding the reins of his party tight to avoid the destructive fracturing of society on the other. I made the case for country above party, and, of course, was not alone. Monsignor Nuñez was a more powerful advocate for this course. We were joined by Ambassador Pastorino and others. Part of our collective leverage was our commitment to press for a real investigation of election skulduggery. None of us were prepared to accept the results of manipulation.

Peña's choice of pacific tools over violent ones did not come easily. His spirit had been fired and his reputation first established by his role as spokesman and speech writer for Colonel Caamaño in the Constitutionalista cause in the civil war of 1964, which pitted Caamaño's troops against US



Dr. Peña Gomez and President Balaguer.

Marines. On this occasion, to his great credit, Peña eventually stood his ground, and instructed his people to engage only in peaceful protest.

With the crisis still in full spate, my role evolved from that of head of the election observation mission to that of international mediator. The OAS announced that its mission in the Dominican Republic would be extended. More and more, as events unfolded, my principal Dominican counterpart became Monsignor Nuñez. I was most fortunate to have such a wise and agreeable partner, and someone for whom almost no doors, no matter how thick, were closed.

During my time as Canadian ambassador I had met a number of times with President Balaguer. There were more meetings during the crisis. Despite the hostility of many of his supporters, which, of course, was linked to the perceived threat that I posed to the success of the electoral manipulation, our conversations were always cordial. One Dominican friend who had known the president for almost sixty years, and knew him as well as anyone outside the family, told me that a close personal relationship with Balaguer was impossible. My own impression was that notwithstanding his infirmities and great age – he was then eighty-seven – he

remained a masterful political manipulator. Cunning, and with a richly developed capacity to harness human weakness to his advantage, he possessed a wonderful memory, intellectual curiosity, and, when switched on, great charm.

That I was often the beneficiary of that charm may be surprising. I put it down to chance – the chance that I had met him when he was still Generalissimo Trujillo's president and I was a young diplomat posted to Ciudad Trujillo. When I returned as ambassador, Balaguer relished conversations about this chapter of his past, his recollections of the dictators of that time and region, his role in rescuing clerics from the vengeance of the Trujillo family. I sometimes recounted political jokes that I had picked up in the capital. These conversations broke the ice and inevitably facilitated discussions on hard issues.

His response to one such joke illuminates our relationship and something of his self-deprecating humour. I embarked on it with trepidation. The story concerns a driver who has joined a long line at a well-known gas station to fill up his car with gas at a time of serious gasoline and other shortages. After a long wait, the man, who is no closer to the pumps, pulls out his pistol and starts to back out of the line.

"*Que paso?*" demands one of the other drivers.

"I'm going to the palace to shoot the president," responds the man, and drives off to a scattering of applause. Half an hour later the same man reappears with his car at the end of an even longer queue.

"What happened at the palace?" ask several in the line who saw him leave.

"The line to kill the president is longer than the line for gas."

The president rocked gently with laughter.

This relationship may or may not explain the outcome of an incident in early June. The changing OAS role in Santo Domingo was attracting increased attention in Washington, and Christopher Thomas, the acting secretary general thought that an internationally recognized figure should be performing the role of mediator. The Brazilian, Baena Soares, had left at the expiry of his term as secretary general, and his interim successor, Thomas, instructed me to ask Balaguer if he would prefer to have the former secretary general leading the OAS mission. The response was immediate: "No, *Señor Embajador*, I would like you to stay." And so I remained, but in retrospect I suspect his answer had less to do with friendly feelings

Graham scrummed by Dominican media.

than with the hope that I would be less troublesome than the former secretary general.

Foreign Intervention?

The OAS was accused by Reformistas and others of being "interventionists" who were working to advance the ambitions of Peña Gomez. The firebrands tried to incite a frenzy of jingoism. It was not prudent to drive past one of their demonstrations without showing the national flag. The charge of intervention was a potent one in a country that had endured a long US occupation (1916–1924), CIA involvement in the assassination of Trujillo, and, more recently, the landing by a force of US Marines (1964). There can be no doubt that our activities and statements stirred an already turbulent pot. My mission had done something unprecedented in the history of the OAS. Even though the wording had been deliberately non-provocative, we had blown the whistle on a flawed election. The OAS had refused to endorse the proclaimed winner. Most Dominicans did not realize that the OAS and the other missions could only be present in the country on the express invitation of the JCE – in effect, of the Dominican government. When speaking to the media I reminded them that I was there only by invitation and repeated my increasingly tedious but fundamental mantra that "the OAS was seeking to support a Dominican solution to the crisis."

The Verification Commission: A Road to Nowhere

In order to achieve this "Dominican solution," the monsignor, I, and others urgently pressed the JCE to launch a thorough investigation. However, it was not until June 6, after many delays and arguments about the composition of the Verification Commission, that it was finally constituted. The commission was to be led by the director general of the JCE and included several competent and respected individuals. The commission reported to the JCE on July 12. On the basis of a random selection of polling sites, the commission concluded that a minimum of 45,000 voters had been disenfranchised as a result of substitution – the real voters' names had been replaced with fictitious names – and that "irregularities" had occurred in at least 1,900 polling stations. The commission noted that the anomalies did not seem to be attributable to technical malfunctioning of the computer equipment. By this point the possibility of innocent malfunction was reduced virtually to a mathematical and procedural impossibility. Nevertheless, the chair of the JCE told the press that the commission "had discarded any notion of fraud." The JCE magistrates sat on this report for three weeks.

Attempts to persuade Balaguer to discuss possible exit strategies were running into a wall. On July 28 the afternoon papers quoted Balaguer as saying that he would not sit down to discuss a negotiated solution until he was formally proclaimed victor of the elections.

That evening I sat rocking on the monsignor's patio, drinking his rum and, as usual, dissecting the crisis. In our view the president was playing with fire, but calculating that a formal declaration by the JCE would increase his leverage if he were to be cornered into negotiations.

The following morning there was a damage control session. It was agreed that we must speak urgently with Peña. In my notes at the time I wrote, "The situation is increasingly volatile and we fear that Peña, in his indignation, may push the situation toward the edge. Agripino [the monsignor] and I will seek separate appointments with Balaguer and with Peña. I called Ambassador Hrinak to suggest that she also call on Peña."

The next day, July 30, I met with Peña. He wanted President Clinton to telephone personally to Balaguer to apply pressure. I responded that Clinton was unlikely to agree, but the notion of an urgent high-level call from Washington made sense.

August 1 began badly. At a morning meeting with the director general of the JCE, I found him very discouraged. He forecast that the official proclamation of Balaguer's victory would be given within days, and would be issued without any reference to the Verification Commission. This prediction proved correct. On August 2 the JCE formally announced the election of President Balaguer for the period 1994–1998, with no reference at all to the report of the Verification Commission.

Of course, all hell broke loose. The roller-coaster crisis plunged again, with the spectre of a general strike and civil disorder. The armed forces and police issued a statement expressing support for the JCE's ruling. Fortunately, the question in many minds about how many military commanders would support the government in the event of an uprising went unanswered.

The US Role: Pressures and Suspicions

Up to this point I have said little about the role of the United States and of its ambassadors. Yet it was critically important. In terms of real leverage, it was crucial.

The US government had assigned two top professionals to the embassy in Santo Domingo. Robert Pastorino completed his assignment soon after the elections and was replaced by Donna Hrinak. I have lost count of the number of meetings I had with these excellent people. I was lucky. Our relationship was that of colleagues who had reached the same diagnosis of the problems and were looking to each other for support. But at the outset of the crisis the application of strong and consistent pressure by the US government could not be taken for granted. Haiti, on the western part of the island, was a bigger and more public headache for the Clinton administration. Washington was attempting – along with the OAS and the UN – to isolate and extinguish the illegal regime of General Cédras. A key component of the effort was to seal the Dominican–Haitian border – which the Balaguer government was not enthusiastic about. While careful not to say so openly, Balaguer had been quite content to see Aristide overthrown by Cédras.

In these circumstances, it might have been expected that the US government would have decided to pay the price of Balaguer's co-operation on the frontier by casting a blind eye on his cooked election. This did not

happen. Notwithstanding the risks to effective collaboration on the border, the ambassadors and the State Department applied pressure on the Balaguer government both to block undesirable border crossings and to rectify its errors in the conduct of the election.

Many years later former US ambassador Michael Skol explained how it was that the US government did not allow the much more public pressures of the Haitian crisis to trump concerns about democracy in the Dominican Republic. Skol, who was at that time the deputy assistant secretary for Latin America, was given the lead on the crisis in the State Department, and eventually the lead role for the US government. At this time I was unaware of the strategic battle taking place in Washington that pitted Skol against Strobe Talbot, the deputy secretary, and number two in the State Department. Talbot had taken an intense personal interest in the Haitian file. He was accustomed to getting his way, and was attracted by Balaguer's ploy to trade Dominican support in plugging the porous border with Haiti, thus further isolating the Cédras military regime in Port-au-Prince, and Dominican co-operation elsewhere, for tacit American acceptance of Balaguer's consolidation of his victory in the tainted election. Skol took a different view. If he had lost the battle with Talbot, the final outcome in Santo Domingo would have been very different.

After this success Skol visited Balaguer in Santo Domingo and told him bluntly that the US government wanted a solution to the crisis that reflected democratic principles. In his comments to me long after, Skol admitted that his tactics might have appeared "harsh, even imperial," but he believed that they were necessary to convince Balaguer that the US government was not bluffing. At about the same time, the US ambassador to the OAS raised the possibility of OAS economic and diplomatic sanctions against the Dominican Republic.

Countervailing pressures were again at work. It was very soon after the elections that my innocence about the privacy of telephone conversations was shattered. I discovered what most others had known – that a sophisticated eavesdropping industry was blossoming in Santo Domingo, and that tapes of my cellular phone discussions had become a popular item in some quarters. In a clumsy attempt to persuade me to be more "understanding" of the government's position, the president of Balaguer's party invited me to listen to a pirated tape of one of my conversations with Peña Gomez. He implied – quite wrongly, I thought – that my objectivity was

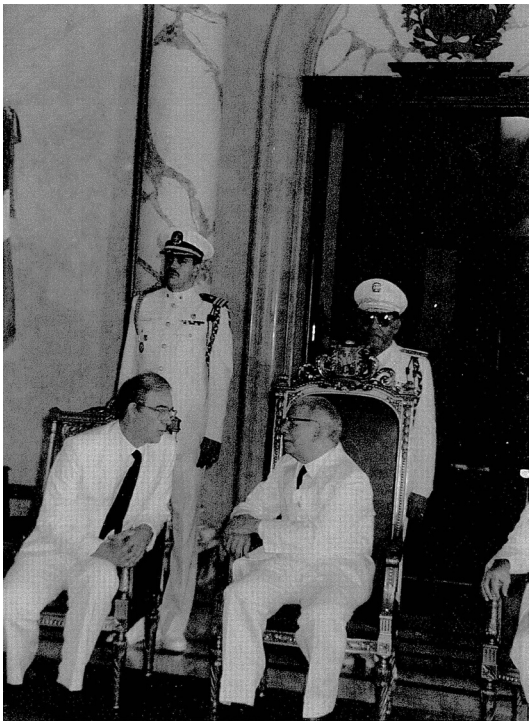
tainted. I was more annoyed than embarrassed about this tape. A senior associate of Peña Gomez tried a similar tactic. He was also threatening to expose my presumed "bias." The meeting was held under the flame trees in the garden of the old OAS building. Like many others, it was held outside in order to avoid electronic eavesdropping. The concern by both sides about where I stood was understandable. There was a great deal at stake.

Pressure was also being applied at OAS headquarters in Washington. One or two OAS ambassadors, unhappy with the OAS's pursuit of democracy in Santo Domingo, complained to Christopher Thomas that my activities as mediator in Santo Domingo exceeded my mandate. Thomas, who was getting cold feet as the election crisis heated up, called to say that he intended to recall me to Washington. I mentioned this to Donna Hrinak. She was horrified, and suggested that I speak to Michael Skol on a secure line. Skol and I had been friends and colleagues when we were our respective countries' ambassadors in Caracas. I spoke to him on a confidential line, and by the next day Thomas had backed off.

By this time I was increasingly a target of press attention. My own nerves were fraying and I wasn't getting much sleep. I decided to call Dr. Jordi Brossa, who had been my physician thirty years before, when he had been one of those involved in the plot against Trujillo. Jordi received me warmly and prescribed potent pills.

Deadlock and Extrication: Ten Days in August

Having conferred the next presidency on Balaguer, the JCE had written itself out of the picture. As this would not have happened without Balaguer's personal blessing, he had either concluded that he could ride out the storm or had calculated that confirmation as president-elect would strengthen his hand for the days ahead. For the monsignor and myself it became clear that the only remaining path out of the worsening crisis lay in direct negotiations between Peña and Balaguer. Our energies were bent in that direction and our shuttle diplomacy accelerated. However, it was not immediately successful. Balaguer was elusive, and Peña was exasperated and losing patience. On August 1 we learned that Balaguer had passed four hours in the cemetery meditating by his mother's tomb. Eventually persistence prevailed. We met separately with Peña and Balaguer.



Graham and President Balaguer in the palace.

As it happened, Balaguer was more responsive to the idea of a direct meeting with his opponent than was Peña, whose advisors were opposed to any one-on-one meeting of their leader with Balaguer. They were convinced that the slippery octogenarian would trick Peña into a bad deal. They were also concerned that directly consorting with the president would lower their moral ground. With the solid weight of many friends and senior colleagues against it, Peña resisted the proposal. It was not until the end of the first week in August that he succumbed to the argument that a continuing stalemate would harm both him and the country.

Peña attached the condition that the meeting must not be in the palace, but on neutral ground. I reported this to Balaguer, who immediately set wheels in motion for the meeting to be held in a library near the palace. It had been agreed between Balaguer and Peña that only four people would be present: the two principals, with Monsignor Nuñez and myself as witnesses.

Pie in the Library

At seven o'clock in the evening, August 9, the monsignor and I arrived at the library to find a surprisingly familiar setting. The furniture, consisting of table, settee, lamps, and chairs, had been moved from the president's reception chamber at the palace and set up there. The president, looking very composed, had already taken his place. Peña appeared within a few minutes, looking less composed. Balaguer invited me to open the proceedings. I made a brief statement about the purpose of the meeting and expressed our pleasure that the principals had agreed to attend. The president indicated his willingness to discuss any proposals that Peña might wish to make. At this point, to our surprise and dismay, Peña interjected to say that his colleague, Hatuey de Camps, was outside and would read a statement articulating the PRD position. Balaguer, without betraying any hint of displeasure, consented. De Camps entered the room and read a statement that essentially reiterated the PRD position that in view of the magnitude of the fraud, the government must agree to fresh elections as soon as possible, and that no other course could be considered. The intention of de Camps' intervention was clearly to freeze the dialogue and intimidate Peña.

The monsignor and I had been told that afternoon that Peña, under tremendous pressure from his senior colleagues, had given them the assurance that he would only meet with Balaguer, that he would negotiate nothing. However, still uncertain about how their leader would stand up to Balaguer, they had extracted Peña's assent to have a senior colleague set out the party's position in inflexible terms. Having apparently accomplished this purpose, de Camps left the room.

For his part, Peña repeated the party's "all or nothing" stance, insisting that the May 16 elections lacked legitimacy. The meeting continued for some time along this sterile path, and both the monsignor and I began to despair of any positive outcome. Attempting to dispel the chill that had fallen over the room, Balaguer showed no impatience with Peña's stonewalling, always addressing Peña as "Doctor." He admitted no wrongdoing, but began to peel away Peña's truculence with words of understanding for his frustration, and appreciation of his opponent's patience, given the strong support he had received across the country. The atmosphere was palpably lightening, and from the softer tone of Peña's interjections it was

evident that Balaguer could sense the change. Speaking very slowly, in his normal, slightly quavering, voice, he reminded his opponent that the elections had ended in a virtual tie, and then suggested, "Why don't we share the pie?" Peña responded, "What does this mean?" The president paused, and said, "Me, two years, and you, two years." As he said this, he bent forward and extended his hand toward Peña. Peña rose and, without any haste, grasped Balaguer's hand. The meeting broke up with Balaguer inviting Peña to his house the next day at 11:00 A.M. to work out the details. Monsignor Nuñez and I were invited to attend this meeting.

Eluding the press, the monsignor and I drove back to his residence, where he poured Cuba Libres with a generous hand. Our shocked reactions were identical. Peña, as his people had feared, had been seduced by the wily Balaguer. There would be no recourse to fresh elections, and the two men and their parties would share equal time at the public trough over the next four years. Having inserted the thin edge of an astute political wedge, Balaguer presumably anticipated that the damage done by this Faustian deal to Peña might mean that he, Balaguer, would occupy the palace not just for the agreed two years but for the full four. Over the next few hours several people dropped by. The last to come was Peña, and at his invitation the monsignor and I offered our opinions about the agreement reached in the library. Upon leaving us Peña passed the night in heavy consultation with senior members of his party.

Neither the monsignor nor I were present for these discussions, but we understood that the "pie" was received with deeply divided reactions by senior party members. Clearly, in the minds of its leaders the PRD had won the election. For a major party that had been out of power for eight years, half of the pie was more attractive than the uncertainties of another election. Not surprisingly, then, many of those present favoured accepting the Balaguer proposal. The arguments were long and intense. It was only in the early hours of the morning that those who argued that neither the party nor the leader would ever be forgiven by the traumatized party base finally convinced Peña to decline the offer.

At ten o'clock that morning, Monsignor Nuñez and I called on President Balaguer at his private residence to inform him that we would not support the arrangement agreed to on the previous evening. The president accepted our position. He offered no counter-argument and expressed his hope that the OAS would continue to support the mediation process. Shortly

after our departure, Peña arrived to deliver his message that the deal was off. Balaguer responded equably, and the two, with a few associates, set about to work on the formula that we had hoped would emerge from the meeting in the library. The central points of their agreement, which became enshrined in *el Pacto de la Democracia*, were the non-re-election of an incumbent president and the holding of new elections within eighteen months. Advisors from both sides were assigned to develop a draft.

"Hallelujah!" we said to ourselves when told of this development. We were now six days from the inauguration, and events were moving swiftly, but they were still on a characteristically switchback course. Confusion and disagreement arose over other important issues, including the scheduling for the embedding of these changes in the constitution by the Constituent Assembly, the timing of the new elections, and problems relating the percentage of votes required by a presidential candidate to avoid a second round of voting. In Peña's presence President Balaguer presided at a press conference that afternoon at which he outlined the terms of the agreement and announced that the Democratic Pact, incorporating this agreement, would be signed at the palace that same night by the three principal parties. To our surprise, Balaguer also publicly acknowledged the role of the monsignor (and the Church) and myself (and the OAS).

The signing of the pact was a catharsis after four months of almost constant civil peril. The media was present in full force, and so too were most of the leading citizens, the party chieftains, the diplomatic corps, and congressional figures. The setting was the opulent Salon of the Caryatids in the presidential palace, where I had first met Trujillo and Balaguer at a New Year's levee. The forty or so nymphs that encircled the entire chamber had lost none of the buxom charm that I recalled from my first exposure to them. The principal change was that Balaguer had recently upgraded them from plaster to marble. Little else had changed in the palace, the tawny-coloured domed Italianate building that was the only architectural success of Trujillo's long dictatorship.

I was seated at the president's left. At his right sat Cardinal Nicolás Jesús López Rodriguez, who early on in the crisis had pronounced anathema on all "foreign intervention," including that of the OAS. However, the ceremony could not begin, because Peña, whose presence was key to the event, was not there. Peña, sleepless now for a day and a half, had spent the afternoon and evening in a crossfire of advice from his political colleagues

about whether he should share centre stage with Balaguer. Monsignor Nuñez, who had been tipped off about Peña's predicament and his reluctance to participate, personally appealed to him. It was this intervention that persuaded Peña to attend, rescued the pact from becoming a humiliating fiasco and the country from suffering more trauma.

The half-hour delay caused by the Peña problem was, for me, spent in very agreeable conversation with the president. I had learned from the time when I was ambassador that Balaguer was happier talking about the past than the present. Almost all of our meetings were prefaced by stories about Trujillo. On this occasion I enquired about how Trujillo got on with the other dictators of that period – some of whom were his temporary guests, in flight from their own countries. "Batista, no," Balaguer replied. "He didn't particularly care for Batista, nor for Somoza." He remarked that Trujillo liked Juan Peron and the Venezuelan, Pérez Jiménez. "What about Franco?" I asked. The answer came readily. Trujillo admired Franco. "Despite many differences and contrasting styles, they got along." On the subject of Franco, it occurred to me to ask Balaguer if he could confirm a story I had heard the previous week from Monsignor Arnaiz. The monsignor, a Spanish prelate, was taking leave of Franco before setting off for Santo Domingo – this was just after Balaguer's first authentic electoral victory, in 1966, when Generalissimo Franco asked the monsignor to convey cautionary advice as well as congratulations to his friend. The advice came in three parts: beware of expectations – with power you must expect to lose friends and gain enemies; don't make promises; and don't invite to the palace those who want invitations, invite to the palace those who don't want invitations. Balaguer emitted a wheezy chuckle and said, "Yes, that was Franco's message."

Peña, of course, fell squarely into the last category. At last he arrived, and the solemn reading and signing of the pact began. Peña's delay and the refusal of some of the designated witnesses to sign cast a light shadow over the event. However, all was neatly, if ephemerally, papered over in the president's speech later on. It was not the soaring oratory of his middle

age, but not bad for a frail, blind man of eighty-seven. More importantly, the pact signalled to the country that the worst was over.

On August 15, the day before the inauguration, Donna Hrinak and I held our last meeting. The issue was whether or not she should attend the inauguration. Almost her entire senior staff were opposed, arguing that Balaguer had made a mockery of the democratic process and should be deprived of any public approval by the US ambassador. The most vehement advocate of this line was the director of USAID. The State Department had left the decision to the ambassador's discretion. My position was that the compromise embodied in the pact would not have been realized without her tireless work, that of her predecessor, and the support of her government. I said that her non-attendance would, in effect, signal a repudiation by the US government of a solution that had avoided civil conflict, and one that we had all laboured so hard to obtain. I added that foreign investors and the business community would interpret this as a vote of non-confidence in an economy already battered by months of uncertainty. She said that there would be another meeting with her staff.

That night I was having a late supper when my cell phone rang. It was Donna. She had decided to attend the inauguration. All of the senior staff tried to dissuade her, with one surprising exception, her military attaché.

The next morning, August 16, we threaded our way separately through a boisterous crowd outside the legislative building. I had mixed feelings about being recognized and about a few placards that read, "Graham and the OAS: Get out." But by far the greater number of derogatory signs were directed at the American ambassador.

Following his swearing in, the president, smart in a dark morning dress and with his black silk top hat on the table beside him, rose to speak. His address was appropriate to the occasion. There was no triumphalism. Instead, there were a few gracious references to Peña Gomez, reflecting the spirit of the pact. In deference to Peña's wishes, Balaguer announced that he would ask the Constituent Assembly to reduce from 50 percent to 40 percent the degree of support for the leading presidential candidate required to avoid a second round of voting. With that, the curtain finally came down on four months of tension, uncertainty, and high drama.

Epilogue

Since May 16, we had confronted the challenge of persuading the government and the JCE to engage in a transparent investigation of a major fraud. Our second task was to continue to protest the fraud until a route out of the electoral crisis could be found without exacerbating the existing tensions on both sides to the point where the stability of the state was seriously endangered. On the first, we were thwarted. A full investigation of the fraud was never completed. The second was more successful. From the beginning, the mediation effort was an attempt to create space within which Dominicans could devise and apply a solution. In the end that is what happened.

The personality, the cerebral strength, the tenacity, and the guile of Joaquín Balaguer permeate this entire episode. He ruled as an omniscient constitutional despot. In the manner of his mentor, Trujillo, his grasp of detail extended beyond the capital into towns and villages throughout the country. He used the weaknesses as much as the strengths of his associates to his benefit. He may not have known the minutiae, but I believe it must be assumed that he approved the fraud in advance. Inside that tight, highly personalized system, reinforced by sanctions of fear and economic penalty, it is unthinkable that such a major decision could have been taken without his consent.

So, why did a wily old bird like Balaguer give his consent? Why did he not anticipate some of the problems involved in inviting experienced international observer teams? My speculative answer is that when he had rigged elections before, he had been slapped on the wrist (by Jimmy Carter and others), but had gotten away with it. Presumably he believed that however clumsy some of the manipulation, the JCE would rationalize and defend the results, and that in the end the international observers would grumble but accept a *fait accompli*. He had little reason to think otherwise. Up to that point the OAS had never so unequivocally cast into question the legitimacy of national election results. When we blew the whistle, we took the government and the JCE by surprise.

It is tempting to judge Balaguer by the standards of a more distant, putative mentor, Niccolo Machiavelli. The author of *The Prince* would have assigned him high marks for his ruthlessness, his masterful command of human psychology and political dynamics, and his commitment to the

dictum "It is much safer to be feared than loved." But guile was not the only test of success for Machiavelli. He respected the positive results of political action that bound a people more closely to their leader. Balaguer's conspicuous failures in education and electrification would drop him several points. Machiavelli also recommended that statesmen facing policy crossroads "should opt for the lesser of two evils." In 1994 the "lesser of the two evils" for the president was a compromise with Peña Gomez, the sometimes flawed and finally tragic leader, who had much earlier placed country over party.[2]

HAITI

"The Pencil of God Has No Eraser" (Haitian Proverb)

I

The events described in this and the following chapter took place in the spring of 1995, when I was running a technical support operation on behalf of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), in preparation for what was to be the second free election in Haitian history. My team was working under contract for the UN.

Garbage collection arrangements in Port-au-Prince are probably unique in the western hemisphere. Each block, or sometimes each grouping of blocks, has its own designated garbage zone. There are no dumpsters. Garbage is taken by bucket, wheelbarrow, or handcart and piled in a rising fetid heap at the side of the street. It's ripe, but downtown, when the wind blows moist and noxious off the bay, the heady effluvium of sewage overpowers the smell of garbage.

The dumping ground near my office served as a constantly replenished smorgasbord for the neighbourhood fauna: rats, the size of small rabbits, chubby pigs, and street dogs. There were no cats; in this part of town few survive the pot. Once every couple of weeks, with surprising regularity, a truck backs up to the pile. Gaunt men appear with spades

Note the citation on the cart for a verse from Exodus.

and the heap disappears into the bed of the truck, leaving a wet, garnished splotch on the road.

For the residents of this quarter, reaching a consensus on the location of the dump site had been easy. It was to be in front of that rotting oxymoron *La Ronde Pointe* (whose sign says "*Rond ointe*"), an ex-nightclub owned by former president Jean-Claude Duvalier. The club had been sacked, or, in Creole, *déchouké*, the day after he left the country with his dollars and his felonious wife. That was eight years before this visit, and apart from the patina of decay, and the squatters behind the rags that sheathed the empty window frames, it was the same ruin I had seen on a visit shortly after the dynasty had fallen.

I remember that corner, its garbage, and its stink vividly. The graffiti changed after former President Carter's visit in February 1995. One wall read in Creole, "Jimmy Carter, false democrat." Alongside, the same hand had written in English, "Jimmy Carter dickhead." Carter had negotiated the exile to Panama of Cédras, the general who had overthrown Aristide and who had ordered his troops to oppose an American invasion. Carter's crime was to save lives, many Haitian and perhaps a few American. The mob had wanted the general's blood at any price.

The roadway is not busy, but the traffic is diverse. Armoured Humvees pass, carrying American or Nepalese troops; men and boys, their shirtless backs slippery with toil, push and drag two-wheeled carts with towering loads of flour, charcoal, motor oil, or ice; once I saw the entire carcass of

a car being trundled down the road by two men. By some Malthusian calculation, human labour is cheaper than that of mules.

I never understood how the children in the neighbourhood were still capable of showing even in short flashes the spontaneity and joy of being children. The remains of *La Ronde Pointe* is at the intersection of Rue Harry Truman and Rue Marie Jeanne. My office was six doors down from the ex-nightclub on Marie Jeanne. Some of the kids shined our shoes or washed our cars during the day. At dusk there was always a group of three waiting for us to leave. They were between eight and eleven and they waited for a handout, usually a few gourdes apiece (a gourde was worth about eight cents) and some good-natured teasing. Someone had told me that Haitians also appreciate gifts of soap, so I remembered to bring some tablets of hotel soap. I flicked these into the air for the children to catch, and was amazed by their wide grins when they recognized the soap. Hygiene in Haiti, especially in that putrefying neighbourhood, is enormously important. Families would disrobe, females partially and males completely, to scrub themselves by a fractured water main across the street.

Two weeks into my contract, the corner was the scene of a human *déchoukage*. It took place around eleven o'clock in the morning. I was in the office talking to a civilian member of the United Nations about the election when shouting in the street drew us to the window. A young man was attempting to outrun a mob that was chasing him down Marie Jeanne, but his hands were tied behind his back and his closest pursuers were striking him with sticks. I didn't know it then, but there were two victims. They were alleged to have been seen stealing. The value of the theft was probably under five dollars. In this culture, if a thief is caught, retribution is swift. Probably because it scarcely exists, justice is telescoped into self-appointed judges, juries, and executioners. Accusations are shouted and a mass of people forms.

I called the UN military on my radio. They arrived with their Humvees thirty-five minutes later. In the meantime, not really understanding what was happening, I went outside. One youngster lay dead, beaten to death. The other was sprawled by the garbage heap, alive but perhaps fatally injured, with a long gash on the back of his head. I called again, this time for an ambulance. It came after the Humvees. I walked back to the office numb with horror. Justice, I told myself, had been a pretext. For me this was the Haitian version of fox hunting – killing for entertainment. My

Haitian colleagues neither shared nor comprehended my reaction. What had happened was, in their context, an expression of natural law. After a time I accepted that my view was too simple, but I still didn't understand. If I was going to go on working with Haitians, there were some steep cultural walls that I would have to climb.

Four days after the killing I was in my ancient, gorgeous, termite-ridden hotel, the Grand Hotel Olafson – gingerbread, architectural whimsy, big saucy rats, and dry rot – made famous by Graham Greene, who used it for the setting of his novel *The Comedians*. Early in its life, for nine years after about 1917, during the US Marine occupation, it had been used as a hospital. It was Sunday morning, and a local church service was being shown on the hotel's one TV set perched above the bar. A woman was conducting the choir, her hips swinging to the music. In the apse, a band – piano, guitar, and goatskin drums – played the accompaniment. The singing was in Creole and the melody was somewhere between a Gregorian hymn and a traditional soft Haitian folk song, at times with louder Vodou syncopations. Behind the counter was a splendid papier mâché bust of Desalines, the first emperor of Haiti, and a large lady bartender. She asked me if I had been to church.

"No, not today."

"Why not? Why don't you go to church?"

"I'm lazy."

"Hmmph. You know…Haitians pray a lot. Haitians pray more than they do in other countries."

The majority practise Vodou, and most blend their Vodou with Catholicism on Sundays. I considered a tart reply, but held back. Surprisingly rich, wonderful choral music filled the room.

"The Pencil of God Has No Eraser"

II

Haiti, with its stygian complexity, its bewitchery, and its insoluble challenges, became a thread that ran through my diplomatic

and international careers. My first visit was in 1960, to a country controlled by Papa Doc Duvalier and his Tonton Macoutes. The last was in 2010, shortly after the earthquake, when I led a small team on behalf of Jimmy Carter's Friends of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. This story, like the last one, is from 1995.

I used to know some yuppie settings where the inhabitants renovated and adorned their bathrooms to the point where they became the centrepiece of the apartment: burnt orange and chocolate ceramic tiles, deep pile around the toilet, an adjoining box room made over into a sauna, thick six-foot towels in solid colours, and, for the minimally deranged, perhaps a toilet seat that plays Handel when activated.

The one bathroom in our small, hot, crowded office in downtown Port-au-Prince was not quite like this, but it did nevertheless hold a natural position as a centre of attraction for us, even more so during the regular power outages that cut out the water pump.

One morning toward the end of April it was discovered that the security guard had somehow broken the stout lock on the bathroom door during the night. Left to itself, the bathroom door would not close. This was disconcerting, particularly for the eleven women in our twenty-seven-person office.

Michel, the office cleaner and general handyman, addressed the problem with a Rube Goldberg solution. The door opened outward, and he attached the end of an eight-foot length of sisal rope to the inside door handle. Snuggled between the barrel of diesel fuel for the generator and the cardboard box containing flashlights so that the generator could be found, the toilet occupant, sitting or standing, could close the door by pulling on the rope. Privacy required constant pressure on the rope.

Michel's experiment was not well received. However, it took two days of rising abuse before he devised an alternative method. Because of the configuration of the door frame and the wall, it was not possible to attach a simple hook latch or deadbolt on the inside of the door. Undaunted, Michel nailed a deadbolt to the outside. This solution involved delegated privacy control. Once in the bathroom, the user required a confederate on the outside to push home the bolt, remain discreetly nearby until the occupant shouted or knocked to be released, and then withdraw the bolt.

In abusive Creole the women made it known that they did not wish to have Michel performing this role.

As the bathroom drama entered its fourth day, there were other developments. The first was that negotiations with the landlord to fit a functional lock on the door that could be operated from the inside were stalled by the landlord's reasonable insistence that the nocturnal blundering of our security guard was not his responsibility. Secondly, there was a rising incidence of constipation. Notable exceptions were those struck down by "Danse Macoute," the Haitian version of the "Aztec Two-Step."

The third development was not related to the bathroom, but to what the UN military command perceived as the vulnerability of our office. Our job was to organize and enter on computers the information required to place the names of some twelve thousand candidates on ballots for the next elections in a country with only one previous experience of free elections. It was accepted that if our machines and data base were destroyed, a highly sensitive election timetable would be derailed. During the previous election campaign a mob had burned down the offices of the Election Commission. The UN had promised twice-daily patrols by armoured Humvees. However, it was seven days before they found our location.

On this, the fourth day of the toilet crisis, we received a visit from a military team comprised of a Bahamian naval lieutenant-commander, a captain of cavalry from Djibouti (the camel corps), a Pakistani police lieutenant, and two trucks from the United States Corps of Engineers. Because it was an unsavoury part of town, the few windows in our grungy, two-storeyed, low-ceilinged office were already grilled. The engineers were there to fasten thick iron mesh over the grill work.

I walked outside to see the work in progress. The street was better than most in this part of town, but the harbour with its memorable fragrance was only four hundred yards away.

"What purpose will the iron mesh serve?" I asked the engineer sergeant.

"It'll keep out hand grenades, rocks, and most of a Molotov cocktail."

The next day a new functional bathroom lock was installed, and the neighbours complained that our fortifications had lowered the tone of the street. Everything considered, they had a point.

BOSNIA

Black Past, Grey Future?

For seven months in 1996 and again for seven months in 1997 I was sent to Bosnia by Elections Canada to work with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). I was there as senior elections officer for a large area in northwest Bosnia. The title of this chapter is adapted from that of Rebecca West's masterly volume on pre–Second World War Yugoslavia, Black Lamb, Grey Falcon.

Before I left for Bosnia, in early March 1996, I found an old Serbo-Croat phrase book in my basement. In large print on the cover it declared, inaccurately, "With this book you need never be at a loss when conversing with Serbo-Croat-speaking people." However, there were some useful phrases inside, such as "Where can I buy a rifle?" and "How many men-of-war are lying in your harbour?"

Thus equipped, I stepped onto the shell-scarred apron of Sarajevo Airport with four companions: a former (and, I thought, still active) Russian intelligence officer, an airsick Dane, a Swede, and another Canadian. The Russian impressed me as a hardened international: his luggage included a tennis racquet. We were all taking up long-term assignments with the OSCE, the instrument chosen by the Dayton Peace Accords for delivering legitimate elections, human rights, and democratization. It was a raw afternoon with snow on the ground and the feel of more to come. We piled

our luggage into the back of a van and set off for the centre of Sarajevo. Exploratory conversations that had begun that morning in Vienna shut down as we drove through a corridor of devastation.

The shock was just beginning. A few days later I took the long drive to my post in Bihac, in northwestern Bosnia. Neither my briefings nor CNN had prepared me for the human desolation. The peace was only five months old, and most of the day's journey was through ruins. Towns and villages were gutted, some by armed conflict, but most burned or blown up by one or other of the opposing ethnic forces. Bosansko Grahovo was a grim example. It had been a town of about 3,000 people, with small lumber mills and a furniture factory. On this first visit, there was not a living thing except for one mournful dog standing in the snow by a row of dilapidated terrace houses. I travelled with a kind of hollow pain somewhere between chest and stomach.

I also learned that to move about Bosnia you needed not just a road map but an ethnic map as well. Take the town of Drvar, a Tito stronghold during the Second World War. It was important to know that it was 99 percent Croat, but it was essential to know that before the Bosnian war it had been 97 percent Serb. Prijedor had been 44 percent Muslim, 42 percent Serb, and 6 percent Croat. In 1996 it was about 98 percent Serb – and so on, with similar dramatic inversions across the country.

After places like Bosansko Grahavo and Drvar, Bihac wasn't so bad. The centre of what became known as the Bihac pocket during the Bosnian war, the town was my base for seven months in 1996 and another seven months in 1997. The climate is not unlike that of Ottawa. The winter is as long but not as cold, which is just as well, as there was almost no central heating. The food is *haut cholesterol* – fried beef, mutton, veal, and fat-laden french fries. Because of the demented driving, the roads are more dangerous than the minefields. But the setting is splendid. Bihac lies in a wide valley, astride a turquoise river. It was predominantly Muslim before the war, and is now even more predominantly Muslim. The electronically magnified voice of the muezzin heralds the day at 4:55 A.M.

Bihac had not been physically overrun. It had withstood a siege for almost as long as Sarajevo, and with that city, Srebrenica, and a few others, shared the much-caricatured distinction of having been designated a "safe area" by the United Nations. Unlike Srebrenica, it survived. The United Nations and its military arm in Bosnia, UNPROFOR (United Nations

Protection Force), can take no credit for this. Survival was largely the result of astute and ferocious local military leadership and the resilience of the community. Almost encircled by the Serbs, Bihac had one open corridor running north to the Croatian frontier. It was sealed when a rebel Muslim group led by Fikret Abdic established a *modus vivendi* with the Serbs. The fighting among Muslims in this "pocket" was the most vicious and costly of the war. It was a conflict that coloured everything – more than the three-year battle with the Serbs. From the highest level of local government and from the deputy commander of the Bosnian army we received threats that if we, the OSCE, persisted in allowing Abdic's party to run in the elections, they would be "unable to protect us from the consequences." (Under the terms of the Dayton agreement, all parties, including that of Abdic, had a right to run.)

A secondary but still disconcerting inter-Muslim consequence of the war was the widening of divisions based on degrees of religious orthodoxy. A moderately secular pre-war population split into zealous and non-zealous communities, a change brought about by pressure from those Muslim countries that provided material support during the war. At one end of this spectrum, Muslims consumed huge quantities of local spirits and supported the Miss Bihac contest. At the other end, a group of zealots blew up a nude statue because it offended their mores. Blowing up statues in Bihac was not difficult, as there was almost unlimited access to explosives and statues.

By any standard this was a catastrophic, brutal set of overlapping wars. Over 150,000 were killed (the majority of them non-combatants), and horrific numbers executed, recalling and certainly exacerbated by memories of past conflict. During the Second World War far more Yugoslavs were killed by internecine conflict than by the Germans, Italians, and Bulgarians combined. Atrocities committed by Ante Pavelic's Ustashi (Croation Fascists) against the Serbs appalled even the German commanding general in Zagreb.

Approximately three million people, well over half of the population, were displaced from their homes. The Hague Tribunal identified some 20,000 cases of rape. Few of the guilty parties were arrested. When I was living in Bihac, the sense of unrequited justice was deep. General Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic, the Bosnian Serb military and political leaders respectively, still ran free, and in towns and villages where mass

graves were being uncovered there was corrosive anger about the lower-level villains who had not been named by The Hague. There were many people who could identify perpetrators of executions, rape, and other atrocities. They could not comprehend how the international community could allow these persons to remain free.

A judge I came to know quite well in the small town of Sanski Most spent about half of his time searching for and documenting bodies, many of them those of people he knew. Although not a cheerful man, he was remarkably pleasant. I could only marvel at how he could smile and talk normally about normal things.

The cumulative impact of these horrors did little to incline the people to trust international institutions. In Bosnian Muslim areas UNPROFOR was particularly vilified. Some UNPROFOR units were regarded as almost useless, such as, for example, the Bangladeshis, who were caught inside the Bihac pocket unprepared for a Bosnian winter. In this case it was the UN logistics unit, not the Bangladeshis, who were the culprits. The French were distrusted because they appeared to favour the Serbs. Many of the forces in the Bihac area, both UN and belligerents, were active in the lucrative black market. For 5,000 Deutschmarks you could pay a UN soldier – or a unit of soldiers – to hide you in an armoured personnel carrier and take you to Zagreb, out of the war zone. In most cases the fault cannot be assigned to identifiable units. Some did excellent work. In the Medak pocket near Bihac in September 1993, the Princess Patricia Light Infantry fought a major engagement, news of which was suppressed by the Department of National Defence in the aftermath of Somalia. In the Medak incident the Canadians were interposed between Croat and Serb forces when the Croats attacked. The Croats fell back with serious losses, while the Princess Pats suffered only light injuries. The fact that the United Nations forces operated under a hopelessly restricted mandate, determined by New York, was not understood – and, in the circumstances, understandably not understood. Bosnian public offices called attention to the failure of United Nations to prevent horrific tragedies such as Srebrenica by placing placards on their windows and walls castigating the UN.

Most of us were regarded as guilty, if not by deed, then by association. Subject to some individual variations, the international community,

including the OSCE, were seen as one grey, pusillanimous, pro-Serb amalgam.

As the senior elections officer for Una Sana Canton (Muslim) and Canton Ten (Croat), an area that covers about one quarter of the Bosniac/Croat Federation, my job was to work with a team of internationals based in Bihac and four satellite offices to help set up and run the election process in the region. We tried to work closely with canton presidents, local mayors, party and election officials, and police chiefs. It was frustrating, frequently irritating, often entertaining, and always challenging.

Sometimes we met with the head of the secret police, a trim, well-dressed man who used his steely grey eyes to engage in "Who will blink first?" contests. We guessed that he had learned this technique in secret police school. In our experience he always won. The secret police in Bihac, and presumably throughout Bosnia, were the best paid, best equipped, and smartest of all Bosnian public servants. They read all of our faxed confidential reports and listened to our car radio communications. Their intercept staff spoke English, Russian, German, and probably French. A few of us used Spanish on the car radio – in large part for security reasons, but sometimes just to annoy the secret policemen. This practice soon led to a competition in offensive invective. José Maria, a Spanish friend, swept the board with "*Eres un mao poreiro!*" "*Eres*" means "you are," and *mao poreiro*, as José Maria recounted, was the working title assigned in the Middle Ages to the farm hand whose task, in the event of fumbled navigation, was to facilitate the fertilization of the sow by the boar.

The team in Bihac was as eccentric as it was eclectic. It included a Danish judge who produced aquavit and raw herring for the summer solstice; a Finn who maintained the only freshly ironed beret in the Balkans; a Polish colonel whose forte was protocol; an officer of the Polish foreign ministry allegedly sent to spy on the colonel; another Pole, whose preparation for his job as elections officer was a four-year assignment in North Korea; a Russian (the one with the tennis racquet) who, as supply officer, hoarded the supplies; two German Swiss, a French Swiss, and an Italian Swiss (*les Fromages Suisses*); an American who drove a Harley-Davidson and who was regularly and jocularly accused of being with the CIA; our well-organized admin officer; the media officer, another American, who had once worked in Dan Quayle's press office and who published a delightfully satirical underground newspaper. Eventually most people earned

nicknames, most of which were affectionately offensive. A young German diplomat was the "Neurotic Teutonic," and a craggy Czech colonel was "Testosterone." Less charitable names were assigned to those who came into our orbit only periodically: a bombastic Italian general became "Il Duce," and a high-ranking Canadian military officer was known as "Half-track." For reasons still unclear, a senior American at headquarters was "Foreskin." One story in the underground newspaper about happenings at headquarters ran with the title "Roll Back Foreskin." The operations centre in Sarajevo, for reasons that I will leave obscure, was called "The Jock Strap"; a Canadian working there was "Cactus Plant." In what began as a playful initiative, but was to prove foolhardy, I gave nicknames in Serbo/Croat to a few of my locally engaged friends. I was soon rewarded with my own tag, "*Veliki Magaratz*" (Big Donkey). Although our group in Bihac sometimes resembled the cast of a Monty Python film, most of the team proved to be very good, and some were quite extraordinary. The internal chemistry was rumbustious.

I ought not to have been surprised, but I learned that in work settings like Bosnia and in other international assignments you are much more exposed to the colour and texture of national idiosyncrasies than you are in the more cocooned platform of an embassy – and, of course, the local population is more exposed to yours.

The elections of 1996 and 1997 have been described as the most complicated ever supervised by an international organization, in large part because of the massive displacement of citizens. The process was girdled with safeguards against fraud, but our design proved excessively complex. In the end, parts of it were almost incomprehensible, especially for those Hungarian, Lithuanian, Kyrgyz, Romanian, and Bulgarian polling station supervisors whose English (the OSCE official language) was mediocre.

A major challenge for Bosnia was the determination of priorities, and thus of the expenditure of energies and money. And a key issue was the skewing of these priorities. Our OSCE mandate encompassed human rights, structural democratization, and media development as well as elections. The local people had other requirements: economic rehabilitation, jobs, water, sewage, rebuilding schools, and repairing hospitals. But elections were the centrepiece, and were driven by a different agenda. They were a fundamental part of Dayton, but they had also become the exit strategy for the United States.

The elections in 1996 and again in 1997 were compressed into unrealistic time frames by Washington's concern for American political realities. The United States had originally committed itself to withdrawing its military forces in December 1996, but President Clinton's advisors insisted that they be withdrawn before the US elections in November. As the US military presence was essential in order to provide a secure environment for the Bosnian elections, this election date had to be scheduled well prior to US withdrawal. Many of us considered this timing counterintuitive. There was only the thinnest of scabs over the war wounds, and real anxiety that premature elections would reopen them. The 1996 elections were intended to legitimize the constitutions of the two entities set up under Dayton (Bosnia and the Serb Republic), facilitate the reintegration of peoples, and democratize. They did legitimize constitutions, but in both entities they also consolidated the power of ruling parties that were not only inclined to authoritarianism, but also gang-infested. Reintegration did not occur, ethnic cleansing continued, albeit in less violent form, and, faced with these realities, American military withdrawal was delayed.

There were other reasons for anxiety about the time frame. We were dealing with governments that were not only concerned with different priorities and had no real interest in accommodating a multi-party system, or such other basic conditions of a democratic society as freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and freedom of movement. These were governments with no tradition of democracy and little interest in democratic norms except in so far as elections served to reinforce their authority. In every case the ruling parties saw themselves as representing a special trust to defend territory, religion, culture, and the memories of those who had given their lives in the same sacred cause. The guns had been silent for only a few months, and the bitterness of conflict was still fresh, so this was a powerful point of view. When they said, "Anyone who is not with us is against us," we did not accept their point of view, but we could understand it.

Astonishingly, the 1996 elections passed peacefully. No one was killed. No polling stations were burned down. There was fraud, some of it in our area, but not much. And all this less than a year after the cessation of hostilities. "Why?" we asked ourselves. One reason was that the local election officers had worked more conscientiously than we had expected. A second was that our preparations had been effective. And third, we had excellent logistics support from the Canadian forces based in our area. But

Graham and ex–Soviet T-55 tank.

as we began to fill our glasses we realized that a key reason had nothing to do with our work. The election would not have been successful without the willing and highly motivated co-operation of the ruling parties. In the end, they ensured that electoral workers were able to do their job. They obtained their objective of legitimizing and consolidating their ethnically based political systems. In other words, this was a success for the process, but not for democracy.

On the eve of the elections I was interviewed in Bihac on what I was assured was a background-only basis by a *Globe and Mail* reporter. The following morning my remark that "the elections in Bosnia were like the game *Snakes and Ladders*, but with more snakes than ladders" was the "Quote of the Day," a feature of the *Globe* at that time. My colleagues in Bihac were pleased. Sarajevo was not.

By the end of September 1997 many of us were feeling jaded and troubled about the disproportionate priority accorded elections at the expense of more basic institution-building activities. Parliamentary elections for the Serb Republic were announced. A repeat round of the 1996 elections for Bosnia and Herzegovina was being planned for 1998. In a dark mood I

included the following paragraph as part of my weekly fax to headquarters in Sarajevo: "We move from one election to another. There is a feeling that we are caught on an unstoppable railway – a diabolical machine with no fixed destination that crashes through an ever-thickening jungle of political and technical challenges with a diminishing and exhausted crew. And there is a question about whether the passage of this juggernaut is improving or complicating the political landscape through which it runs." There was no reply.

In the relatively few cases in which the outcome was in doubt, one ethnic group was attempting to retrieve political control of the municipality from which it had been expelled by force. In these electoral contests, "free and fair" had little meaning. Such was the case in Drvar, which was part of my area. The new Croat inhabitants had been displaced from about forty different municipalities, to which in most cases they could not return.

Both the OSCE high command in Sarajevo and the international press concluded that Drvar would be the most combustible part of the country for the two days of elections. Helicopters descended on Drvar. One contained Robert Gelbart, the United States Assistant Secretary of State, who appeared to have been badly briefed. On arrival he strode into the polling station dedicated to Serb voters and harangued the Croat staff for "deliberately delaying" the Serb voting. (A subsequent investigation determined that there had been no significant or orchestrated delay.) He was joined by a gaggle of VIPs and a British major general, whose bodyguards clattered into the polling station carrying their automatic weapons and tried to set up a satellite telephone between two ballot boxes. Gelbart's personal bodyguard, dressed in civilian clothes and carrying a submachine gun, stood watch in front of the door to the polling station. The young Hungarian election supervisor protested that guns were specifically prohibited from polling stations, but was rebuked by the general. The Serb voters, many of whom had fraudulent papers, were confused and irritated by the uproar. The Croat-staffed polling station committee was threatening: "You push us, then you run the polling stations. We will go home." A crisis was building.

Meanwhile, about three hundred yards away, Colonel Grant, the commander of the Canadian Battle Group, and I were trying to land in a helicopter, but couldn't set down because the landing area was already crowded with helicopters. We hovered, the downdraft from our machine

stripping plums off the orchard below, until one helicopter was moved. The rest of the day and a good part of the night were devoted to damage control and the negotiation of another polling station for the Serbs. This was tough, because the Croats knew that an extra polling station made it that much more likely that they would lose the municipality.

Elsewhere in the town, the Canadian military were containing a volatile situation, setting up extra polling stations, feeding and comforting ten busloads of Serbs who were spending the night in a parking area above the town, and, not least, calming the British general.

On the second day my team and I woke up in Canadian army tents to heavy rain. It was unusually – and blessedly – heavy, and lasted all day. The rain reduced interethnic collision in Drvar. It also stopped the return of the helicopters and their passengers. In the end there were no fatalities, and the Serbs had the opportunity to vote, or to try to vote (some were seen by my staff forging documents). But enough had voted, and the

Croats lost Drvar to the Serbs. Across the country the OSCE-imposed elections led to some "returns," but by and large Bosnia remained a frozen ethnic checkerboard.

It goes without saying that a vital ingredient for international effectiveness in war-torn societies is good co-ordination among the international players under sound leadership. In 1996 and 1997 this ingredient was not in place in Bosnia. Instead, the international presence was often characterized by turf battles, personality conflicts, and lop-sided competition between Bosnian needs and the political agendas of Russia, France, and the United States. Abrasions at the centre were frequently reproduced in the field, with the inevitable result that they diminished the already tarnished credibility and leverage of the international community.

There were many areas of controversy. One was the United States Train and Equip program. Mutual deterrence was part of the Dayton strategy. This involved efforts to build up Croat, and particularly Muslim, weaponry, skills, and military organization so that the previously superior Serb army, with its competent former Yugoslav officers, no longer threatened. In conversation with a Train and Equip officer just before I left Bihac, I enquired about his current task.

"Well," he replied, "we're teaching the Bosnian army how to shoot straight."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"For Christ's sake," he retorted, "haven't you seen the walls of the buildings around here? They look like Swiss cheese. Ninety-nine percent of the shooting is off-target."

"Yes," I said. "We should keep it that way."

Sex, Sports, and Diplomacy

Working in immediate post-war Bosnia was gruelling, but we also frequently found it eccentrically comical, because so much of the learning experience involved cultural collision – and the need for more humility than most of us possessed.

Halid Lipovac, the mayor of Cazin, a Muslim town in northwest Bosnia, and Fikret Dragonovic, his deputy, looked uneasily at their dinner guests: a Polish colonel, a Swiss human rights officer, an American advisor, two interpreters, and myself. Cazin was frowzy and war-torn, its appearance only partially relieved by an old Ottoman fortress built on an escarpment at the edge of town.

A round of *losa*, a semi-lethal local beverage that resembles slivovitz, had not softened the brittle atmosphere as both sides groped for common ground. I don't suppose that the decor of the municipally-owned hotel – dark wood, poor lighting, and cherry-velvet upholstery – was much help. Most of the broken glass had been replaced, but some window frames were still sheathed in plastic. The war had stopped only five months before, and there hadn't been time to cover up all the ravages of Serb mortar and rocket fire. This was a duty occasion for both sides, and none of us was looking forward to a collision of cultures.

Another round of *losa* appeared. Dragonovic reached for his glass, stood, lifted his beaky nose, and intoned the Bosnian toast: "*Zvilili*."

"Gentlemen," he said, ignoring the interpreters, "I propose tonight that there should be two topics of conversation: sex and sports." He was trying to break the ice.

Throwing non-sexism to the winds and attempting to bring to a close the lengthening silence that followed the translation of this initiative, I said, "*Gospodin* [Mister] Dragonovic, you said that there should be two topics, but you have mentioned only one." When this was translated, the Bosnian side actually beamed. Our side was not expecting this agenda in a rustic Muslim corner of Bosnia, but now that the conversation had been propelled downward, it gathered momentum.

The diners were wrapped in smog. I had brought cigars, good handmade Dominican coronas. The Bosnians only knew thin black cheroots. The mayor was enchanted, and intended to cut his cigar into pieces to share with his friends, but Dragonovic insisted on smoking his. There was no cigar cutter, so I demonstrated that the tip could be cut by using one's teeth. Dragonovic chomped deeply, removing almost an inch of cigar, and the rest started to unravel in his mouth.

Spewing shards of tobacco leaf and puffing deeply, Dragonovic told dirty jokes. Invariably they featured the respective taboos of Bosnian mullahs and Croatian bishops: pigs and girls.[1] Unfortunately, etiquette called

for reciprocity, and it was soon clear that on our side I was the only one with a supply of moderately obscene stories. I responded with a story about crazed parrots and prostitutes. Dimly recalling a historical Bosnian animosity toward Rumanians, for my second story I substituted Ceauşescu for Fidel Castro.

This demented cultural interchange was beginning to work. The *losa* was also playing its intended role. But the key to success was more the quality of the translations than the quality of shaggy parrot stories. Zena, one of our two interpreters, was in shock, so translation in both directions fell on my assistant, Maryanne Rukavina. Maryanne, Croatian-born but raised in Chicago, gave an eighties punk rock dimension to the evening. She was twenty-three and attractive, with short, black hair. Because the hotel had no heating, she had zipped up her black leather jacket, so not one of the estimated five tattoos on her body was visible. However, her rings were. She had six in her left ear lobe and two in her right, and a turquoise stone was set in one nostril. Black leather boots completed the ensemble. However, she managed to look slightly less raffish than Dragonovic, who was wearing a baggy double-breasted suit in garbage-bag green. Maryanne was splendid. She carried all of the indelicacies with seamless aplomb.

Maryanne had come to Bosnia during the war, and worked for eighteen months in a clinic for women who had been raped when armies swept over towns and villages. At the war's end she applied for a job with the Canadian Army near Bihac, but because her appearance was too exuberantly nonconformist for the Canadian Army, she was hired instead by the OSCE in Bihac.

Midmorning, two days later, Maryanne and I were sipping bad Turkish coffee with her friend Adita in Bozanki Petrovac, another small town. The rough tablecloth was speckled with mould, and the mould fit with the devastation of the town, and with the tank tracks imprinted in the asphalt beside us. The April sun, dappling through the chestnuts overhead, was just warm enough to allow us to sit outside. As usual, the customers were nearly all men. They were drinking coffee or beer and they were all smoking, mostly the foul and cheap local *Drina* cigarettes. Beer is two German marks; coffee, one. Where did they get the money, in a town where unemployment is at least 80 percent?[2]

The three of us had just had a disagreeable meeting with the mayor. We had failed to obtain his agreement to establish a non-partisan local

election commission. I was berated for representing an organization that was ignorant of his community's history, insensitive to its needs, and too close to its enemies.

As we stirred the thick coffee, Adita, who lives in Bosanski Petrovac, said to me, "You should not be upset. Poric (the mayor) is a fool, but there is reason for his anger."

"You mean that he blames us for not stopping the Serbs?" (Unlike Cazin, Bosanski Petrovac was overrun by the Serbs.)

"Yes, but that's only part of it. You and the OSCE come here to tell him that he must spend time and money on electoral organization. What would you do in his shoes? There are no jobs, half the roof is missing from the school, the factories are in ruins – and you've seen the shambles at the hospital. If we're lucky there's electricity three hours a day, and water is not much better. Only half the remaining houses in this town have been repaired enough for people to live in them. What would your priorities be? And besides, what does he want elections for? Do you really think he believes in democracy, or the rights of an opposition he despises? Another mass grave was found on the road to Sanski Most just last week – and there will be more. The Muslims in this town – and now there are only Muslims – don't want to hear about reconciliation."

Adita was bright and she spoke her mind. Some of the premises I had brought with me from Ottawa were lying smashed at my feet. Adita was doing a good job. Before the war her town had been 40 percent Serb, and during the Serb occupation it had been almost 100 percent Serb. Now, with the exception of a few elderly people, there were no Serbs at all.

"Adita, what happened when the Serb militia came to put you in trucks? Weren't there some friends and neighbours or Serb leaders in the community who tried to prevent it? It's hard to believe that the hundreds of people you've lived in peace with would all turn against you."

"No, they weren't all like that. But there were some horrible surprises. People you trusted, people whose children you'd looked after. But you're right. There were some who didn't like what was happening."

"What did they do?"

"They did nothing."

"Couldn't they have said something?"

"No. It's very simple. Their own people would have killed them."

This is what they believed. It is not necessarily what would have happened.

The Psychologist, the General, and the Beauty Contest

This is another story about cultural collision that descends, as most of them do, into black humour.

"You are a strange person." The remark was addressed to me by Drojic, the gaunt, sour, grey-faced chief of protocol, who was filling in during the unexplained absence of the mayor of Sanski Most. Jasmin, the interpreter for our Sanski Most Field Office, was embarrassed. His hands and eyes appealed to Drojic to offer alternative language, but Drojic was already looking forward to telling the mayor and his chums how he had told the foreign intruders to stuff it. He would have been dismayed to learn that Jasmin, as he told us later, had blunted the sharpest barbs.

"Why are you in this office? Why is your organization in this country?" Drojic snapped. "We, the Bosnians, drove the Serbs out of this town six months ago. Not only did you not help us, you stopped us from recapturing the towns in the north – Priejedor, Banja Luka – and that's where Muslim families have lived for centuries." There were elements of both truth and fiction in this statement – mostly truth. It was a swamp to stay away from, and soft soap wasn't going to get us anywhere.

"*Gospodin* Drojic, I am here because your president, Alija Izetbegovic, signed an agreement in Dayton. He and the other presidents [of Serbia and Croatia] agreed that IFOR [the Implementation Force] troops would come and enforce the peace, and that the OSCE, my organization, would be responsible for human rights, elections, and political stabilization. That means that when you and your mayor threaten to evict the leader of the opposition party, one of the very few people in this community prepared to oppose your party, you are violating the rules that your president agreed to. We are not here because talking to you is fun."

"Hah, you are mistaken." Drojic glared at us across the drab, unheated meeting room, then continued, "The reasons have nothing to do with politics." He paused.

"And the reasons are?"

Drojic stiffened. "In this municipality, 4,613 houses and apartment buildings were destroyed. Another 10,000 were badly damaged. Returning residents and refugees were assigned houses according to family size. Bobic [the evicted opposition leader] was given an apartment with two rooms. This was a mistake. He was not entitled to two rooms."

"That was three months ago. Why wasn't he told immediately that a mistake had been made and assigned another apartment?"

"It was the hospital where he works. They own the apartment. He's a psychologist. Maybe they didn't tell him."

"But now that he is working for the opposition, you're telling him?"

Only slightly nettled, Drojic replied, "Muslim families are coming from a refugee camp in Croatia. Where do we put them? Is the OSCE helping? As usual, not at all. Besides, Bobic is an inappropriate person."

"Inappropriate?"

"Yes. The neighbours complain about drinking parties, too much noise, unorthodox clothes – and girls."

"Girls?"

"The place was a brothel."

If even some of these accusations were true, Bobic was beginning to sound like the best thing that had happened to grim, depressing Sanski Most since the liberation. At this moment the door opened and General Alegic, the mayor, appeared. Puffy-lipped, baggy-eyed, with a six-day beard, Alegic was a seedier, slightly beefier Yasser Arafat look-alike. We were invited into his office. It had heat and a military decor: a mounted Kalashnikov and a shelf lined with mortar shells. He distributed plasticized bilingual business cards that describe him not as mayor, but as "Chief" of Sanski Most. The former commander of an army corps, and still a warlord, he wore his power, his avarice, and his dirty deals with a rough effervescence.

This was not my first meeting with Alegic. His conversation, like that of his assistant Drojic, was spiked with accusations about the incompetence or indolence of the OSCE. However, unlike the sparring with Drojic, the exchange of insults that had begun between Alegic and me was for reciprocal entertainment.

Drojic and I gave short summaries of our respective positions. I informed the general that the blatant, politically motivated eviction of the only significant opposition leader in the municipality would bring him

grief. He would be subject to sanctions by the OSCE electoral tribunal that could cost him money or some of his authority or both. Finally, I reminded him that Sanski Most needed money from the international community.

The general pushed out his bottom lip. "Once again you have come to make my people nervous. Look what you have done to Drojic."

"General," I replied, "if we didn't come, citizens of this town would not dare to vote against you."

Alegic favoured me with a toothy smile. "Vote against me? The people like me. They like the party."

The meeting concluded with the general saying that he would consider the eviction decision. A week later we learned that the notice had been withdrawn – a small victory, probably a temporary one, and a loss of face for Drojic.

An Improbable Celebration

My colleague Luke and I celebrate by attending the cantonal beauty contest. We can't believe that in tired, battered, conservative, Muslim Bihac they are actually holding a beauty contest. Luke is the former intern in Dan Quayle's press office, mentioned earlier, the editor-in-chief of our satirical and highly libellous underground newspaper, and the OSCE's Bihac press officer.

It is pouring with rain, but we are overcome with curiosity, and with my Venezuelan beauty contest credentials I regard myself as an authority in this area. We join about four thousand people jammed into the town arena. The shell holes in the roof have recently been repaired, so most of the rain is kept out. Almost everyone appears to be under the age of twenty-three. Roughly 3,750 are smoking. There is a wall of smoke through which violet shafts of light are gyrating. The whole place throbs with acoustically defective, hyper-amplified heavy metal. The audience claps and screams. We have never seen such enthusiasm in six months in Bosnia. Maybe, although this seems very unlikely, the contestants are performing a Balkan version of *Carmina Burana*. From the back of the arena who can tell? Smoke has made the stage invisible. We climb to a narrow catwalk that hugs the wall near the ceiling and extends over one side of the stage, which is now more or less visible. We can see the contestants dancing. They are wearing identical tubular pant suits cunningly

designed to eliminate any pectoral outline. In Venezuela, the crowd would howl with rage. This crowd is berserk with joyful abandon. There has been nothing like this evening for three long, bloody years of siege. The war is over. This is catharsis.

More Generals and the Ice Cream Men

> *Bosnia at this time was characterized by mismatched encounters between occasionally earnest, usually cynical, sometimes corrupt internationals and frequently depressed, equally cynical, often corrupt locals. There was a generous sprinkling of decency on both sides, but, like Haiti, it was a place more imprisoned than enriched by its history.*

I wake to the sound of Kalashnikovs. The deeper crumps are hand grenades being thrown in the river. The reason for the explosions – or part of the reason; nearly everyone in Bihac has a gun and likes to shoot—is the Muslim festival of *Bajram*. *Bajram* also explains the freshly skinned sheep hanging in the fork of my neighbour's tree. Traditionally, the sheep are roasted on a spit over a wood fire. This is just as well, as there is no electricity. Snow in the mountains has knocked out the power line from Croatia. No electricity also means no water, because the pumps have stopped. Breakfast is all right. I cook it on a gas stove and heat up some of our emergency water for a bird bath.

Outside, the rain is falling on last night's snow. I have been a month in this remote corner of Bosnia and each day brings a fresh variation on the theme of pathological intolerance. This day is no different. Haris, the driver, Maryanne, the interpreter, and I head southeast for a meeting in Drvar with the "Ice Cream Men." The Ice Cream Men were the monitors of the war, and now of the peace. They are mostly retired military officers and were appointed by the European Union Commission. They have a longer title, but everyone calls them the Ice Cream Men because they are dressed in white from head to toe. This is to identify them as visibly neutral, making them less likely to be shot at.

We are going to a different corner of Bosnia, but there is the same mix of grandeur and horror in the landscape as I saw on the first drive in from Sarajevo. This time there are towering cliffs, crags, long open valleys, and an abundance of rock. One of the first phrases I learned was "*mnogo kamen*" – "lots of rock." From a distance, the villages of grey fieldstone clustered on the lower slopes fit perfectly into this wintry splendour. Closer, it's clear that everything has been disfigured by war. Mile after mile of destroyed and abandoned villages and farmhouses. Broken roofing tile provides a few filaments of colour. Most of the houses were deliberately burned or dynamited by one or other of the retreating armies – or else by the owners themselves, determined to leave nothing to the enemy. In this sector it was the Serbs who were the most thorough practitioners of scorched earth. Most of what remained was looted. The looters left pathetic piles of rubble: sinks, bed springs, a man's jacket, a child's bicycle, and, curiously, a pair of yellow plastic ski boots. I approach for a closer look. "Stop!" Haris shouts. Until recently he was a Bosnian soldier. "Don't go near them. Serbs leave booby traps – and you never know where they have planted their mines."

It's easy to tell when you are entering a front line area. The forest, when there is one, is shattered: trunks and branches have been hacked away by shell and rocket fire. This battlefield is signposted with old ammunition boxes, shallow trenches, and a burnt-out tank. We climb into a heavily wooded area and then climb down in looping switchbacks until we reach Drvar, once Tito's headquarters. In 1942 and 1943 it was a partisan base and a popular Wehrmacht target. Rebuilt partly as a shrine, it was knocked about again last year. But the setting is unchanged. Flooded fields around the town perimeter reflect the snow-covered Dinara Alps. The sun flashes briefly from behind the clouds.

Dieter and Trevor, the Ice Cream Men, take us to meet Father Topic, the Catholic priest. Topic is a Croat, a refugee from Serb expulsion. He serves a community that is almost entirely Croat and that occupies the patched-up homes and apartments that still legally belonged to the Serbs until they were driven out five months before.

Topic is depressed by his parishioners. "Most of them don't want to work. A man summed it up yesterday. He said to me, 'Why should I work in the fields? When the crop is ready the Serbs will come back and take it.'"

"They don't believe that reconciliation is possible?" I ask.

Topic's exasperation is masked by fatigue. "No. Any talk of reconciliation frightens them. You must understand, everyone in Drvar is a refugee. Most lost their homes four years ago. They move to another town, it's attacked, and they move on again – or they're ordered to leave by their own army. Drvar is a Serb town, it's not home to the Croats. But they're tired."

"What about the UN and the humanitarian organizations? Do they motivate the people to work?"

"No," says Topic. "They hand out food and some money – and that's part of the problem. Of course, at the beginning we couldn't survive without them, but now the incentive is gone. Most of them won't work if they don't have to."

The next day is bright, but colder, and despite layers of sweaters, pyjamas, and socks, I am still chilled in my unheated bedroom. The ceramic stove downstairs radiates heat in a two-metre arc. Its best feature, probably its only redeeming feature, is ornamental. The electricity and the water are still off, and I am adjusting to last night's adventures at the wildly misnamed Tropicana Restaurant, where I was kissed by an unknown war veteran. My colleagues at the table, who were not kissed, laughed hysterically. He was a friendly drunk showing his affection in the traditional way. Unfortunately, this is the second such occurrence in two weeks. The first involved a fiddle player for the Tamborski Orkestra, also drunk and also unshaven. Heidi, a blonde, red-cheeked Austrian, smiles at the unshaven part. "Now you know what it's like." She is genial and a determined feminist, allegedly on her second volume of recorded sexist remarks by the male international staff.

A week later the Polish colonel, Aryana, the colonel's interpreter, a Swedish major, and I set off at eight o'clock in the comfort of a warm Volkswagen. A snow-covered mountain road takes us to Kolin Vakuf, a battered but still attractive village overlooked by a huge Turkish fortress. Two semi-hostile armies, one Croat, the other Bosnian Muslim, face each other across the swollen Una River. Disagreement about which army should control the village is festering dangerously. A meeting has been called to find a solution. Four generals and the OSCE have been invited. The Muslim general is Atif Dudakovic, a local war hero. He wears a permanent pit-bull expression and has an ego the size of the mountain behind us. The Croat is Mirko Glasnovic – more subdued, but also with an impressive war record. A Canadian citizen, Glasnovic is a former sergeant

in the French Foreign Legion and before that a sergeant in the Princess Patricia Light Infantry. The others are Major General Kearley, the British divisional commander, and Brigadier General Jeffreys, the Canadian brigade commander. Kearley is backed up by five tanks and infantry, Jeffreys by three armoured personnel carriers.

The Polish colonel, the Swedish major, and I are witnesses to the negotiations, not participants. We stand shuffling in the cold, waiting for things to start. Sentries are warming themselves by a wood-fired iron brazier. The scene is beginning to look staged, like a set from a film about the Russian front in 1943. A British officer invites us into his command post for tea. The tea is English "char" – hot, sweet, premixed in a large aluminum canister, and welcome. The command post is an ancient stone farmhouse. On an inside wall is posted a glossary of useful expressions with their Serbo/Croatian phonetic equivalents. The first is "Ne postazi. Ya sam kiri Britanski" – "Don't shoot. I am a British soldier."

The meeting starts. Krasnovic agrees not to do anything provocative provided Dudakovic does nothing provocative. Dudakovic agrees not to do anything provocative provided that… The tension has dropped, so the meeting is not a total failure.

Back to Bihac through the same wild terrain and bleak desolation. The first time I passed through this ravaged landscape, the horror drove so deep inside that I thought it would never leave. After a month the dull, sick feeling was still there, but less intense, as if some sort of neurological insulation had lacquered my antennae.

Back in Bihac that evening there was an invitation to meet with an international group of Bosnia watchers at the Pink Flamingo Disco. Jean-Pierre, another Ice Cream Man, offered to drive, but didn't know the location of the club. Our administrator, Christian, one of the Swiss fromages, supplied what proved to be hopeless directions. Bihac is not that large, but we drove all over town, stopping periodically so that I could get out of the huge white armoured Mercedes to ask directions in my almost non-existent Bosnian. The drive gave us a chance to talk. I told Jean-Pierre I was puzzled by what seemed to be a frosty relationship between Trevor and Dieter, who were supposed to be working as a team. "Well," said Jean-Pierre, "that's because they are still fighting the Second World War. Both are too young to be veterans, but Trevor was a lieutenant colonel in the

British Army and Dieter a major in the German Air Force. They get prickly about history."

Finally we found the Pink Flamingo. The place was jammed with young people, mostly men, some on crutches, and most of them recently demobilized soldiers. They sat or stood with their beers and cigarettes, glancing morosely at the dancers through the thick smoke. In most cases these were women dancing with other women.

Aladin, one of our local staff, was nearby. Over the din I shouted to him, "Why are the men more interested in beer than girls?"

Aladin paused. "It's hard to say. But people don't have jobs. Things are tough. Sometimes they commit suicide, occasionally with hand grenades, in places like this."

"Is that why there's usually a curfew?"

"Maybe. Two nights ago the bouncer here shot a customer, a soldier who'd tried to pull a gun on him. Lots of blood. The soldier was OK."

Three months later the Polish colonel, Maryanne, and I entertained General Dudakovic for lunch at Gurman's, Bihac's least bad restaurant. It was a warm day and the owner had set the table on the terrace at the edge of the Una River. Dudakovic arrived accompanied by a brigadier and a colonel. His bodyguard patrolled nearby and his chauffeur sat in a new Mercedes 300. At our suggestion the general ordered the food, a ventricle-clogging succession of local dishes: soup with bits of mutton, *Bosanski lomax* (a heavy local stew consisting of steak, mutton, turnip, and other root vegetables, and garnished with pickled cabbage), and fruitcake compote. This was served with local beer and Dalmatian wine.

After several months I was getting to know the general, in part by direct contact and otherwise through second-hand accounts. Trevor had told me one fragment of the story. He and others were trading war stories with the general when someone spoke of the famous meeting in no man's land in 1915 when soldiers from both sides stopped shooting and exchanged Christmas greetings. Dudavokic then recounted what he described as a similar experience. It was the last month of the recent war, and the general's army was advancing across Serb lines. Dudakovic was at a forward command post when he was greeted by a bewildered soldier. The general recognized the Serb uniform, but the Serb, assuming he was addressing a compatriot, asked what route he should take to get back to his unit.

"What happened?" asked Trevor.

"I shot him," replied the general.

Dudakovic was in his usual ebullient and pugnacious good humour – and we had to take him seriously. At this time he was one of the most influential and potentially dangerous players in northwest Bosnia. He was also the most successful, most enterprising, and without doubt most courageous general in the Bosnian army. The survival of Bihac against vastly superior Serb, Croat, and rebel Muslim forces was largely due to his leadership. Between mouthfuls he told war stories. The one I recall most clearly concerned his attempted entrapment of an opposing army by pretending that Bihac had been captured by units of the rebel Muslim army. He organized the townspeople to celebrate their "liberation" by shouting in the streets.

"We fooled some of them, but before we could suck them all into the trap they smelled a rat. And do you know where I got this idea?" he asked.

None of us ventured a guess.

"From the English film *The Eagle Has Landed*."

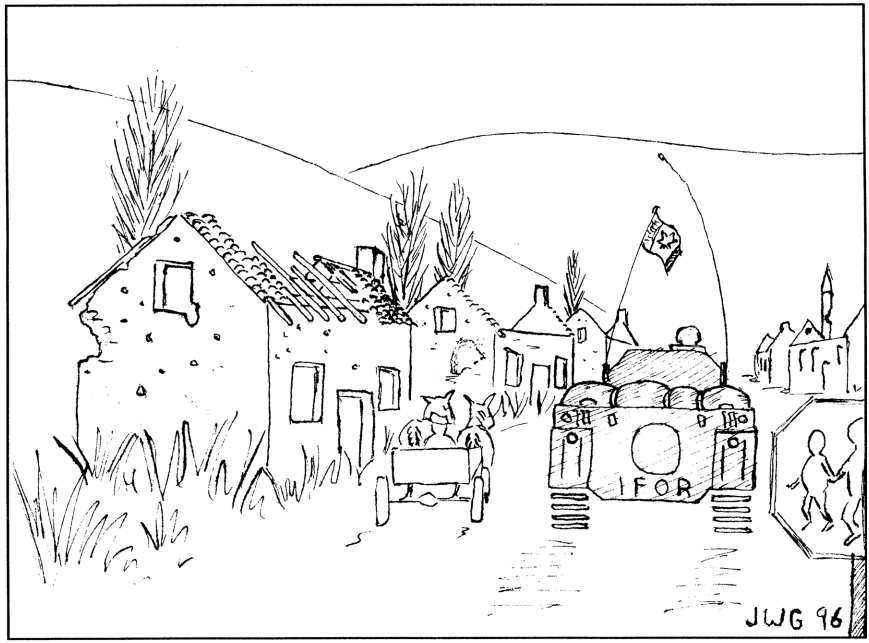
Conversation was moving easily when I made the mistake of shifting it to economic subjects. The general's eyes glazed over, and the brigadier intervened to provide useless information about a recycled five-year plan. The subject was dropped, glasses were refilled, and Dudakovic put down his knife and fork.

"I am going to tell you something that I have told no one else in the international community," he said, moving his eyes slowly around the table. We were accustomed to his theatrics, but he had our attention. "The Muslim rebels, under their leader Fikret Abdic, are planning an operation in the area of their former headquarters in Velika Kladusa. This is extremely serious, and I must take pre-emptive action to prevent a disaster."

"But…," the Polish colonel interjected.

"I know, I know. Any armed operation on my part would be in direct violation of the Dayton Agreement. But what else should I do? What would you do in my position – if you had to decide between respect for an agreement made in Ohio or the defence of your own soil, for which thousands of your comrades have given their blood?"

"General," I said, "you wouldn't be telling us this if you didn't want us to do something. If we are to do anything, we will have to know more



about this crisis. Until now, we have heard nothing about a potential attack by the rebels. What evidence do you have?"

"Of course, we have evidence – but you will understand that the sources are very confidential."

"General, unless you can persuade us that the threat is real, we are going to be skeptical. You must know that because you have given us this information we must speak to General Couture or General Kearley. They are going to be suspicious." General Couture was the Canadian brigadier general in Coralici, which was nearby, and General Kearley was the British major general in Banja Luka.

"Yes," said Dudakovic. He was not pleased when the conversation took this turn, but neither was he surprised. "I can tell you that my people have detected large-scale smuggling of arms into the Velika Kladusa/Cazin axis over the past week. Of course, the arms come from across the Croatian border. Tudjman knows about this." Tudjman was the president of Croatia and one of the sinister players in the Bosnian war.

"Can you identify the location of the arms caches? This is an IFOR job." IFOR was the NATO-led multinational peacekeeping force.

"Look, I can take you to my camp at Cazin. Last night a military bus was ambushed on the road toward Buzim. There are twenty-two bullet holes in the bus, which is now at the camp."

That evening we sat down to another meal of supercharged cholesterol, this time with Christian Couture, the Canadian brigadier. He was unaware of the crisis, had no information about accelerated smuggling, wondered about whose bullets had made holes in the bus, and shared our skepticism. He also deployed armoured personnel carriers on the access roads to the camp where Dudakovic's army was quartered. The Bosnian forces far outnumbered the Canadian, but Dudakovic knew better than to spring Couture's tripwire.

The Road to Srebrenica

In early September 1998 I returned to Bosnia to supervise another set of elections for the OSCE. Although I did not learn about my assignment until I reached Sarajevo, my final destination was Srebrenica, and it may be inappropriate that the first stages of a roundabout journey to that dark place should be tales of whimsy. However, they loosely fit the pattern of this book.

I had not expected to reach Bosnia via Rome. The usual route from Canada in 1998 was through Frankfurt to Zagreb and then into Bosnia by car or bus. But that was with Air Canada, and Air Canada was on strike. There were about a thousand people, or so it seemed, lined up at the gate in Pearson Airport waiting to board a 747 that was wearing a giant wristwatch whose strap was buckled over the forward hump of the aircraft. It should have been an advertisement for Brunswick Sardines, not Bulgari timepieces. However, the Alitalia schedule offered an eight-hour stopover in Rome before my evening flight to Split on the Dalmatian coast, time enough, I thought, to renew an old acquaintance with a beautiful city. I was on my way to take part in what proved to be another counterproductive election organized by the OSCE. An excursion in Rome struck me as therapeutic preparation for post-war Bosnia.

But what to do in the few hours available? I settled on three objectives: a city tour, lunch in a Roman restaurant, and an Italian haircut. Each goal was accomplished, but not as planned. From Leonardo da Vinci Airport an express train whisked me into the central railway terminal, where I had been told I would find tour buses. After a half-hour search I found that one tour bus had moved its starting point to a new and unadvertised location. I was guided to a different tour company, but its bus had engine trouble. I boarded an imitation trolley belonging to a third company, only to be told to get off, because it wasn't taking passengers.

Time was passing and it was very hot. "To hell with a tour," I muttered. I would get a haircut. It was Monday, and I soon discovered that Italian barbers don't work on Mondays. The only possibility might be the railway station. I walked back and found a sign featuring scissors and a comb. The arrow pointed down. At the bottom of the staircase was a long, dimly lit tunnel that ran under the tracks. Beyond another arrow was a small shop with "*Pelecuria*" on the door. Inside it contained the absolute minimum of furnishings and a small, ancient Roman with a white smock and a mournful moustache. He looked 105 and embalmed.

"*Buon giorno*," I said cheerily. No reply. He motioned me to sit. Pointing at my head, I said, in what I thought might be Italian, "*Normale*." Through a long session in which he said not a word, I began to worry less about my hair and more about what a straight razor would do in his trembling hands. I survived, but not much hair did. I emerged in the sweltering heat looking like an elderly marine recruit.

Still no buses. Fed up, I took a taxi to the Trevi Fountain. It sounded cool, and the sculpture is magnificent. However, the fountain and the sculpture were almost completely screened by a thick ring of tourists. Perspiring and tired, I was beginning to think that the Visigoths who had sacked the city in the fifth century had been misrepresented by revisionist historians.

I lunched in a trattoria. The pasta was a skimpy *puttanesca* and ridiculously expensive. Muttering darkly to myself and walking away from the trattoria, I spotted a sign that read, in English, "Scooters for Rent." Inside the shop I was cheerfully received. They would certainly rent me a scooter.

"What about a licence?" I asked.

"Licence, *signore*? Forget it – no licence required."

"And a helmet?"

"Don't worry. Yes, there is helmet law, but is not enforced."

"OK, but would you rent a scooter in this town to someone who has never driven one before?"

"*Non c'è problema*."

I wasn't sure, so I took a test run on the cobbled lane outside the shop. The machine was amazingly basic: accelerator, brake, turning signals, and horn; no gears. Very slowly I set out into the afternoon traffic, nervous and awkward, like someone doing a practice run for the film *Roman Holiday*. Herds of scooters whizzed past. From the narrow Via del Lucchesi I turned left onto Via del Corso – the Pantheon on my right, through the Piazza Venezia, the blinding white monument to King Victor Emmanuel on my left and the Forum behind it. I swung right, by the Theatre of Marcus Claudius Marcellus, onto the west bank of the Tiber. Past the tomb of Tiberius and the mausoleum of Marcellus's uncle, Augustus. Sightseeing at twenty kilometres per hour and watching out for the gyrations of Roman drivers was nerve-racking, but I was beginning to enjoy it. The wind in my face was cool and no one had sworn at me.

Back at the shop the manager was renting a scooter to an American couple as I came up. "How did it go?" he asked.

"Great. I hit one Fiat, one Ferrari, and one Cardinal." I was treated to a tired smile.

It was early evening when I arrived at the hotel in Split – and there were complications. To save money the OSCE had assigned two persons to each room. This would have been all right if there had been two keys, but my unknown companion had the only key, and he was asleep in the room. His routing, from Vancouver via Frankfurt, had delivered him to the hotel that afternoon. Bushed with jet lag, he had gone straight to bed. Repeated loud knocking eventually produced the sound of muffled cursing, and a dazed and dyspeptic gentleman, even older than me, opened the door. Still grumbling, he went back to bed while I unpacked. I removed my breakables, starting with a duty-free bottle of gin. "Hmph," said Phil Shirer, a distinguished labour lawyer from Vancouver. "I have one of those." Next came an airline-size bottle of dry vermouth. "Hmm," he mumbled,

evincing more interest. Finally, I drew from my luggage a small jar of picked onions. "My God!" said Phil, getting out of bed and shaking my hand. Martinis were prepared and the old curmudgeon and I bonded.

The next day Phil and I were in the much shot-up Holiday Inn in Sarajevo serving martinis to a small group of friends, most of them from my previous incarnation in Bosnia. These reunions invariably generated a stream of anecdotes. The most curious story that evening was told by Luke, a good friend and colleague from Bihac – and the recipient of my Mickey Mouse watch when he was transferred to OSCE headquarters in Sarajevo: I thought that in times of need it would help him with perspective, as it had for me. The story was set in Bihac during the Bosnian war. Luke had only recently heard it from a Bosnian friend who had been trapped in that town throughout the siege. He began, "You fellows know about the Bangladeshi battalion in Bihac during the war?"

"Sure," said Soren, a Danish judge and my apartment mate for several months in Bihac. "It was late fall and they were rotated into the so-called UN Safe Zone still wearing tropical uniforms. They were hustled into Bihac because the French had withdrawn ahead of schedule. Their supply ship hadn't arrived and the UN logistics people in Zagreb had neglected to get them warm clothes. They would have frozen if the citizens of Bihac hadn't taken pity and loaned them overcoats and sweaters."

Goran, a Croatian friend, added, "Many of them had to share crummy East German Army sleeping bags."

"That's right," said Luke, "and it does involve the same idiots in Logistics. But that's not the story. Sometime in February they sent in five thousand field rations of freeze-dried pork stew. As good Muslims, the Bangladeshi soldiers wouldn't touch the stuff. As you know, Bihac is largely Muslim, but most of them were less strict, and all of them were very hungry. So what happens? Inevitably, the people in Bihac learned about the shemozzle. It didn't look as if the Bangladeshis were going to give away the rations. What was there in bloody, besieged Bihac that a Bangladeshi soldier could possibly want in exchange for a pork stew? And by this time the UN had finally sent in warm clothes. You can imagine all the late-night brainstorming. Cash, of course, was a possibility, but for some reason that wasn't working. The commandant's orders or a code of conduct? Who knows? Finally somebody had a brilliant idea. There were porno films in Bihac. Yeah, a lot of porno films in normally quiet, conservative Bihac.

Next day there were two converging lines of citizens and soldiers – a good outcome for both sides."

"A great story," said Carolyn, an American and another former colleague from Bihac, "but is it true?"

"I can't be certain," replied Luke. "I'm telling it as it was told to me – and knowing Bihac, you have to admit that it's plausible."

"It's true," I said, "at least I think so. And there's more to the story." Luke's account had stirred a memory of a convivial evening the year before in Cazin, a small town near Bihac. The hosts were Matthew, a former British army officer, and Laura, an Italian. Both were working with the OSCE. One of the guests was Indira, a tough, smart, whisky-throated Bosnian who had been the interpreter for Colonel Meunier, a Canadian who commanded the Bangladeshi regiment in Bihac.

"You remember Indira, Colonel Meunier's interpreter? She was there, and she told me that a key player in this saga was a West Indian named Oscar, a civilian working for the UN and, according to Indira, a very cool guy. Oscar buys a TV set and VCR in Zagreb and sets this stuff up with a few chairs in an empty UN container in Bihac. He made a fortune charging the Bangladeshis five Deutschmarks each to watch twenty minutes of their own porn."

Once started there were more Indira stories. Apparently Colonel Meunier had the annoying habit of walking around the perimeter of his base every day with his interpreter, and about one third of this route was visible to Serb snipers in the hills surrounding Bihac. Indira made a point of keeping Meunier between her and the snipers."

Indira had dark-side stories too, and I had made a note of one of them. In February 1995 Jimmy Carter was concluding negotiations with President Karadzic of the Republika Srpska. For once it looked as if there would be a positive outcome. The Serbs had agreed to halt attacks on safe havens such as Bihac, Sarajevo, and Srebrenica. On the day following the day when Carter had understood an agreement would come into effect, a Serb bombardment was launched at Bihac, including cluster bombs in the town centre. These are fragmentation bombs designed not to destroy strategic installations but to penetrate flesh. Colonel Meunier immediately dispatched a message to the office of Akashi, the top UN officer for Bosnia, reporting this violation. Within a few hours a reply was received from the UN headquarters in Zagreb that read, "What is the nationality of the

officer reporting this incident?" Inured, or so he thought, to UN casuistry, Meunier was incredulous. The bombardment continued.

When the party was breaking up, Finn, a Norwegian judge, told me that he had arranged to have me observe the elections in Srebrenica, the darkest of all the dark places in Bosnia. Like Bihac and Sarajevo, Srebrenica had been declared a safe zone by the UN early in the war, which meant that its integrity and the safety of non-combatant citizens would be assured by the UN.

The UN's performance at the time of the Bangladeshi farce in the winter of 1994/1995 foreshadowed the much darker tragedy of Srebrenica only a few months later. In Bihac the cumulative impact of dithering by the UN in New York, the pathetic condition of the Bangladeshi troops, and ultimately a UN refusal to allow air strikes against the encroaching Bosnian Serb and rebel Muslim forces brought this city to within a hair's breadth of a bloody collapse. Although NATO urged air strikes, the UN command held back, fearing that aircraft would be lost to Serb surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) allegedly deployed to the region on orders from Belgrade. For the same reason, they suspended airdrops of food and medicine. In the end, although greatly outnumbered, Bihac survived three years of siege. Robust Bosnian Muslim (or Bosniak) military leadership under General Dudakovic held the perimeter until August 1995, when Croatian President Franjo Tudjman finally ordered his army to attack the Serb forces. Tudjman was not responding to UN appeals. He acted because he recognized that Serb control of Bihac would threaten the security of Croatia. By then, almost five thousand lives, mostly non-combatant, had been lost in the Bihac pocket.

The script is chillingly similar, but unlike Bihac and Sarajevo, Srebrenica did not survive. Menaced by encircling Bosnian Serb forces, the commander of the Dutch UN contingent based in Srebrenica appealed for air strikes. Once again NATO officers supported the request, but apart from some minor sorties that were "too little and too late," the request was opposed by senior UN military and civilian officials. They feared that a show of UN strength would provoke attacks on other UN contingents. While it is conceivable that this calculation may have been correct, the result led to the retreat of the Dutch and the massacre of approximately eight thousand unarmed Bosnian men and boys – the worst atrocity in Europe since the Second World War.

Sitting in the war-mottled Holiday Inn sipping martinis, our conversation occasionally slipped away from jocular anecdotes to the dark side. Someone asked, "Is the common perception of UN decency and rational purpose a delusion?" It was a fair question, because our work with the OSCE was profoundly affected by UN decisions. The martini party consensus went something like this: if we set aside failure to act as a consequence of the veto system in the Security Council, the UN is still left with responsibility for colossal preventable tragedies. The worst was the Rwanda genocide, and in the next tier was Srebrenica. With an effort, we widened the context and concluded that, even with ghastly lapses, on balance the UN record is not so bad. But as Carolyn observed, "Cold comfort for the Bosnians."

The next day there was a briefing at OSCE headquarters and I met Belem, a very pleasant young Spanish woman assigned as my partner for the Srebrenica elections. In the afternoon we climbed into our crumbling Opal (the odometer read 369,925 kilometres) and drove from Sarajevo out of the Bosnian entity, now "cleansed" and separated into Bosniak and Catholic Croat enclaves, to the Republika Srpska, equally "cleansed," from all but the Orthodox Serb. Both entities were part of the dysfunctional Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. From the border we headed northeast through wooded hill country – not the dramatic landscape of the Bihac and Drvar areas, but disfigured in the same way, with smashed villages and blown-up farms.

The long siege had taken a heavy physical toll on Srebrenica. Artillery and mortar fire had destroyed or damaged 60 percent of the homes and buildings. The city's one hotel was missing windows and most of its plumbing, so most of the international community assigned to Srebrenica was lodged in nearby and less damaged Bratunac. This was convenient, as we were able to commune with the people on arrival. Our quarters were in the Hotel Fontana.

Surprisingly, the most accessible and sociable of the internationals were the IPTF, the International Police Task Force – surprisingly, because the IPTF in many regions of Bosnia had a reputation for insularity and mediocre competence. The officers in Bratunac were French Gendarmes and, almost as surprisingly, their immediate boss was a superintendent from Scotland Yard. Once, after only a few days of acquaintance and with perhaps excessive jocularity, I greeted them with, "*Bonjour, les flics*."

There was a short silence, and then one replied, "*Non, non, monsieur, nous ne sommes pas les flics. Nous sommes les poulets.*" I was unaware of the Gendarme nickname.

Asked about their professional challenges, they said they were tough. The town was grey, sullen, and depressed. No surprise. Srebrenica had 70 percent unemployment, and agriculture was hazardous, as the fields had been heavily mined. 75 percent of the residents were refugees from their own homes and dependent on foreign handouts. Asked about crime and violence, the superintendent responded that there was a great deal of violence, wife-beating particularly. A Gendarme remarked that it was so common that the men in this region seemed to regard battering their wives as a form of foreplay.

"Can you do anything about it?" I asked.

"No. No woman ever reports it. And it is not just fear. The brutality is accepted. It's part of the culture."

Bratunac lies on the left bank of the Drina, one of the great rivers of the Balkans, which forms the frontier between the Republika Srpska and Serbia. One evening I walked along the road that leads to the bridge linking the two countries. Mist on the river had turned Serbia into a long smudge, and the far end of the bridge was dissolving. I was fishing my camera out of its case to take a picture when I looked up and saw a local policeman rapidly approaching. He pointed sternly at my camera, making it clear that no photographs of strategic installations were permitted. A ridiculous prohibition. The bridge and its predecessor had probably been there for 150 years. There was no column of tanks, in fact no traffic at all. The policeman's action was part of the lingering paranoia that gripped this godforsaken region.

Srebrenica and Brutanac had been thoroughly "cleansed." The two communities had been Muslim by a wide majority before the war. The people living in Srebrenica at the time of our visit were 100 percent Serb, and were not pleased with the OSCE system, which encouraged voting by the original inhabitants. In Srebrenica this ensured that the Serbs would have only minority representation on the municipal council. The elections in 1997 (Bosnia was awash with elections) had produced these political inversions across the country, with Bosniak, Serb, or Croat mayors governing residents the majority of whom were of an ethnicity not their own. The idea was not just the application of a democratic principle, it was to

facilitate the reintegration of former residents. Under enormous pressure from the international community, all municipalities reluctantly complied. The one exception was Srebrenica. In February the new mayor and the Bosniak councillors attempted to enter Srebrenica. They were blocked by angry Serbs, and the accompanying OSCE car was stoned. Total obstruction led the OSCE to impose an international, a former American army officer, as mayor, with wide discretionary powers. He was not well received. Nor were we.

Like the previous postwar elections, the voting in 1998 had brought almost no positive change to the Bosnian political landscape. In most cases the corrupt, militant, single-ethnicity parties remained frozen in place. The respected International Crisis Group described these elections as "a giant process of ethnically motivated social engineering." Their judgment on the elections that Belem and I were observing was that they "had not even dented" the power of the entrenched parties.

Under the OSCE rules, the surviving former Bosniak residents of Srebrenica had the right not only to vote for a Srebrenica slate that included Bosniak parties, but to vote in person in Srebrenica. However, the OSCE were not taking any chances. Two busloads of Muslims, all women, came from Tuzla, about two hours drive from the other side of the ethnic boundary, and voted in the two polling stations that were allotted them. Because these stations were located on the rural outskirts of the municipality and away from most of the Serbs, the elections in Srebrenica passed without serious incident.

By the time balloting was over, clouds shrouded the steep hills encircling Srebrenica and it began to rain heavily. An ugly place in sunlight, it looked much worse in the rain. We were there only a few days, but Belem and I could not will ourselves to ignore the ghosts of Srebrenica, real or imagined. Back in Brutanac, we talked about it. What had happened was a grotesque, totally unforgiveable crime, but we agreed that the crime had deep roots. The poison with which Milosevic had infected Yugoslavia was insecurity – the spread of corrosive distrust of once respected neighbours because they belonged to another religious/ethnic group. At the outset, insecurity about the intentions of others was artificially created by means of lies and innuendo. Like anti-Semitism after 1945, it did not come to an end. In the mid-nineties, little more than a generation had passed since the horrors of the Second World War. Serbs recalled the atrocities of Ante

Pavelic, the leader of the Croatian Fascist government set up by Hitler, and the founder of the notorious "Black Legion." Armed by the Germans, this regiment was composed of fanatical Croat Ustashi and Bosniak Muslims. While the Black Legion proved impotent when faced with Tito's partisans, it was the instrument both of Nazi genocide against Balkan Jews and gypsies and Pavelic's own policy of genocide against the Serbs.

Bosnian Serbs were still nursing these, as well as other more recent, wounds. In 2006 Naser Oric, a Bosniak military commander in the Srebrenica area, was sentenced to two years in prison by the International Human Rights Tribunal in the Hague. Journalists estimated that hundreds of Bosnian Serbs, mostly unarmed, had been killed by Oric's soldiers between 1992 and early 1995. In *The Broken Road*, the final volume of his brilliant trilogy describing an odyssey on foot from Northern Europe to Istanbul between 1933 and 1935, the travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor grumbles about the Balkan pathology of a thousand years of oppression and conflict: "The frontiers have changed again and again…and each step in these struggles has been marked by horror: ambush, assassination, burnt villages, uprooting and massacres leaving behind them the curses of fear, hatred and irredentism and thirst for revenge."

In Srebrenica the Serbs we met in town were voters, or those involved in the mechanics of the election process. They and Slobo, our driver, and Sanja, our interpreter, were uniformly taciturn. We steered away from the massacre, but it was evident that they were in denial about what had taken place three years before. They took their cue from the wartime president of the Republika Srpska, Radovan Karadzic, who declared that "nothing had happened in Srebrenica." Karadzic, who was also a psychiatrist, a poet, and a former snake oil salesman, remains in prison in The Hague awaiting sentence for genocide and crimes against humanity – crimes committed over two decades ago. He is there with his colleague, General Ratko Mladic, the Bosnian Serb military commander responsible for the siege of Sarajevo and the liquidation of Srebrenica. The Bosniaks, unable to decide which of the two was the bigger beast, have bestowed on both the sobriquet "Butcher of Bosnia."

PARAGUAY

El Supremo

In July 1998, the Washington-based International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) sent me to Asuncion with a small technical support team in advance of the presidential elections. I was in Paraguay for just under a month.

Paraguay was not a wholesome democracy when I was there in 1998. In fact, it never was. The country's closest approach to democratic normality up to that point had occurred in 1993, when Juan Carlos Wasmosy, who represented the Colorado, the ruling party of the preceding dictatorship, was elected president. Despite the fraud and horseplay of that election, the opposition made a good showing. In 1996, Wasmosy's anointed successor, General Oviedo, the head of the army, wishing to accelerate matters, attempted to overthrow his president. After much shuffling back and forth, Oviedo was imprisoned and Raul Alberto Cubas became the governing party candidate with the unusual platform, "Me in the Presidency, Oviedo in power." This entire cast was to experience unhappy trajectories, but more on that later. The country faced other problems. Paraguay was close to the top of Transparency International's ranking of corrupt states. Confronted by the press with evidence of massive embezzlement, a government senator responded, "Why not? These are the perks of office." It was in this setting that the recently established Paraguayan Election Commission invited IFES[1] to send a technical support team.

I was the leader of the IFES team, and my first call on the magistrates in the Commission was unwisely scheduled for two hours after the arrival of my connecting flight from Brasilia – which was just before my luggage arrived in Santiago, Chile. My wrinkled and generally scruffy appearance was a shock to the soberly attired commissioners. A bad start, I thought. However, the next morning a beautifully gift-wrapped silk tie was delivered to my hotel from the commissioners.

The commissioners quarrelled among themselves, which complicated our technical support mission, but, unlike many of the politicians, they were looking for results that more or less resembled the will of the voters. And, like most Paraguayans, they were delightful as individuals. The chief commissioner, Dr. Carlos Mojoli, was very genial, but eccentric even by Paraguayan standards. He had three hobbies: fishing, shooting, and motorcycling and managed to practise at least two of these pursuits simultaneously. Several months previously, Richard Soudriette, the head of IFES, was invited to join Dr. Majoli on his fishing boat. Casting near the shore, Richard snagged his lure on the branch of an overhanging tree. Richard was about to cut his line when Mojoli produced a submachine gun from his cabin, which he fired until the offending branch fell into the water. I will return to Dr. Mojoli.

Paraguay was frustrating, entertaining, and often enchanting. The city of Asuncion gave the impression that time had stopped about 1926. That was the feel of the architecture, the hotel lobby furnishings, the public transport system, the restaurant menus, and the courtliness of the citizens. But nothing spoke of the distant past so much as the pace of life. Leisurely movement was embedded in the culture. The siesta was sacrosanct. Almost everything stopped at noon. The tobacco men, who rolled cheap (5 cents each), foul, pretzel-shaped cigars in the market, hitched their hammocks under the public tables.

Before scattering to different destinations within the country, my team, from seven Latin American countries, met in Asuncion for a final briefing. Because the cellular network was limited, our communications would be by fax. "How should we address you?" one of the team enquired. Salutation protocol is given more emphasis in Latin America than in Canada. The previous evening I had been reading the exceptionally dolorous history of Paraguay. A long chapter is devoted to Dr. Francia, who was president from 1811 to 1840. In many ways he reminded me of Trujillo:

efficient, incredibly brutal, and a megalomaniac. Francia instructed all Paraguayans to address him as "*El Supremo*." Such was the chemistry of our team that with a straight face I suggested that they send their faxes to "*El Supremo*." And so they did. One of them still does.

Manuel Herrera and I remained in Asuncion. Manuel was a consultant with Mexico's Electoral Institute and a former professional soccer player. Still athletic, he persuaded me to run each morning at an ungodly hour. Each morning before breakfast we were picked up by Julio Cesar, our driver, and taken to the city park, which lies between the Paraguay River and the railway tracks. The circumference of Julio Cesar's waist was only a little less than his height. That he barely fit into our rented car and that the steering wheel dug into his belly never seemed to affect his sunny, garrulous, and earthy nature, nor his morbid interests.

On our drive to the park we were brought up to date on the scandals and criminal violence of the previous day. We were also taught amazingly offensive epithets in Guarani, the original language of Paraguay, to hurl at miscreant drivers. "Señores, say this loud and you will get respect." In our view, informing a tough, evil-tempered Asuncion driver, "Only mushrooms would grow in your swampy crotch," was more likely to get us shot. Wednesday was Julio Cesar's bumper day. As we climbed sleepily into the car he would show us with great relish a copy of a weekly tabloid that specialized in the most grisly crimes of the past week. This paper, which is no longer in circulation, was mostly comprised of excessively graphic photographs of victims, severed body parts, and distraught relatives.

In the park, Manuel and I ran along the perimeter trail and then inland toward the railway tracks. If our timing was right, about 7:45 A.M. we would hear the rumbling, clanking, and snorting of the commuter train. This was a joy to behold. The ancient wood-fired locomotive belched smoke and sparks, and a bright orange glow could be seen through the many holes in the walls of its rusty furnace. The three passenger carriages looked slightly crumpled, as if they had rolled over once or twice. All that was missing from this wonderful tableau was the thunderous pursuit of rebel horsemen shouting "*Viva Zapata!*" or perhaps "*Muere Supremo!*"

Meanwhile, the election campaign was getting testy. Especially disquieting for us was the escalating vendetta between Dr. Mojoli and the president. Rooted less in politics than in personal antipathy, the feud was rapidly becoming politicized and deteriorating into tantrums. Wasmosy

accused Majoli of exceeding his mandate as election chief. Majoli fired off verbal shots warning the president off his turf. Wasmosy ordered troops to remove the stone wall that surrounded the cluster of election offices and warehouses. Furious, Majoli instructed workers to rebuild it. The election was now only two days away. At election headquarters Majoli told me he feared that the arch villain Wasmosy intended to seize the Commission's buildings, depose the commissioners, and take control of the election machinery. This seemed unlikely, but in that overheated political cauldron nothing was impossible if the governing party feared it might lose. I was in touch with Maura Harty, the US ambassador, who shared these concerns. She was in direct contact with Wasmosy.

Although aware of the diplomatic pressures on the president, Majoli wasn't taking any chances. He showed me into one of his warehouses, where he produced a small plastic case and said, "Have a look at this." Inside was a .45-calibre automatic with extra magazines. Engraved on the grip in small print were the words, "Made in Canada." I was surprised, but this was not the moment to enquire about the exact provenance of the guns. Majoli said, "There are lots more. See that pile on the shelf…and we have dynamite."

Wasmosy did not invade, the election passed relatively peacefully, and Cubas was elected president. There were gross irregularities and much intimidation, but the OAS and other observers judged that a plurality had voted for the governing party.

The postscript is messier. Wasmosy was indicted for fraud and sentenced to four years in prison. Released by President Cubas, General Oviedo fled to Brazil. Argana, the new vice-president, a jovial politician who had teased me about fomenting trouble in the largely Canadian Mennonite community, and an ardent opponent of Cubas's soft-on-Oviedo policy, was assassinated. Unproven accusations were made that Cubas and Oviedo were involved in the conspiracy. President Cubas resigned the day following Argana's assassination to avoid impeachment by the legislature.

Plus ça change.

KYRGYZSTAN

Boiling Toilets and Fermented Mare's Milk

This story encompasses two presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan, the first in 2000 and the second in 2005. On both occasions I was an observer with the Office of Human Rights and Democracy (ODHIR), which is a branch of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The story opens in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan.

From the balcony of the Hotel Pinara in Bishkek I looked out on rows of yellowing poplars and bare hills. Beyond was a white wall of high mountains, hazy in the bright sun but gorgeous in the evening and in the early morning light. Breakfast was very much like that in Bosnia: fish, cheese, salami, fresh pomegranate, and wonderful yogourt. That evening I dined at a Siberian restaurant with an enterprising young Swiss colleague. He knew Canada better than I, having cycled from Vancouver to Newfoundland three years before. The daily special was borscht and "meat à la French," which my Swiss friend decided was horse.

Outside I gave paper money in the local currency to a small beggar boy. He was carrying a sign in Cyrillic that I couldn't read. The note was probably worth about five dollars, as I didn't have anything of lower value. Apparently no one had ever given him such a treasure. He looked at me with amazement, then ran off lest the foolish philanthropist change his mind.

We had just had our first briefing for the presidential elections by the leaders of the ODHIR/OSCE team. The incumbent president, Akayev, was seeking another term, although the constitution said that he couldn't. Until about four months before our arrival, Akayev's image as a reformer and political moderate stood out against a backdrop of unreconstructed Soviet hacks in the rest of central Asia. This was no longer the case. We were told to expect manipulation, voter intimidation, and harassment of opposition organizations. The election campaign had failed most of the usual tests. There was virtually no free press, and several journalists who had the temerity to criticize the government were on trial or in jail. We wondered what we were doing observing a pre-cooked election. ODHIR/OSCE hoped that its presence could be a deterrent to blatant irregularities, and of some educational value to embryonic civil society election organizations. The movement of bureaucratic wheels was also a factor. The decision to observe had been made before Akayev had turned his back on "free and fair."

The briefing discussion moved from the political to the mundane. We were told a) that the cheap local vodka was potentially lethal; b) to keep passports and wallets well hidden; c) not to expect help if we were attacked; d) that local drivers would drive at speed as close to pedestrians as possible; and e) not to make a face if you didn't like the food. The head of mission added that the Kyrgyz are very hospitable. It was not clear from what he said whether this was a warning or a compliment. I soon learned that the Kyrgyz were hospitable to a fault.

The next morning six of us set off with a driver in an ancient seatbelt-less, and almost springless Mercedes van to our destination in Karakol, the small administrative centre of the Issyk-Kulskaya *oblast* (province). Karakol is at the eastern tip of the spearhead-shaped republic; geographically, the spear is aimed at Sinkiang, the huge province in China's northwest. To the north is Kazakhstan, to the west are the ancient cities of Tashkent and Samarkand, and to the northeast, Alma Ata, cities of the Silk Road, the tales of whose splendour were carried to Europe in the Middle Ages. The squiggly and wildly indented eastern frontier resembles a fiendishly difficult Rorschach test.

The drive was spectacular. Dry, dun-coloured flatlands around Bishkek soon gave way to the foothills of several mountain ranges. Running diagonally to the northeast along the Chinese frontier is a long parapet of rock

and ice. This is the Tian Shan mountain range, whose peaks rise to over 7,400 metres. Mountains are always visible in Kyrgyzstan. Only 3 percent of the land is flat and only 8 percent arable.

There were occasional villages along our route. The rustic architecture of most of the houses reminded me of all the films I had seen of the Russian/Siberian countryside – wood frames, mostly white, with small windows and corrugated roofing. The attractive ones have a central balcony on the second floor, elaborately shaped and carved with gingerbread. Pale blue is the favourite colour for window and door frames. The villages are the descendants of the old caravan stops along the network of silk roads. In the fields were large herds of horses, bred for transport and consumption. The early onset of winter had driven the yak to lower pastures. Traffic was now mostly horse traps and Kyrgyz riding on horseback. By the roadside, fishermen peddled trout, fished from glacier-fed streams.

After about four hours of gorges, switchbacks, forest, and scree, we came to Lake Issyk-Kul, a huge crescent-shaped lake 120 kilometres long. Ivan, our driver, told us that Stalin, and later Brezhnev, once had hunting dachas nearby. The lake is salty, and so full of minerals – including some carcinogenic waste dumped accidentally by a Canadian gold mining company – that it doesn't freeze, even in the harshest of winters. We parked in a grove of beech trees and lunched on borscht in a yurt that smelled of charred fat. Outside, the turquoise lake glittered blindingly behind the trees. Beyond rose the white palisade of another mountain range.

The bedraggled town of Tyup at the eastern end of the lake was snow-covered, and as we climbed toward Karakol and the Tiam Shan mountains, the snow lay even deeper on the fields. Farmers were hacking at the semi-frozen ground in an attempt to save the potato harvest, of which, we were told, over 60 percent was lost. Even at 1,800 metres, this much snow and cold at the end of October was most unusual.

Karakol was splotched with melting snow and looked bleak and dilapidated. The key to our apartment wouldn't work, and a fight was breaking out among the interpreters who were waiting for us. They had discovered there would only be two jobs between the three of them. The two males were telling us that we couldn't hire Rosa, a young Kyrgyz woman with gold front teeth, because she was nursing a baby and therefore would not be available full-time. We hired Rosa. Eventually a working key was

produced. We lugged our packs inside, including my emergency bottle of duty-free Scotch, and looked around.

"Keith, look!" I shouted. "You can boil an egg in this toilet." A plume of steam was rising from the toilet bowl and the pipes were rattling. I had discovered the only source of heat in the apartment assigned to Keith and me. Keith, a starchy ex-Sandhurst Englishman, was overdressed for Karakol and certainly for our apartment. Threadbare carpeting ran halfway up the bedroom walls. It was Keith who discovered that the tap marked in red was for cold water and that marked in blue was for hot water. Herbert (Swiss) and Louise (Belgian), the leaders of our small observer presence in the *oblast*, invited Keith and me to join them for dinner. Keith opted for an early night.

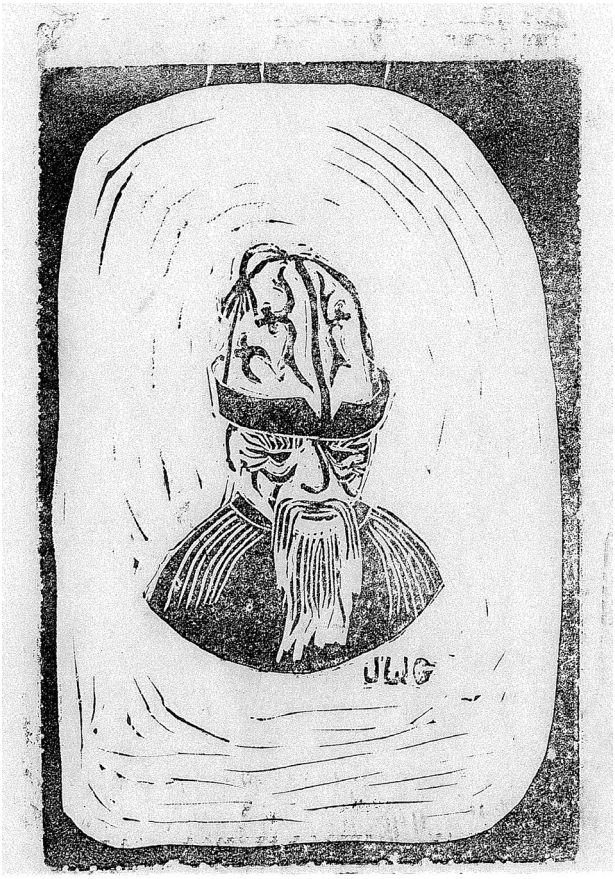
The restaurant was one of the grungiest I have ever been in. Roughly patched chairs, splintered linoleum tabletops, and vivid tropical island murals were lit by over-bright neon strip lighting. Our neighbours were young Kyrgyz who were throwing back the dollar-a-bottle vodka that we had been warned about. We checked the two rooms upstairs. The first was set up as a nightclub and the other had little cubicles with curtains. Louise and I agreed that it was a temporarily inactive brothel. Unsure about the dining options in Karakol, we went downstairs and ordered dinner. The beer was drinkable and the horse *shashlik*, cooked on a charcoal grill outside on the street, was very good. After dinner we were joined by Rosa and several of her girlfriends. Although the gold teeth took a little getting used to, the Kyrgyz women were beautiful: light bronze complexions, lovely chestnut eyes set wide apart, and stunning features. Steel teeth I could not get used to, perhaps because they reminded me of that James Bond film.

Rosa persuaded us to have another look at the nightclub, now booming with action. We danced to the awful cacophony of a Russian punk band on tape. Louise was ordering wine when an inebriated Kyrgyz army officer approached our table and insisted on buying us a bottle of champagne, which he could not remotely afford. Totally embarrassed, we resisted his offer, until one of the girls explained that the offer was being made because we were guests in his country, and that he would be grievously offended if we refused. He was also wearing his pistol. As soon as we could we made our way downstairs, and found that the young Kyrgyz in the bar/restaurant had become belligerently drunk. A sad and bewildered group – intoxication was one of their few entertainments.

Back at the apartment the cold was intense. Despite a layering of socks, sweaters, and long johns under pyjamas, we had difficulty sleeping. Next morning Keith and I complained to the landlady, who performed some magic with the central heating, redirecting the scalding water from the toilet to miniature radiators in our rooms – and to the red tap in the bathroom.

That night, after we had spent the day visiting election and party officials around the *oblast*, Herbert invited the men in his observer team to join him at the local Turkish bath. With reasonably based suspicion about what might lie in wait in a Karakol Turkish bath, the others declined. After a short drive through the forest, Herbert and I arrived at a crumbling ruin. The chamber for the Turkish bath was still mostly intact, and Herbert speculated, on the basis of the elaborate tile around the plunge pool, that it had been part of a czarist hunting lodge. The attendant tossed logs in the furnace, the ancient pipes groaned, and soon we were able to enjoy our first Kyrgyz Turkish bath and the mixed pleasures of the icy cold and poorly illuminated plunge pool.

On election day we squelched along, through deep mud, to as many polling stations as possible. Once inside we tried hard to be inquisitive and businesslike. For their part, the Kyrgyz tried, with great skill and charm, and sometimes with success, to transform the observers' visits into social events, at which we were expected to try the pickled vegetables and other local delicacies. The borscht was multi-coloured, thick, and delicious. A particularly memorable treat at one polling station consisted of fried bread spread with rancid yak butter. The food is prepared in advance by local families to fuel the workers at each polling station over the very long election day, and washed down with chai or locally distilled beverages. As in many countries, the elections were treated as a national festival. In rural areas – and our *oblast* was mostly rural – it was an occasion for gossip and socializing. The best clothes are worn. For the women this meant brightly embroidered blouses and camisoles. The men's winter togs included sheepskin coats and long, occasionally vividly coloured woollen or burlap robes cinched with large metal buckles. Many of the horsemen wore fur hats, but most Kyrgyz men in rural areas wore the traditional felt hat, the *kalpak*. These are splendid: usually bone white, they are cone-shaped, with upturned rims, and beautifully embroidered in black thread. A measure of the status of the *kalpak* is that it may be worn in the mosque. I brought



Kyrgyz elder wearing a kalpak.

back six, plus a fur hat, for family, friends, and myself. Like the women, the men were often strikingly handsome, some with thin droopy moustaches and wispy beards.

In many villages we were a curiosity. Several people told us that we were the first non-Russian, non-central Asian foreigners they had seen. In the days before and after election day we were plied with questions about our countries. As in Bosnia, jokes were regarded both as tests of character and as icebreakers. I found that mine often left my audience puzzled – for which, of course, I would blame my interpreter. They ended up being more interested in my accounts of Canada, another country of mountains and long, harsh winters, especially relating to stories of crops destroyed by insects, floods, and early winter storms.

Back to Bishkek

Of course, Akayev won. But he would have won anyway without the massive fraud, a small part of which I saw in Karakol. He had apprenticed as a Soviet autocrat and it was not in his nature to take any chances. Akayev had no credible opponents, even counting those he had put in jail. Four and a half years later, his electors, unhappy with the corruption and incompetence of his administration, drove him out of office. The ensuing instability and risks of inter-ethnic violence troubled the neighbours, especially the Russians, Kazaks, Uzbeks, and Tajiks. The Americans were also nervous – like Canada, they are members of the OSCE. The result was pressure on ODHIR/OSCE. And so it was that five years later, in July, we were back in Kyrgyzstan to monitor a fresh election with a new slate of candidates. This time the observer team was under different, overstressed management. Although most of us were experienced observers, we were lectured like impish teenagers and potential sex maniacs. Bob Pym, from Nanaimo, compared notes with me, and we concluded that our leaders' sensitivity with respect to sex may have been related to the mission's informal, hugely successful, well lubricated, and notorious farewell bash in Bishkek in 2000, which concluded with a Russian stripper.

The small group assigned to the Fergano Valley flew from Bishkek to Osh, another ancient silk road town and the capital of the *oblast*. Kamilla, a young Uzbek woman with whom I was paired, and I were met by Sultan, our driver, and his battered Audi. We drove through blazing heat: it was 44 degrees centigrade. The Fergano Valley is Kyrgyzstan's bread basket, comprising most of the country's sparse arable land. We passed fields of cotton, watermelon, rice, and corn, and a vast network of irrigation canals fed by a girdle of glaciers. One large canal still bore the name Staliniski. This remnant of the past, like the statues of Lenin and Marx, was a reminder that nomadic Kyrgyzstan, unlike the Baltic states and Eastern Europe, had no history of democracy, and in consequence did not experience the same sense of liberation when the Soviet empire unravelled. Distance from Moscow insulated them from bureaucratic inanity and cultural bruising, but it did not free them from it. Many Kyrgyz families mourn family members killed in the Afghan war. But the country did benefit from membership in the USSR in the form of an infrastructure of roads, airports, hospitals, telecommunications, schools, and universities.

By late afternoon, Sultan had us installed in the Swiss Guest House in Jalal-Abad, our base of operations for the next four days. Apart from the mountain views, there was nothing remotely Swiss about it. There was no air conditioning, but it was comfortable, and by the standards of Karakol the Swiss Guest House was five-star.

On election day Kamilla woke me up at 5:20 A.M., well ahead of the agreed wake-up time. She was a would-be female Genghis Khan, very bright and impatient with old geezers. We had occasional sharp exchanges. Sultan was waiting, and we started our long circuit of polling stations. As it had been five years before, in Karakol, election day was festival time. The best summer clothes were worn and most of the men wore the traditional *kalpak*. Food and non-alcoholic drink were available. We were invited to partake of the Kyrgyz tradition of sharing bread – delicious round bread with a local design baked in the centre – but there was less of the abundant hospitality we had experienced in the north.

The heat was too much for the radiator, and Sultan stopped frequently to top it up. We topped up too. I can't recall a time when I took in so much liquid. Sultan stopped in a small village and returned to the car with large glass mugs of *jarma*, a local beverage made from yogourt, water, and whole wheat grains. It's like an unsweetened Indian *lassi*, only lumpier.

We climbed a gentle slope above the Fergano flatland until we came to a small and foul-smelling polling station. It was empty except for a goat and a policeman who was fast asleep. Awakened, he summoned the polling station chairlady. She was delightful, and took us to the bank of a spring-fed river where we filled up our water bottles. Sultan's car, which had conked out again, was also treated with spring water.

Election day went surprisingly well in Jalal-Abad, and generally in the rest of the country. There was intimidation and some vote stuffing, but very little violence. It was fascinating – and, of course, dehydrating.

Our visits to the police, political parties, and election authorities completed, Kamilla and I accepted Sultan's suggestion that we visit his friend the mullah, halfway up a foothill overlooking the town. We wound slowly up into the forest and stopped beside a tiny mosque set within a copse of conifers. At the bottom of the mosque there was space for no more than three people crammed together. The minaret was only about twenty feet high, and inside there was a narrow ladder to the top. A beautiful setting for prayer, but not much accommodation for the faithful. We said as

much to Sultan. "Ahh," said he, "I will ask the mullah to explain." Sultan disappeared and eventually returned with the mullah and his small son. The mullah told us that in clement weather his small group of parishioners place their prayer rugs on the grass outside the mosque. What happens in inclement weather was not made clear, but I suspect that it involved umbrellas. The mullah, who seemed pleased to see us, instructed his son to bring a "container" from a neighbouring farmer and talked to us about the tangled history of Jalal-Abad. The son returned with a pitcher of thick, off-white fluid. Sultan exclaimed that we were greatly privileged. This was *kymyz*, or fermented mare's milk. It is the "national" drink of Kyrgyzstan and its pungent taste defies the usual adjectives. My encyclopaedia describes it as "one of the most difficult [of the central Asian nectars] to get used to." We sat in the mullah's garden eating the watermelon that I had brought and sipping *kymyz* with varying degrees of real and pretended relish.

GUATEMALA

San Marcos and the Election of 2003

In 2003 I was invited by the OAS to observe the municipal, legislative and presidential elections in Guatemala. Democracy in Guatemala had been struggling with narcotics-fueled corruption and a landed elite largely unwilling to cede their privileges, prejudices, and political control. This is an account of that election, its consequences, and of my experience in San Marcos, a small province bestride a drug route in a remote corner of the country.

"… every time the lid is lifted from four centuries of injustice, the social ferment begins to bubble over and a further wave of brutality is the only way to restore 'order'. Guatemala allows the grass roots to sprout and then mows the lawn."

Ronald Wright wrote this dismal epitaph in his classic study of Guatemala, Belize, and Chiapas, *Time Among the Maya.* At the time he was writing, in the mid-eighties, Vinicio Cerezo's democratically elected government had put an end to a brutal procession of military governments, notably those of Lucas and Rios Montt, but the military, in league with the old-money elite, was still keeping the grass short.

Twenty years on, and thanks in part to the energy of the international community, Guatemala had a good election – better than Cerezo's and

probably the best election in sixty years. Accused of large-scale embezzlement, the previous president, Alfonso Portillo, skulked rapidly out of the country when his designated successor and prospective protector, Rios Montt lost to Oscar Berger.[1] The new president's program bore some functional resemblance to that of President Juan Jose Arevalo, who in 1945 boldly tackled health, water, education, labour law, and land tenure. But then Arevalo and his successor Jacobo Arbenz took on too much too fast for the political paranoia of the times. Arbenz was famously dislodged by the United Fruit Company (aka *el pulpo* – the octopus) and the CIA, with the blessing of the Eisenhower administration in close collaboration with the army and the elite.

Berger opened his administration with surprisingly reformist panache. He acknowledged the country's 'sinister' past, rebuked his predecessors and cited the scorching report of the United Nations Truth Commission. He made commitments to 'restructure' the army – which meant compressing the size and reforming the culture of the military establishment. It is difficult to underestimate this undertaking in a country where a privileged and intransigent military has long intimidated civil authority and slaughtered non-combatants with impunity. The Commission noted that 83 percent of the victims of the conflict were indigenous people and that acts of genocide had been committed. The military were only lightly tethered to their barracks and remained an inhibiting spectre for civilian government and civil society.

The scale of Berger's challenge and that of all subsequent presidents was huge – and his achievements, like those of his successors, have been disappointingly modest. Guatemala has one of the hemisphere's most lopsided distributions of wealth. The disequilibrium of land tenure has not changed significantly since the massive appropriations of peasant and indigenous land by dictator Justo Rufino Barrios and his successors in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Although small parcels of land have been redistributed by succeeding administrations, 2 percent of the population continues to control about 65 percent of the land. Infant mortality is over twice the average for Latin America and the Caribbean. Murder has been escalating.

For about one quarter of adult Guatemalans, as in many other parts of Latin America, the hand that lifts them from poverty and malnutrition is that of the family member who mails or wires a remittance cheque from

the United States, Mexico, Europe, or Canada (over 90 percent of these cheques are sent from the US). The other helping hand is the narcotics transshipment business, which carries many others well above the poverty line.

The catalogue of grievances gives the impression that Guatemala is still caught in a relentless cycle of racism, discrimination, and repression. There are criticisms, both domestic and international, that fundamentally nothing has changed. Not nearly enough has changed, but charges that the cultural divide and its practical consequences are as bad now as they were thirty years ago are overstated. World Bank and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) statistics show gradual upward movement in areas such as life expectancy and literacy.[2] The physical perils of involvement in political or labour activity have declined. My discussions in 2003 with many Guatemalans, including indigenous persons, involved in development, education, and human rights indicated that forms of discrimination were beginning, ever so slightly, to moderate. They also suggested that the cultural lens through which some in the *ladino*[3] population traditionally see the indigenous people, either as an asset for exploitation or as a threat to their security, is beginning to change. The walls of discrimination, especially the indirect ones, are still indefensibly high, but they are being scaled by small numbers of enterprising individuals.

However, these changes must also be seen in the context of how the indigenous population has fared in relation to the *ladino* counterpart. While there is overall statistical improvement, the gap in the quality of life between a rural *ladino* and a rural indigenous household is actually widening.[4] In other words one effect of national economic advance has been to enlarge disparities.[5]

Ronald Wright remarked that "Latin Americans have enormous trouble with the idea that cultural diversity and national unity need not be incompatible."[6] This remains especially true in Guatemala where cultural sclerosis and exclusion have undergone very slow generational change. Up to now progress along this road has depended largely on nudging from the international community. Pressure from within is a new and still not fully matured phenomenon. While the OAS was encouraging a mobilized civil society in Guatemala, the president, Alvaro Arzu, abominated the boldness and lack of respect shown by civil society towards his government. I was present in 1999 when he admonished the General Assembly of the

OAS meeting in Antigua: while civil society in some countries might be 'civil', he explained, in Guatemala it remained 'uncivil', leaving his foreign minister, Eduardo Stein, rushing about for the next three days attempting to put the flowers back into a broken vase.

The Election

In compressed and greatly oversimplified form I have given an update on Guatemala's social and political setting and have indicated that, dark as it is now, the shadows were longer when I returned to the country in 2003. At that time, looking at Portillo's botched legacy and poor prospects of winning another term for the party if it played according to the rules, the question arose as to why the government would bother to have international observation. The answer was in part wishful thinking that the president's candidate, Rios Montt, and his FRG party[7] could win, coupled with the view that, if he did win it would be important, as in past elections, to have the international validation and legitimacy that an OAS observation can confer.[8] The government would also be aware that regimes with dodgy governance records in Latin America often needed the blessing of the OAS and other major observer organizations to secure and maintain development assistance from the Bretton Woods institutions.

The UPD (Unit for the Promotion of Democracy and my former job) had seven months' lead time to prepare for the first round in November, but not much cash. No funds were available for elections from the OAS regular budget. The organization had to solicit contributions from the donor community for each election observation. As concern grew through the summer of 2003 that a mix of sophisticated manipulation, dirty tricks and raw intimidation could unsettle the Guatemalan electoral landscape, the OAS and the European Union recognized that a major effort would be required. Election infrastructure is always huge. In Guatemala the voters list ran to over five million eligible citizens.

A comprehensive observation in a potentially unstable election requires scrutiny of all the major election functions and a presence, if possible, in all the departments – an expensive undertaking and a difficult one in an environment of hemispheric parsimony. Short on donor funding, the observer mission under a former president of Peru chose to put its primary investment in a group of long-term observers and sectoral experts.

The Canadian embassy played a significant part in this process as Canadians made up almost a quarter of the OAS short-term observation team. The ambassador, James Lambert, lobbied hard and successfully to obtain Canadian funding to help underpin the OAS mission.

By the end of September, experts had been assigned to monitor voter education, voter registry, vote counting procedures, logistics, the training of election officials, and to organize a quick count.[9]

The Portillo government's support for the candidacy of Rios Montt in the face of a constitutional provision barring former dictatorial rulers was a major vexation to election planners. The decision by the FRG-packed Supreme Court to allow Rios Montt to run escalated concerns about the environment in which campaigning would take place and the integrity of the process itself. Portillo's government supported Rios Montt's presidential ambitions with state funding. One example was the doubling of the number of former members of the para-military Civil Defense Patrols entitled to pensions. These rural patrols had been employed by the Lucas and Rios Montt regimes to secure villages and combat guerrillas. Often reinforced by press-ganged Maya, the civic patrols became part of the control apparatus that systematically violated human rights. By the end of the campaign there had been a flood of death threats and some 20 party activists had died in incidents related to the campaign.

Distressed by the prospects of increasingly turbulent elections, the OAS and European Union missions joined other international démarches, including that of Canadian Foreign Minister Bill Graham, to press the Guatemalan government to increase its security measures. The government was receptive, but there was apprehension about how increased security would be applied. The contamination of police forces by narcotics traffickers had been rising in frontier municipalities. Portillo's police force had become more corrupt and less competent. Much more competent, but greatly feared in many areas, was the army. Indigenous and opposition leaders wanted the army kept on a tight leash.

In this climate both OAS and EU missions increased the assignment of long-term observers throughout the country. Thirty-four were sent by the OAS and fourteen by the EU. OAS long-term observers spent between two months and six weeks in their departments prior to election day. The use of long-term observers is an increasingly vital tool of election missions. Complaints that election observation is too narrowly focused on

election day itself was shifting from accounts of what was happening at the polling station to pre-identified weak spots in the process – such as abusive government control of the media, election transport, election financing, intimidation, lack of transparency in the computer registration of voters, and improper security of ballots.[10] Identifying the deficiencies in advance and then discreetly encouraging national electoral authorities, in this case the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), to address the problems requires skill, diplomacy and adequate lead time.

Although it was always assumed that a second round between the run-off presidential candidates would be necessary, the activities of the OAS mission (including long-term observers) and its expenditures were focused primarily on the first round of the elections where most of the serious difficulties were expected. Past elections had shown that the elections for mayor, which are decided in the first round, generate more potential for violence and irregularities than any other. Especially in rural communities, the mayor is the local '*cacique*' or 'chief' dispensing patronage, controlling the municipal registry of citizens, and determining who is assigned the best (and worst) stalls in the local market. Mayors belonging to Portillo's and Rios Montt's FRG party enjoyed additional leverage; the police in an FRG municipality, e.g., did not look closely at political or other abuses committed by the municipal administration.

The job of the long-term observer was to enter these political cauldrons and find a way, in collaboration with local authorities and civil society groups, to lower tensions and increase the prospects of a reasonably fair election. The impact of well-selected and well-motivated observers who are sensitive to local culture and knowledgeable about recent history can be significant. I was not a long-term (but rather a middle-term) observer, but had had enough exposure in Guatemala and other places to assess the work of those who were – and to know that this work was mirrored in many of the departments where tensions were high and there were suspected deficiencies in the process. Combined with discreet prodding of the government and TSE by the OAS and EU headquarters missions, the work of the long-term observers in helping to defuse problems proved critical to the success and 'relative' tranquility of election day.

The Case of San Marcos

Fausto was my driver. I was not sure whether he was the worst driver I had ever had or just the second-most frightening.[11] To be fair, he was not wholly responsible for the frightening parts. The mountain roads with narrow, bending lanes frequented by local rattletrap trucks, bore their share of the responsibility. Fausto had groovy sun glasses and drove a six-cylinder pick-up with machismo relish. He complained that he did not get enough sleep. This was partly due to late nights and mostly due to his stomach, which rumbled at night – sometimes during the day, too, causing him discomfort. His diet consisted almost exclusively of deep-fried chicken and Coke™, and he disliked health food lectures. Fortunately, when fatigue was loosening his concentration, I was able to take over – but only after swearing that the OAS, who were paying him, would not be told.

On arrival in San Marcos we asked repeatedly for directions to the Hotel CRINAP. No one had heard of it, most doubted its existence and, after an hour, so did we. Finally we were able to reach one of my new colleagues by cell phone and were directed to the hotel – so new that its cement staircase was still under construction. This and the fact that each room was crammed with beds explained its cost – $7 a night. Fausto asked about the curious nomenclature of the hotel which resembled no known Guatemalan hostelry.

"Yes," they agreed. "It's strange. The proprietor used the first initial of each of her six children."

One of them, aged about thirteen, was the acting manager when I arrived. Given the modest amenities of the CRINAP, this was not demanding – with one exception. The CRINAP advertised hot showers and this was important since we were in the mountains where, by November, the nights and early mornings were frosty. Heat was supplied to the shower head by means of a canister of butane, ignited with a switch. On the second morning, instead of producing controlled heat, the canister emitted a blue flame, a loud crump and then died. Until four days later when I was able to move to another room, also crammed with beds, I took my showers short and cold.

As it was one of the four most conflictive departments in Guatemala, San Marcos illustrated many of the issues facing observers. Of its twenty-nine municipalities, the TSE identified eleven with problems rated

medium to high. The most common was intimidation. In the remote highland town of San Miguel Ixtahuacan the FRG mayor, who was running for reelection, scarcely troubled to mask his machinations. A nearby hamlet which favoured the opposition was warned in writing to support the mayor or face nasty consequences. A number of persons approached the OAS alleging having had death threats made against them. In San Miguel Ixtahuacan, on the basis of flimsy pretexts, about 900 citizens (almost 10 percent of the municipal electorate) had been disenfranchised through the citizens' neighbourhood registry controlled by the mayor – the same mayor whose personal protection was a pair of ferocious and startlingly white-furred and blue-eyed huskies.

In these circumstances observers must decide what course to follow – whom to speak to – the police, the local party leaders, and/or the TSE – and in what terms. The OAS provided general guidance but no prescriptions. More often than not there is little opportunity to check with headquarters, especially when the connection is a capricious satellite telephone. While certainly not always welcome, in Guatemala the observers generally enjoyed the advantage of respect as representatives of the international community. The point was often made that we were the 'eyes of the outside world'. Fortunately this view still had resonance in 2003. Wearing vests and caps with the identifying insignia of the OAS was not only fairly safe, it had a positive impact. Visibility is a key function of all observers. It magnifies the deterrent effect that is a vital component of all election observation. The visibility factor also underscored the need for observers to project their messages to thousands more by speaking on local radio and TV. Being careful to avoid any remotely partisan comment, the three of us in San Marcos gave about a dozen local media interviews in the last week before the elections. To counter the intimidators, whose threats tend to be more effective with the illiterate, we emphasized the secrecy of the ballot. We spoke encouragingly, if not always honestly, about our confidence that the process would be fair and peaceful. The "we" were Alan Oliver (American), Domingo Mateos (Spanish) and I. They were excellent companions.

We called on party leaders, including mayors, the military commander, and the department governor. At a meeting facilitated by the governor we were able to make a presentation to a specially assembled meeting of police chiefs from all municipalities in the department.

I also made a point of calling on the local bishop, Monsignor Alvaro Ramazzini. As expected, the bishop was well informed. He was also hospitable, genial, and courageously active in defense of indigenous parishioners and others suffering at the hands of Rios Montt's henchmen. He had a passion for justice in a place where it was in very short supply. And, importantly, he was willing to share his local knowledge. His outspoken criticism from the pulpit of the barbarous behaviour of local drug lords, most of them supporters of Rios Montt, had earned him death threats. Catholic priests and nuns in Central America enjoyed no immunity from violence. Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, six Jesuit priests, including my friend Father Ignacio Ellacuria, the rector of the Universidad Centroamericana in San Salvador, many other nuns and priests, and, five years earlier, Bishop Juan Jose Gerardi of Guatemala had all been assassinated.

Inevitably, reports of this remarkable man spread beyond the mountains of San Marcos. Preparing notes for this chapter, I found that the bishop had been awarded the prestigious *Pacem in Terris* award in 2011. Previous recipients have included John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, and Jean Vanier. It was Monsignor Ramazzini who told me that his nickname for the province was San *Narcos*.

Leaving the bishop's residence, I noticed a queue of people, mostly Mayan, across the street lined up to purchase tortillas at a tiny bakery set into the side of an old stone house. Unlike the usual wheat flour or yellow corn patties, they were an unappetizing grey colour. I asked about the flour.

"It is from black corn, *señor. Muy sabroso* (delicious)." And so it was. I bought several and extras for Domingo and Alan. Fausto declined his.

The bishop had advised me about civil society organizations operating in the department. Very few were prepared to put their heads above the parapet in San Marcos and traditionally there had been little dialogue between civil society and government at the municipal level. Nevertheless this set of elections marked the first major participation by Guatemalan civil society in election observation, including MIRADOR, a coalition of four human rights and humanitarian organizations which fielded many thousands of registered and sometimes haphazardly trained observers. In my case I was fortunate to share time on both election days with a member of a group of indigenous women observers – a tiny body of only forty for

the entire country, but it was a beginning. Irma Raquel, resplendent in traditional costume, had no funds for transportation, so, breaking another of the OAS rules, I invited her to accompany me. The result was much improved outreach and a better grasp of the difficulties faced by indigenous women.

We broke for lunch at a rustic fish place built on stilts. Irma Raquel was hesitant about entering. It may have been the first time she had been in a restaurant, however modest. She may also have been nervous about the location – or about being seen with me. The village was Ocos on the Pacific coast, less than a kilometre from the state of Chiapas and the Mexican border. As she explained later, the beach we were perched on was a busy transit route for drugs. She didn't say, but it seemed possible that this route was the source of employment for some of the diners at neighbouring tables. Reminders of the fruits of this industry were the occasional large, invariably gaudy houses that stood out like bad plastic Christmas tree decorations from the surrounding shacks. Sometimes there was a Cadillac Escalade or similar in the driveway to complete the image.

Election day was not quiet. By the end of the day police swat squads had been deployed to five municipalities in the San Marcos department to deal with disturbances. In one town rioters broke into the voting centre and burned all the ballots. Lynchings were threatened, vehicles burned, votes were bought and four municipalities rang with accusations that names had been removed from the voters list. Crowd control was almost non-existent and a child was asphyxiated in one highland voting centre. Yet the news in San Marcos was not all bad. The majority of otherwise problem-prone municipalities had an orderly election day – a far better result than had been forecast early in the campaign. Even troubled San Miguel Ixtahuacan had a good election. Despite disenfranchisement of many, enough voters found the courage to defeat the mayor and his huskies.

Rios Montt was defeated, but because Berger did not have 50 percent of the vote, a second ballot for the presidency was necessary. This meant that Alan, Domingo, and I returned to San Marcos in December. As a veteran of the Hotel CRINAP, I made noises about upgrading. The choice in San Marcos was limited. I opted for the Hotel Esmeralda and the others reluctantly agreed. OAS observers were allocated a set amount *per diem*. If you found cheaper accommodation you could pocket the difference. We

received no salary, so for many the extra money was a powerful incentive to stay in flop houses like the CRINAP at $7 a night. The Esmeralda would put us back $17. It had a dining room, central heating and each room had no more than two (or at most three) beds. The one drawback was the paintings in the public rooms. They were uniformly macabre, involving men doing inquisitorial things with whips.

The many incidents in San Marcos and three other largely indigenous departments could not spoil the sense of relief in the country that the process had survived more or less intact. With a few exceptions where reruns were necessary, the combustible local elections were over. By comparison, the second round on December 28 was a cake walk. Despite the incidents and the high level of intimidation, the elections conferred unquestioned legitimacy on the new Berger government. For the OAS, the EU, the Carter Center and other smaller missions, and for bilateral donors, including Canada, it was effort and money well spent. Unfortunately, Ronald Wright's forecast that change and a bridging of the cultural divide would be painfully slow has proven correct. The political reversal in 2014 of the court conviction of Rios Montt for genocide shows that Guatemala is still mowing the grass.

VENEZUELA

Hugo Chavez: Much Loved, Much Loathed

By 2004 Hugo Chavez had overtaken Fidel Castro as the most interesting, polarizing, and charismatic leader in the hemisphere. He was squeezing his country's free press, politicizing his judiciary, militarizing his administration, intimidating his opposition, mismanaging the economy, failing to cope with rising domestic violence and eroding constitutional checks and balances. The dark side of Chavez is very dark and stands in puzzling contrast to his successes. Frequently a clown who took adolescent pleasure in Bush baiting, he was also a genuine socialist reformer. Illiteracy all but disappeared. Education and free health care became almost universally available. Improving the quality of life for millions at the bottom levels of society was no small achievement.[1]

Additionally, Chavez kept one foot on the democratic side of the thin line that separates democracy from full-blown authoritarianism. He was proud of his 'democracy' and to his credit eventually installed what is, or was, probably the most tamper-proof voting system in the Americas. In 2004 the constitution still retained a clause which required a sitting president to submit to a recall referendum if confronted by a petition with 2.4 million signatories. In June 2004, at the culmination of a robust anti-Chavez campaign, this figure was reached and the president reluctantly acceded to the constitutional requirement. Few of the players, either national or international, emerged from the ensuing mud-slinging fracas unscathed.

Initially uncertain that he would win a free contest, Chavez took some precautionary steps by eliminating some of the basic freedoms, including full access to the voting computer centre, essential for effective electoral observation. Only when his popularity had been fortified by massive public spending and when his polling signalled that he would comfortably defeat the recall referendum did he make some concessions for international observation. When confident that he would have a majority, he decided to ice his cake with authentic international validation – the sort of certification that the OAS, Carter, or the European Community could provide. By this time only a few weeks remained before the referendum date and the European Community concluded that (a) too many restrictions remained and (b) there was too little time to assess the fairness of the pre-referendum conditions. The OAS and the Carter Center agonized over these deficiencies, examined Chavez's concessions and, knowing that their final judgments could not be based on an in-depth evaluation, decided to accept the insistent appeals of the Venezuelan opposition to be present. Having achieved the actual holding of a national referendum, the opposition were desperate to have every possible international support, including the impact of reputable international monitors.

I was invited by the OAS to participate as an observer and, using some of my vanishing leverage, persuaded the OAS to accept three others from the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL)[2]. I was assigned to Valencia, a city of about one million persons, the third largest in Venezuela and the capital of the state of Carabobo. (A curious name because literally it means 'clown face'. Carabobo was the site of a major victory of Simón Bolivar's rebels over Spanish troops in 1821.)

On arrival we had two days before the voting to identify our polling stations and familiarize ourselves with the region's political idiosyncrasies. The latter was going to be problematic without long-term observers to furnish intelligence. I suggested a series of visits to key people to fill in part of this gap. With surprising speed we fixed up appointments on both sides of the political fence. Henrique Salas Römer was easy, as I had met him during my incarnation as ambassador to Venezuela. He is a former Governor of Carabobo and was the centre-right presidential candidate defeated by Chavez in 1998. He and others told us about potentially troublesome polling areas, gave us a grim account of the government's attempts to disenfranchise the 'disloyal', and enlarged on their scepticism about

the transparency of the process. As I recall, a colleague and I were offered access to confidential intelligence on government abuses, which I declined as the arrangement would have compromised our neutrality.

One of our meetings on the government side was with the commandant of the state's military garrison. After the usual civilities I said, "General, there have been press reports that a military presence has allegedly intimidated some opposition activities in Carabobo." The general snorted: "You should not believe opposition rubbish. If there is a problem, it is you. The obvious partiality of the OAS is disturbing the calm of this region."

"Hmm," I said to myself, and thought of Bosnia. The refrain was familiar. Giving us short shrift, the general concluded the interview.

My meeting with the Archbishop of Valencia took a different course. I was offered cakes and coffee in Monsignor Jorge Liberato Urosa Savino's cathedral office and treated to a tirade about the iniquities of Chavez. The Archbishop had become a national figure for his denunciations of the government from the pulpit and in pastoral letters. He also spoke with great warmth of his time in a Canadian seminary. Looking at me with what seemed to be some diffidence, he said that he could even recall the words of the Canadian national anthem. He then sang "O Canada" in French. Two years after our meeting he was promoted Archbishop of Caracas, and not long after that, Pope John Paul appointed him Cardinal.

On referendum day we devoted most of our time to checking on procedures in polling stations, speaking to the poll officers about problems (very few), and briefly interviewing the official representatives of the government and opposition in each polling station. In 2004 Valencia was still a fairly prosperous city, and many of the polling stations on my list were in middle income to wealthy neighbourhoods. Wearing a vest and cap emblazoned 'OEA' (OEA is OAS in Spanish), my colleague (a Paraguayan lady) and I were immediately recognizable. This was a good thing because the presence of the OAS (or other well-known international observer organizations) was often a deterrent to voting shenanigans. My previous experience of elections, including several in Venezuela, had been that of a generally pleasant or at least civil reception. This was not the same. Walking along the queue to reach our first polling station, my colleague and I were greeted rapturously. We were astonished. As more voters recognized us, joyful shouts rang out, "OEA, OEA!" and "Viva la OEA!" There was

a rippling of applause along the line, and the same welcome followed in several other polling stations. Not quite the reception that Allied soldiers received in Europe on entering a recently liberated town or village, but it must have been close. The big distinction, of course, was that in our case it was undeserved. One of my Canadian recruits elsewhere in Valencia told me that a very attractive lady had embraced him and invited him to her apartment for "refreshment," an invitation he had with difficulty declined.

Turnout across the country was close to 70 percent. The queues were exceptionally long, remarkably so in the scorching August sun, but people were in buoyant good spirits and somehow, at least in that part of Valencia, we were the reason. What was happening? Valencia was part of the opposition heartland. Most of its supporters believed absolutely that the recall would succeed, but only if there was an honest tabulation. Greatly exaggerating our powers, they believed that we, especially the OAS, were the guarantors of that honest tabulation and therefore of their victory.

This was not to be. Late that night it became clear that recall had been defeated. By early morning it was apparent that the "no" side had a comfortable margin of about 8 percent. The results were soon acknowledged by the OAS and the Carter Center.[3] Yesterday's euphoria turned rapidly sour. From heroes we became backstabbers. Word reached us from head office to be discreet. We packed our caps and vests, stripped our vehicles of OAS logos, and slunk out of town incognito.

UKRAINE

Night Train to Ternopil

Ukrainian national elections in October 2004 failed to give any candidate the 50 percent or more required to gain the presidency. Run-off elections were called for November. Contaminated by massive fraud, these elections were annulled by the Ukrainian Supreme Court, which called for fresh elections to be held December 26. Discreet guidance from a few Western NGOs, but most of all, popular reaction to the fraud, especially among the young, powered the impressively successful Orange Revolution. I participated in the November run-off election as an observer for the OSCE, and in the December re-run election as an observer for an all-Canadian team. This team was created by the Canadian government to attract a domestic constituency in western Canada, despite sound warnings that a one-flag observer mission runs major credibility risks. This story draws from both experiences.

I was not an attractive sight. Dishevelled and fragrant from seventeen hours of airports and economy seats, I stood in front of the young woman responsible for hotel reservations and mission assignments. Her office was in the Hotel Rus in central Kiev. I and three hundred others formed the mission of the Organization for Security and Co-operation

in Europe (OSCE) that was assembling for deployment across Ukraine for the November presidential elections. She smiled tightly and asked for my name.

"It's Graham; John Graham," I said.

"Ah, Mr. Grim," she muttered, skipping through her file to G. "We are sending you to Chernobyl."

"Chernobyl!" I gasped. Good God, they're sending me to the most radioactive location on the planet! Chernobyl was fresh in my mind. Before leaving I had read a question listed under "restaurants" that a black-humoured Berlitz author had inserted in my Ukrainian phrase book: "Is this food radioactive?"

"No, no," said the young woman, laughing. "Not Chernobyl – Ternopil." The problem was less her articulation than my defective hearing. "And you leave tonight by train. Ternopil is far; is near Polish border."

The destination was an improvement, but this was still not good news. I had just come from Atlanta via Chicago and London, my luggage was somewhere in Heathrow, and all I could think of was a bath and bed.

Fortunately there was time for a bath and a few repairs before setting off for the train station. I found a Ukrainian-speaking colleague, a veteran of the first election round in October, who took me to a labyrinth of small stores under street level, where I bought toilet articles, socks, and underwear. There was a difficulty about pyjamas. After a long search I presented my colleague with a pair of pink and decidedly feminine pyjamas.

"No!" she said.

"What do mean, 'No'? They fit. I'm tired and don't care what sex they're intended for."

"The salesperson will refuse to sell you a female garment. Believe me. I know."

Eventually I found gender-appropriate pyjamas and there was still time for borscht before leaving for the station.

Passazhirskiy Railway Station is astonishing. Floodlit, and gleaming in the rain, its giant portals of moulded aluminum suggest intergalactic rather than railway travel. Inside the huge vaulted entrance hall is a fountain set

among full-size palm trees in iridescent puce plexiglass. Henri, our team leader, who had travelled this route many times, joined a line of slouching men in black leather jackets to buy tickets. "The sleeping cars," he said on return, "are just like those on the Trans-Siberian." None of his flock, a group of fourteen, jumbled in age and nationality, had experienced the Trans-Siberian. It sounded to us like prolonged discomfort.

Briefing papers warned us to expect "irregularities." The first round of elections, a month before, which reduced the presidential candidates from fifteen to two, had drawn a sharp rebuke from the OSCE. But as we boarded the train we had no notion of the scale of mischief and manipulation that was being planned by government apparatchiks across the country.

Once in the train we divided into sleeping compartments by random choice. The system was unisex, with no reserved berths. The bunkmates in my compartment were a young Ukrainian man, an elderly American man, and a middle-aged Hungarian woman. It was midnight, but the American and I tried to make conversation as the train clumped slowly out of the station. The body language of the Ukrainian said that we were not "cool" travelling companions. The Hungarian gave us a flinty look, and conversation sputtered out. The one paradoxically bright spot on this expedition was that I did not have my suitcase. My companions' bags left space only for my briefcase and shopping bag.

The sleeping car conductor came by, offered us tea from an enormous nickel-plated samovar, and lowered the vinyl-sheathed upper bunks. The arrangements were basic: a sheet, a blanket, and a pillow, but no curtains. It was already midnight. The lights were dimmed, and we prepared for bed. The Hungarian lady opted to sleep fully clothed. At this point, I realized that there was no ladder for the upper berth, and I had conceded the remaining lower to the marginally more elderly American. An upper berth was no problem for the athletic Ukrainian. Eventually I managed it by leveraging myself on the American's berth below me and the Ukrainian's upper opposite.

The train pitched and thumped through the night. Exhausted, I fell asleep, to be awakened several hours later by my aging bladder. Now, I realized, a fresh set of adventures would begin. The compartment was in total darkness. Pushing back the blanket, I stretched an arm toward the opposite bunk and probed for an edge. Propped by my arms, one foot explored the bunk below. The train was in spasmodic lurching mode,

improving the chances that I would find a groin rather than vacant mattress. My toes touched something un-groinlike, then settled on mattress. The American was still asleep, and I made my way down the corridor to the washroom at the end of the carriage. There was a wash basin that didn't work and a toilet, opening onto the tracks, that did. The washroom was also inexplicably equipped with a galvanized bucket suspended from a hook over the wash basin. I returned to the compartment and managed to hoist myself onto the berth without incident.

Shortly after dawn, we drew into Ternopil station. Wet snow was falling. The temperature was dropping, and by nightfall the snow had become a blizzard. Snow continued to fall for the next seven days, with one twenty-four-hour break.

The first day was spent listening to disturbing reports from opposition politicians and election administrators about government interference and intimidation. The most credible information came from tough and intrepid women administrators. Three out of five senior government-appointed election officials in the Ternopil *oblast* had been dismissed on orders from Kiev because the government candidate, Viktor Yanukovych, had not received enough votes.

The election environment was darkening, but I was anxious to get back to the hotel. I spent a lot of time thinking about bed – my first real bed in three days. In the post-war Soviet period the Hotel Ternopil had been a spa for mid-level state, military, and party officials. Tourism was actively discouraged, because this area of the Ukraine bristled with westward-pointing ballistic missiles. This circumstance may explain why the hotel, including its window frames, was not built to international standards. Outside, the snow was driven by a howling gale, and within half an hour of my burrowing under the covers, three of my windows had blown open. I jammed them shut with bits of sock and climbed back into bed, only to watch the curtains billow at a 45-degree angle in front of the "closed" windows. I was huddled in bed wearing my fleecy, jeans and a scarf over my new Ukrainian pyjamas when the phone rang.

"Allo," said a silky voice, "my name eez Irena." I put the phone down and fell asleep.

The next day was the last before the elections. Zevile, my Lithuanian colleague, and I set off on a wide arc to the north to monitor the preparations. The blizzard was unabated, with visibility occasionally reduced

to about sixty metres. Sections of the road were swept clean by the wind, while long stretches were snow-covered. In this part of Ukraine there are few ploughs and no salt. In the autumn, trucks drop small cones of sand at intervals of approximately forty metres along one side of the highway wherever there is a gradient. With the arrival of snow or freezing rain the resident peasant emerges from home with a spade and hurls sand erratically across his or her section. This system does not offer a uniformly non-slip surface. I suggested to my colleague that we should snap on our seat belts. Hers was fine, but mine was broken. When I reported this to Miroslav, the driver, he showed no concern. The safety device was the icon of the local Virgin that was clipped below the rear-view mirror. The next day another Ternopil team vehicle slid on the icy road and crashed, requiring the medical evacuation of a German observer.

Perched upon a low hill at the top of our circuit was the splendid Holy Archimandrite of Pochaev, a monastery from the fourteenth century, built, according to legend, where holy men had seen "the footprint of the Mother of God." Its parade of gold onion domes, some with swirls of blue and green, glowed against the grey sky. A gilded gazebo sat on a cushion of snow in the courtyard between one large and one very small cathedral. We had been warned by the opposition that the abbot and his monks had been invoking both divine and secular powers to persuade the villagers to vote for Yanukovych. The monastery exerts powerful influence and collaborates closely with Kiev-appointed officials who support a political alliance with Russia. "Why the political connection?" we asked Ludmila, the interpreter, by this time swathed, like Zevile, in a skirt rented at the monastery gate. "Well," she explained, "the superior of the Metropolitan, the chief of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Kiev, is the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow. This man, the Patriarch, was a colonel in the KGB." We were shown a flyer, apparently produced by this alliance, instructing party workers to ensure a good turnout for Yanukovych. The monks ignored us.

November 21, election day, was a blur of snow and polling stations. We were reminded early on that bars and bottle stores do not close for elections. I was hailed by a tottering voter who kept insisting "*Je parle français*," until it was clear that this was the sum total of his vocabulary. Another, with equally inflammable breath, gold teeth, and handlebar moustaches assumed that anybody could understand Ukrainian if the

language was spoken at full bore. They and others belied the myth that vodka leaves no incriminating scent. In a hamlet almost literally in the shadow of the Pochaev monastery, a farmer took our interpreter aside as we trudged through the snow and failing light and explained hastily that the church and party officials had threatened the village with "reprisals" if the population did not vote heavily for Yanukovych. He then left, for fear of being spotted talking to us. Meanwhile, my toes were beginning to freeze, and I thought unhappily about my warm, waterproof hiking boots, somewhere, I hoped, in the British Airways lock-up in Kiev.

Henri passed on a report from the October election that all prisoners in a local maximum security prison had been beaten because a few had had the temerity to vote for opposition candidates. We agreed that this was a good reason to visit the prison. After lengthy processing and checking to ensure that we were not smuggling weapons, the warden, a colonel in this latest incarnation of the KGB, led us though a warren of iron gates to his office. The wooden panels shone with a recent coat of varnish, a rubber plant drooped in a dry pot, and a portrait of the country's national poet hung over the warden's desk. "This prison," the warden told us, "has 1,250 inmates, of whom 170 are incarcerated for life. Most will vote – but not the youngest."

"How young are the youngest?" I asked.

The answer was fourteen. In response to the next question, he admitted that they are not separated from adult convicts because there is "no space."

The prison was built in 1914 under the czars, and in the intervening years it had been run by some of the world's most barbarous police forces, including the Gestapo. Although it was meticulously clean, there was little sign that amenities had changed in ninety years. After making our way through a labyrinth of corridors and iron doors, we reached a narrow chamber where voting was taking place, and where we were joined by a general from the Ministry of the Interior, presumably alerted by the warden. A civilian polling officer assured us that "guided" voting was not taking place. The civilian suggested that we should take his views seriously, because he was a former inmate, incarcerated in this same prison for twenty years for a political crime. We left, subdued, and skeptical about the fairness of the process. But as we walked away, I thought that if nothing else, my colleague Zevile, with her striking figure, mink coat, and purple hair had for a short time brightened that grim and sunless place.

Holy Archimandrite of Pochaev.

Over six hundred party loyalists from the eastern region of Ukraine spread out through our province with instructions to boost the Yanukovych vote by fair means or foul. Two of them had tried to set fire to ballots in one polling station, an attempt that was thwarted only because their ignition system burned too slowly. Ternopil province was not a hotspot, but it had become a microcosm of the abuses contaminating the whole process. Manipulation on a colossal scale was taking place in the east.

Next day the government declared that Yanukovych had won. Simultaneously my organization and other observation missions reported massive fraud, calculating that roughly 1.3 million votes were added to the count between 8:00 P.M. and midnight. Most pundits and embassies in Kiev had expected that the election would be stolen. They also expected that a compliant population with no solid democratic tradition would allow the government to get away with it. That the government did not get away with it – then – constitutes the astonishing saga of the Orange Revolution, but that is another story, and a story with a sad ending and dim prospects, at least in the short term, for a brighter future.[1]

PALESTINE

Good Elections, Bad Judgments

In January 2006 I joined a one-flag (Canadian only) observer mission organized by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to monitor elections on the West Bank and Gaza.

At about six o'clock in the evening at the end of January, thirty-eight Canadians, all short-term observers for the Canadian Observer Mission to the Palestinian elections, arrived at Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. Earlier that day a suicide bomber blew himself up in the city, wounding ten people. However, the airport was calm, and with the help of an embassy official we scooted through Customs and Immigration and onto the bus that took us east into the hill country and to Ramallah, the Palestinian capital on the West Bank.

Our group gave meaning to the term "eclectic": we were a congenial collection of volunteers from all parts of the country, comprising lawyers, a family physician, an ex-colonel, a former helicopter pilot, professors, an artist, an automobile export entrepreneur, a former MP, an aircraft designer, graduate students, consultants, a fisheries commissioner, a professional election expert, CIDA officers, and diplomats, one active and two retired. There was a good gender mix and a range of ages from the late twenties to the mid-seventies. Almost everyone had either previous election experience or direct knowledge of the Middle East.

Briefings in Gatineau and at a Canadian Forces Base in Kingston included a simulated kidnapping. This was arranged to prepare us for the unexpected. A military briefer offered this cheerful epigram from Thomas Hardy on what an abducted person may expect: "More life may trickle out of a man through his thoughts than through a gaping wound." There were more briefings in Ramallah before we were deployed across the West Bank to Jericho, East Jerusalem, Hebron, Jenin, Bethlehem, and Nablus. Except for a few daytime excursions, Gaza had been scratched from our list as too volatile. Eleven persons had been killed there in the preceding few days. The Palestine veterans kept repeating that the situation is "complex," and advising us that if we think we are understanding it, we should dig deeper until we realize that we don't.

Bearing that injunction in mind, a few details may provide some context. Since the 1967 war, the Palestinian territories have been under Israeli occupation. In 1993, negotiations under the Oslo Accord gave Palestinians a limited degree of autonomy in the administration of the areas allocated to them. Since 2001, the beginning of the second Intifada, and up to the time of our visit, over 900 Israelis and over 3,500 Palestinians had been killed. In December 2005, a relatively quiet period, sixty had been killed in the West Bank. Over 150,000 Israelis had been established in fortified settlements in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, although those in Gaza were removed by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2005. Secure road links to the settlements, a vast network of Israeli Defence Force checkpoints, and the new concrete wall offer enhanced security for the Israelis and suffocate the Palestinian economy. As a consequence of policies under the British mandate, Israeli investment in universities, and particularly the schools set up by the UN refugee organization (UNRWA), education levels in Palestine, including those for women, exceed those of most countries in the Middle East. But there are few outlets for the skills and training that these educational opportunities have provided. Unemployment is very high and likely to increase as a result of the standoff between Hamas objectives (including the extinction of Israel) and the reactions of Western donors, who were expected to pull back from many programs.

My destination was Nablus (Sychem in Biblical times), a city of grim, overcrowded refugee camps, a centre of tension and periodic violence. It is beautifully situated, with tall sand-coloured buildings ascending steep hills on either side. Most of the villages in Samaria, the ancient province of

which Nablus is the centre, have been built on the crests of arid, stony hills. In many, the archeological remains reach back 3,000 years, but the ruins are neglected, rimmed with ramshackle cinder block houses, daubed with anti-Israel graffiti, and festooned with litter. And except for people like ourselves with special passes, the monuments are inaccessible. Palestine reeks with the stink of burning garbage. But not everything is bleak. Back in Nablus we passed a shop with a sign in English, "Arafat's Sweets." We stopped and had the finest baklava pastries I have eaten.

At a small resort on the Dead Sea, we bought ice cream from a young woman from the kibbutz nearby who had a pistol tucked into her waist. Because we wanted to say that we had done so, we plunged into the Dead Sea – and almost bounced. The water was incredibly buoyant, so much so that normal swimming strokes were impossible. Walking in the shallow water was slightly hazardous. People have been bathing at this place for thousands of years, but no one has cleared away the salt crystal-encrusted rocks on which we cut our feet. There was no sun and we emerged cold (it was January) and splattered with allegedly medicinal black mud.

Back in Nablus, the busy and deceptively normal street life was quickly shattered by the appearance of irregular militia groups. Twice in one day we encountered these men in dark clothes with no insignia, carrying an assortment of Kalashnikovs and shotguns. The atmosphere had been heated by a political murder near one of our polling stations the night before.

Given this, and the invariable irritations with checkpoints, the election itself was extraordinary. I have been to many elections in difficult settings and seldom have I observed one as professionally executed. In our polling stations there was a slight preponderance of female staff, and in some of them women were in charge, which was remarkably positive for an environment known for its Islamic militancy. Despite active campaigning outside the polling stations, there was unexpected civility within them, and in the usually chaotic press of voters immediately outside. In other words, the Palestinian Election Commission, supported by CIDA and by Canadian expertise, had reason to be proud of a first-class performance. Another consequence was that the Hamas victory was fair and square.

However, the concept of a Canada-only observer mission was not such a good idea. Stand-alone missions from whatever country, particularly when they are inextricably identified with the government of that

country, are problem-prone. Election missions must have credibility built on a cumulative track record if they are to be convincing in their endorsement or repudiation of an electoral process. Making judgments and recommendations that will be considered seriously by the country in question and by the international community requires a level of credibility that is very difficult for a single-flag mission to achieve. The National Democratic Institute, the Carter Center, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (all of which I have worked with) are all US-based, but are never uniquely composed of US citizens or even a majority of US citizens. National missions are susceptible to possessing political baggage that can compromise their essential credibility. It is not difficult to imagine what would happen if the Canadian prime minister or his foreign minister were perceived to be obviously partial to Israeli or, for that matter, Palestinian policy. Multilateral missions like those from the EU, OAS, and OECS are largely insulated from this predicament. In this case CIDA and the Canadian government succumbed to the temptation to look upon Canadian observer missions such as this one, and the mission in Ukraine, as opportunities to burnish the Canadian image both at home (especially in politically congenial constituencies) and abroad. We go down this road at our peril.

An example of the counter-productive instructions that can arise in such circumstances was the prohibition on contact with Hamas imposed by our government. Any observer mission that goes into an election environment subject to the proviso that it can have no substantive contact with one of the two principal contestants cannot be expected to be taken seriously. In very difficult and contentious election situations it is often precisely the ability of election observers to talk to all sides that promotes problem-solving.

A further complication was that some of the arrangements on the ground for the Canadian Observer Mission were not prudent. The day before the election, our regional team, together with other observers, was taken to a briefing in an Israeli Defense Force compound outside Nablus. A convoy of vehicles, each plastered with its respective observer identity, drove into the compound, where we were given an almost totally useless briefing by an Israeli colonel who was an expert at non-answers. Not only did this waste an entire morning, but, more seriously, it sent the wrong signal about our neutrality to the Palestinian authorities, who were

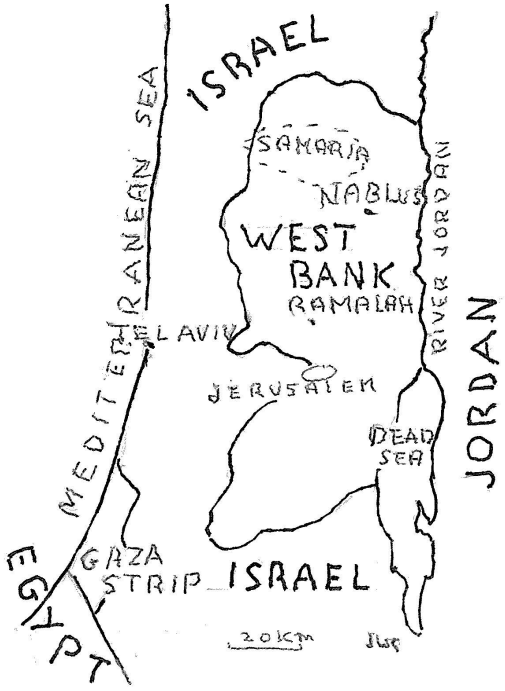
certainly aware of our destination. There was no balancing meeting with Palestinian officials. We embarked on election day with inadequate intelligence about what problems to expect, which party controlled the different sectors in the Nablus area, and where the "hot spots" might be located. In the event, this was not a problem as the election, with its unusually small number of incidents, was exemplary.

Getting to the polling stations was another matter. For some tangled reason relating to security, our drivers were from East Jerusalem, and had no familiarity with the Nablus area. In an environment where there are no detailed maps available, no street signs, and, apart from major highways, no directional information, this was a problem. Scouting the terrain prior to the election, we were perpetually getting lost. One afternoon we inadvertently drove into an Israeli settlement area. We turned around and were making our way back when we were overtaken and stopped by an armoured Israeli Humvee. In the end there was no problem (the car was papered with CIDA/Canada signs), but Ayat, our local interpreter, was terrified.

Ayat was a delightful young woman from Ramallah. When the need arose she was also enterprising. After one long day, much of it spent getting lost, we reached a remote village at the furthest end of our route. Public facilities are almost non-existent in rural Palestine, and our bladders were stretched. She got out of the car and knocked on the door of the most prosperous-looking house in the village. The woman of the house welcomed us into her home and to her bathroom. She introduced her family and served tea. On the following day, in a different village, an elderly woman invited us into her tiny confectionery for cookies and then into her more comfortable house. As we sipped her tea amid a jumble of small children, she told us with some pride that she had forty-four grandchildren. The Palestinians have few defenses, and a high birth rate is one of them – a tactic known elsewhere as *la revanche du berceau*.

Tragically, frustration takes other forms. Three brothers, all below the age of ten, were playing with a ball on a village street. Hanging from cords around their necks were miniature photographs of their "martyred" suicide bomber cousin. Conversation with the kids revealed that the pendants were being worn not just in sad remembrance, but with pride. To take the life of the innocent, including children, is horrifying and unconscionable, and to do so with pride, almost unimaginable. It was equally horrifying to

get inside the minds of these boys. There was no longer any place within their conceptual framework for innocence. If you were an Israeli, you were the natural enemy and therefore a target. Whatever your age or occupation, you shared the guilt for what had become of Palestine. Nothing I experienced on the West Bank was more troubling than this.



These kids and their parents, and others like them, represent a significant, fanatical, segment of the population. Yet, from admittedly brief observations, I had the impression that the majority of voters were not deliberately opting for terrorism, and that, like voters in this country, many were simply voting against a government and a system in which they had lost confidence. Dignity, identity, and the Hamas record of social service at the grass roots, as well as frustration with corruption and incompetence, were among the motivating factors.

Did they, in fact, elect a dark and implacable force that will lead the Palestinians and their neighbours into a deeper vortex of misery? Was penalizing the freshly elected consistent with our encouragement of a free election? Did the swift rejection of Hamas by Israel and Western donors undermine the pragmatists and reinforce the hard line within that movement? I don't know the answers to all or any of these questions. The Palestine veterans, who warned us we shouldn't expect to understand, need not have worried. The closer you look, the more distant your understanding becomes.[1]

NICARAGUA

The Jaguar Changes Some of Its Spots

Over the past decade I have travelled frequently to Central America on behalf of the Carter Center. The expeditions in this story were made following the completion of election work for Friends of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, a hemisphere-wide group created by former US President Jimmy Carter.

There was a young man from Nicaragua
Who smiled as he rode on a jaguar.
They returned from the ride
With the young man inside
And the smile on the face of the jaguar.

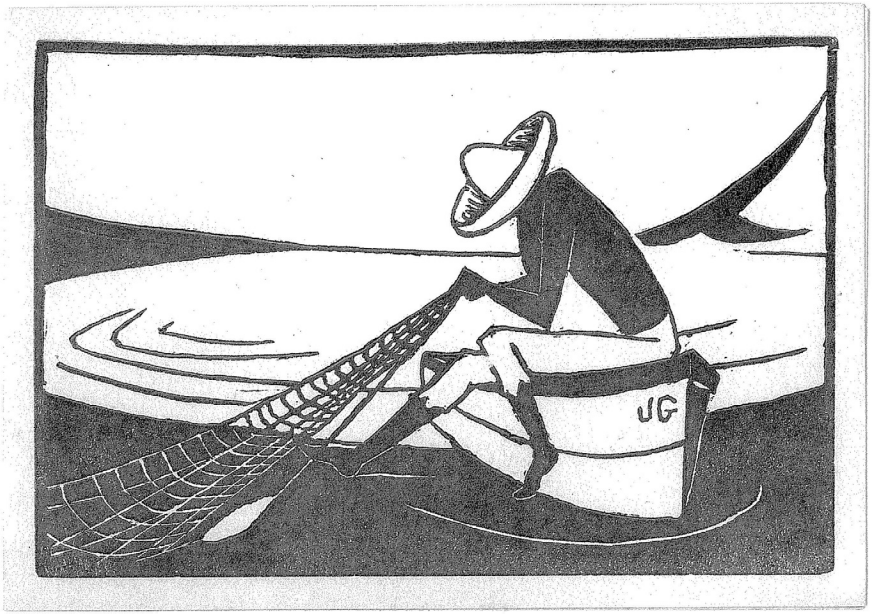
Anon[1]

Nicaragua is a bundle of grim, but sometimes entertaining, contradictions. The country is ruled by the former Sandinista commandante, Daniel Ortega, whose ambition is to become president for life, or at least for much longer than the constitution will currently allow. With a tropical mix of guile, good works and dirty tricks, he may achieve his goal. His latest venture is a project with a Hong Kong tycoon to drive a canal with twice the capacity of the nearby Panama Canal across his part of the isthmus.

Digging has begun, and if completed, the geopolitical consequences will be huge and the environmental consequences not yet predictable. Its opponents call it a '*monstruosidad*'. Others call it perplexing. Completion would almost certainly require at least tacit financial approval by China, yet the Nicaraguan government is one of only a handful on the planet that still recognizes Taiwan.

With few exceptions the governments that have marked Nicaragua's institutional character have been piratical. After Haiti it is the most impoverished country in the hemisphere. Rhetorically, it's well out on the left and continues to move away from democratic norms and the civil rights of its citizens. At the same time it is open to business, especially big business. The International Monetary Fund regards Nicaragua's macro-economic policies as reassuringly conservative. Central America, together with Mexico, is the heartland for narcotics-fuelled organized crime, with a staggering daily toll of violent death. Yet Nicaragua is less corrupt and gang-infested and much less violent than its neighbours. In large part this is because it has the best and least corrupt army and police force in Central America.

With the dust still thick in the air from the traumatic 2011 elections, I took two days to explore some obscure parts of the Pacific coast. Setting off with my taxi driver, the laconic and in this regard un-Nicaraguan Euclido, and his fifteen-year-old Corolla, our first destination was the Chocoyero–El Brujo Nature Reserve, a wildlife refuge. We drove for an hour and then turned off onto a road that would not normally be recommended for elderly Toyotas. We bumped along for about six kilometres until the road stopped in front of a plain wooden building with a courtyard where a birding class was in progress. For a small fee I hired Andres, a local guide. As we walked along the forest path, he explained that I had chosen the wrong time of day to see the birds. Dawn or late afternoon were better times, but, because there was cloud cover, we might be lucky. Andres directed my eyes to a motmot, whose long tail feathers culminated in tufts of blue, cuckoos, guans, and other birds almost invisible in the foliage. We briefly sighted the iridescent blue wings of a morpho butterfly. The path ended at a steep cliff face over which fell a thin stream of water. Swooping over the water was a flock of green parakeets. As we walked back to the car we heard the baritone ululations of a howler monkey. A labba or capybara,



a thirty-pound member of the rodent family, jogged across our path. No jaguars or quetzals, but this was a good start to the day.

"What's next?" asked the morose Euclido. Waving my hands and feeling like Balboa,[2] five hundred years before, I said, "Let's go to the Pacific." I was keen to have a swim, a body surf, and fresh fish for dinner. It wasn't far. In an hour and a half we arrived in the small fishing village of La Boquita with its long beach of dark volcanic sand. However, a thundering surf meant no swimming and certainly no body surfing. Instead I settled for an early supper with Euclido at one of the thatched, sand-floored restaurants. We had just sat down when the wash from a huge wave flooded the restaurant, soaking my shoes and pant cuffs. We shifted our table further inland, and eventually our ceviche, beer, and huge grilled snapper appeared. Euclido showed signs of mellowing.

After dinner I strolled along the beach. The roar of the surf had softened, and I watched a group of fishermen preparing to launch their boat. Using palm trunks as rollers and picking the exact moment between the waves, they pushed their open boat into the surf, jumped in, and cranked the outboard. Aboard were hundreds of lines with hooks, and buckets of

bait. They would fish all night and truck their catch into Managua in the morning.

It was a seductive place, but the election was still buzzing in my head. Nicaragua was a pernicious model of abusing judicial, constitutional, and electoral processes and getting away with it.

The OAS was also taking a hit. On election morning, Dante Caputo,[3] head of the OAS observation mission, was distressed to learn that about one-fifth of his observers had been denied access to polling stations. As this was a blatant violation of the rules, Caputo convened a press conference to express his alarm about non-compliance by the electoral authorities. They eventually responded by opening all polling stations to OAS observation, but by then the news was out that this was a contaminated election. Ortega had won, but the exclusion of the observers for several hours, together with a host of other irregularities, including the exclusion of six thousand domestic observers, opened the question of whether he had really won a key two-thirds majority in the legislature.

That evening José Miquel Insulza, the OAS secretary general, spoke to Ortega by phone from Washington. The following morning, he issued a communiqué congratulating Nicaragua – saying that "democracy and peace took a step forward." We were astonished.[4] I spoke to Luis Yanes, the head of the EU delegation. He was equally astonished. Why would the secretary general basically accept the Sandinista version and undercut his mission on the ground?

Possibly because he was concerned that Ortega, who denigrates the OAS and frets about American influence, might seize the excuse of an unfavorable OAS report to withdraw his county from the organization – a precedent that might be followed by other countries on the radical left – most of whom claim to be more politically comfortable with CELAC – the new hemispheric organization that excludes both the US and Canada.

If there are lessons in this episode, one is that no international organization should undertake an electoral observation in a country to which in some important respect it is hostage. Another is that the hemispheric community should not have stood aside allowing the potentially infectious precedent of democratic backsliding to go unchallenged.

On the way back from La Boquita we were stopped at a police checkpoint. Euclido and I both grumbled. However, we were spared a lengthy delay after Euclido paid a small bribe. He explained that checkpoints were the principal means by which the rural police supplemented their miserable salaries.

The next day Euclido was unavailable and, in any event, I was looking for a more cheerful companion. I hailed a taxi on the main square. It was a Honda of about the same vintage as Euclid's. I asked the driver if he could take me to Poneloya, a small town about two and a half hours away on Nicaragua's Pacific coast.

"*Si, Señor*," the driver replied briskly, pleased at the prospect of a windfall long-distance fare.

"Do you know Poneloya?"

A pause, and "*Absolutamente*."

We negotiated a fare and set off. I had chosen Poneloya for my last free day because it is almost unknown to international tourism, is within a few hours drive of Managua, and I had never been there. The previous day when I told my friend David that Poneloya was my choice, he told me I was crazy. "It's a crummy down-market place, and the toilets don't work." David had lived for fifteen years in Nicaragua. I rejected his advice to travel south to a trendy resort area, but my confidence had been shaken.

Ambrosio, the driver, and I headed north. Conversation was desultory – not a big improvement on Euclido. He talked about his family and was less interested than I was in the country's perplexing politics.

The first crisis of our expedition arose when Ambrosio got lost in Leon, a city on our route. Fortunately it is not a bad place to be lost in – sleepy, baked a smoky yellow by the sun, and, like most of Nicaragua, almost totally devoid of road signs. Leon is a university town, and although the periphery is frowzy, the centre, with churches and other buildings dating from the seventeenth century, is beautiful. After asking at least four people for directions, we eventually found the road to Poneloya.

When we arrived it became clear that David, unlike Ambrosio, had been there. Poneloya's main street, in fact virtually the only one, ran between decaying cement and cinder-block houses, some of which were beach hotels. My guidebook described several. One was the Hotel Lacayo, which featured "sagging beds, shared bath and a dilapidated balcony overlooking the ocean." The price was five dollars a night. The blurb added, "Don't mind

the bats – they eat the mosquitoes." For another thirty dollars you could be air-conditioned in Poneloya's most "romantic" and expensive hotel. As far as I could see, all the hotels were empty. Worse, the few restaurants were closed. It was midweek, and nothing much happened in Poneloya except on weekends and holidays. Discouraged, we motored on to the end of town, climbed a hill, and wound down the far side, where a line of very shaggy thatched bars and restaurants looked out over a river basin that opened onto the Pacific. Here at least there were a few cars and motorcycles.

We stopped at the Club Chechi, where there were customers and a woman leaning over a wood fire. I asked if she was still serving lunch.

Big smile. "Yes, indeed. What would you like?" She removed the lid from an ice box and showed us half a dozen fish that had been taken out of the water early that morning by the small boat moored at the foot of the

restaurant. Ambrosio only wanted soup. I ordered a fish and shellfish soup for both of us and a medium-sized *pargo* (snapper) for myself.

We climbed a spindly staircase to our table, which stood on a balcony overlooking the river, and more distantly the ocean. The restaurant's ambience was artisanal grunge. There were no real windows and hence no glass. The floor was a charcoal-coloured clay composed of a sort of volcanic porridge and soot. The toilet arrangements were on the dark side of basic, but the view over the water, and most especially the food, more than compensated. The fish soup was one of the finest I have eaten, and the snapper, filleted and fried, was sublime. We drank the local beer.

The next part of my program was a swim in the ocean. We drove about a kilometre from Club Chechi and parked close to some fishermen who were repairing their nets. The beach was lovely, with deep beige sand, and a heavy scattering of shells above the tide line. Huge rollers crashed about a hundred yards off shore. There were no swimmers and no warning signs. I asked a young woman who was collecting shells if it was safe to swim. She raised her head, considered the question, said, "Yes and no," and returned to her shells. When I stepped into the water I could feel the current on my legs, so I stayed in the shallows. I walked to the point where the river opened to the ocean, from which I could see the tiny village of thatch and bamboo where we had lunched. It was huddled by a bend in the river and looked frozen in time.

Back at the car, the fishermen said that I could use water from their well to wash the sand from my feet. The well pump was operated by a bicycle wheel contraption. Ambrosio turned the wheel and the water gushed out. It was while washing my feet that I noticed that the cover that capped the fisherman's well was an old metal sign with the faded lettering still visible: "Danger. Strong Maritime Currents."

Except for the cell-phone calls from Ambrosio's wife and many relations, the return drive was lovely. To the east, looming above Lake Xolatlan, was the almost perfect cone of the Zero Negro volcano. Its flanks glowed pink in the late afternoon sun, and we were favoured with a plume of white smoke from one of its infrequent mini-eruptions. The sun set, and the western sky was so drenched in vivid apricot that it looked like a cheap postcard.

Still some distance from the capital, we stopped at a thatched roadside *quesillo* bar, dimly lit from within. Outside were scooters, bicycles, and a

horse hitched to a cart with a broken wheel. Ambrosio explained, "Señor, the *quesillo* is one of Nicaragua's famous delicacies. You should try it." The Nicaraguan *quesillo* consists of mushy cheese mixed with sliced raw onion, rolled in a tortilla, and topped with thick fresh cream. Like fermented mare's milk in Kyrgyzstan, it is an acquired taste.

EL SALVADOR

Off the Beaten Track

The purpose of my visit to El Salvador in 2011 was to attend the Annual General Assembly of the Organization of American States on behalf of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas. Like the trips described in the two preceding chapters, the expedition described below was initiated after the meetings were over. This visit also kindled memories of earlier experiences of El Salvador, when the country was mired in civil war.

After Belize, El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America. Its only sea frontage is on the Pacific, running in a saw-tooth coastline from Nicaragua to Guatemala. At the conclusion of work in San Salvador, the capital, it was my plan to spend several days on this coast.

The portents, however, were not all good. Before leaving the capital I had to deal with the consequences of an "official" dinner I had attended the previous night. The pharmacist dispensed powerful substances guaranteed to set concrete in my internal regions, warning me against gin and almost everything else, with the exception of rice and grilled fish.

Pharmaceutically fortified, I set off for the coast with my newly acquired taxi driver. "Benedicto," I said, looking at the strange configuration in front of me, "what happened to the dashboard?"

"Ah, Señor, it is because this was originally a right-hand drive car."

It was a beautiful day and we made good time, but after covering the specified distance along the coast road, we could not find the hotel. It had been awarded three stars by *Frommer's Guide*, which said prophetically, "This is the place to stay if you want an adventurous vacation." Eventually a local resident told us that we had to look for a gate bearing the sign "*Propriedad Privado*." Why, I wondered, would the entrance to a prominent hotel be so peculiarly discreet? The gate was opened by Fina, the cook. There were no other signs of life in this small hotel on a cliff top overlooking the Pacific. I was the only guest, Fina the only staff member. But that was OK. It was gorgeous.

I climbed down steep steps to the base of the cliff, where a natural basin had been extended and protected by a low wall. At high tide the rollers would crash against the wall, pitching huge curtains of spray over the pool and delivering a novel aquatic experience. Back at the top of the cliff, I settled into my hammock with a book and a rum and coconut water.

The problems began when I went into my room to shower before dinner. The power was off. This meant no light, no air conditioning, no water, and, I soon discovered, no dinner. Fina and I searched for candles and flashlights in the remains of twilight. No luck. Joaquin, the night watchman, arrived, but he had no flashlight. He pointed me in the direction of a nearby hotel where there might be a generator and supper. Alas, neither were available. However, someone offered me a lift in a truck to the nearest restaurant that had power. I clambered aboard and clung to the top of the cab while the truck lumbered up, down, and around the corrugations of the coast road. There were about eight of us in the back, mostly hotel staff. The man beside me said that there would be nothing open until we reached La Libertad, and something about the road being dangerous at night.

"Dangerous from the cars and trucks?" I asked.

"No," he said.

I thought about the book I had been reading on crime in El Salvador, where the homicide rate is the third highest on the globe, and my guide book, which described La Libertad as a town with "a reputation for high crime." It was probably not a good idea to let hunger trump common sense. Ahead of us were flashing lights and police. A large articulated truck had crashed, snapping off a hydro pole, causing the blackout.

There were lights in La Libertad, dimly illuminating an unlovely town. I was dropped off at a seafood restaurant built onto a pier, and arrangements were made for a ride back to my hotel. I ordered a grilled dorado. Service was slow, and by the time the meal arrived my driver was waiting. The fish was enormous, its head and tail overhanging the plate. I explained to the waiter that I would pay, but had to leave. He wrapped the fish in aluminum foil and gave me two candles. Back at the hotel, Joaquin enjoyed most of the fish while I skinny-dipped in the freshwater pool. With one candle, a crescent moon, and no other guests, this was not a problem. Apart from the crump of the surf against the cliff below, it was also incredibly peaceful.

The quiet and the conversation in the back of the truck set my mind back to 1983, when the country was less quiet. It had been my first visit to El Salvador, and my friend Chips Filleul, our ambassador,[1] had arranged for us to meet Thomas Pickering, the American ambassador, at his embassy. The war in El Salvador between the government, supported by the United States, and the Faribundo Marti revolutionaries (FMLN), supported by Cuba, Nicaragua, and by extension, the Soviet Union, was in full spate. Both sides were responsible for war crimes, but the atrocities on the left were no match for those on the right. The guerrillas lacked air power, with the result that they were unable to hold any town, mountainside, or other space permanently. But the peasantry and the urban poor were largely on their side, and this enabled the FMLN to move easily about the country. At the time of my visit, there were frequent attacks against army barracks and buildings in the capital, against the US embassy, and occasionally against the Hotel Presidente, where Chips and I were staying. The US embassy has now been replaced by an enormous walled monster on the edge of town, but at that time it was in the heart of the capital. It was the most visibly embattled embassy I have ever seen. The perimeter walls were pockmarked by rocket and mortar fire. When Chips and I arrived, it was protected by two companies of Salvadoran troops, while inside there must have been forty well-armed US marines. Although the circumstances were less dramatic, the scene reminded me of photographs of the siege of Western legations in Peking during the Boxer Rising of 1900.

We sat down with Pickering to hear a considerably more candid and even-handed socio-political analysis of the situation in El Salvador than the bald spin presented by the Reagan administration.[2] Discussion

continued over lunch at the ambassador's residence, but the journey from the chancery to the residence was more memorable than the ensuing conversation. Chips travelled with Pickering and a bodyguard in the armoured limousine, while I was in the second of two armoured vans. The convoy travelled at speed, but respected traffic signals. When we stopped, the lead van swung diagonally in front of the ambassador's car, while mine braked on the opposite diagonal behind the limousine. I was in the back of the van with two bodyguards who were armed with submachine guns. The bulletproof windows had three ports through which the guns could be fired.

At Pickering's well-fortified residence we talked about the people who were attempting, at enormous risk, to find a few moderately sane individuals on both sides who were prepared to talk about ending the conflict. One of the most significant of the intermediaries was Father Ignacio Ellacuria. Born in Spain, he was a Jesuit philosopher, a Salvadoran citizen, and the rector of the Catholic University. More importantly, he knew many of the FMLN leaders and had earned their respect. He was instrumental in securing the release of the daughter of the president, who had been kidnapped by the FMLN.

On this occasion and on many subsequent visits to El Salvador over the next five years I made a point of calling on Father Ellacuria. More than anyone else, he helped me toward an understanding of this bloody conflict and its roots. By 1988, the time of my last visit to El Salvador, his name had advanced to a top spot on the army's enemies list – and we had become friends. In a conversation in the Carter Center in Atlanta almost thirty years later, a former guerilla commandate, Joaquin Villalobos, and I discovered that we had both enjoyed a friendship with Father Ellacuria over roughly the same timespan – in Villalobo's case the relationship was infinitely more meaningful. He had been the principal FMLN interlocutor with Father Ellacuria in peace negotiations with the Salvadoran government. A target of the Salvadoran army and the CIA, he always carried two pistols, one of them in his hat. Interviewed after the war, he remarked, "*No hay peor cosa que matarse por ideas*." (There is nothing worse than to kill for ideas.)[3]

I was in Caracas when I learned of Father Ellacuria's assassination. On November 16, 1989, troops of the American-trained Atlacatl Battalion, a counter-insurgency unit, entered the university campus and executed

Ellacuria and five of his Jesuit colleagues. Two witnesses, the rector's housekeeper and her fifteen-year-old daughter, were also shot. Subsequent investigation by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights disclosed that senior officers of the army had been implicated. Eventually two officers were jailed, but later released under an amnesty agreement.

If any good came from this crime, it was that international outrage, including widespread condemnation in the United States, accelerated the push toward peace negotiations. But "good" was a long time coming. Archbishop Oscar Romero, another outspoken advocate of human rights, had been murdered by an army death squad while conducting mass, nine blood-soaked years before the murder of Ellacuria and his companions. The United Nations-sponsored peace agreement was finally signed in February 1992. The war had come to an end. However, El Salvador soon descended into a different kind of mess. In the first decade of this century the blood spilled by violent crime and "drugs and thugs" gang wars exceeded the casualties of the civil war.

Enough gloomy reflections. The next night the hotel was air-conditioned, and the morning after, I ordered a car to take me to the airport. The car turned out to be a van with a handicap sticker. Once inside I realized that the sticker was not a precaution taken for potentially mobility-impaired passengers, but belonged to the driver, Miguel, a one-legged civil war survivor, who took me safely to the airport.

HAITI

Goudau-Goudau: Return to Haiti

My last visit to Haiti was in December 2010, a year after the earthquake, and a week after a deeply flawed election had plunged the country into another major political crisis. The purpose of the visit was to learn what, if anything, the international community might do beyond what it was already doing to help prevent further unraveling of the country. The team represented Jimmy Carter's Friends of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, and was to have been led by Joe Clark. Unfortunately, civil disorders closed the airport, and Mr. Clark was unable to join us. Almost no story in Haiti follows a straight line. This one has a switchback course.

"Goudau-Goudau" is the onomatopoetic Creole word for the deep rumbling that signals the approach of an earthquake. Unsurprisingly, Haitians remain sensitive to that sound. In Port-au-Prince and in a wide arc surrounding the epicentre, there was still so much rubble and dislocation that you would think that our hemisphere's most devastating natural disaster occurred only weeks, not, in fact, over a year before our visit.

Our small team[1] was in Haiti for eight days, and we eventually did most of the things we were supposed to do, but this was not easy. The night of our arrival, rioting broke out in Port-au-Prince and around the country. Most of the demonstrators were protesting widespread fraud in the recent elections. A few took advantage of the general disorder to pursue personal

vendettas and criminal opportunities. The result was that the capital and much of the country were paralyzed. Port-au-Prince must be the most easily barricaded city on earth. With few exceptions, the streets are narrow and strewn with rubble. Add a tire, light it, and, if it's handy, throw in the carcass of an old car, and presto! you have stopped all drivers save a few enterprising motorcyclists.

The team was marooned in the Hotel Karibe for several days. If you recall the casting and circumstances of the old Humphrey Bogart film *Key Largo*, you will understand the change in social chemistry that takes place in a hotel when none of the guests can leave: some become bitchier, some more nervous, and most, in our case, more convivial. We were a mixed bag: journalists, staff members from international organizations, a Dutch builder, a Haitian "rubble removal" entrepreneur, and several Spaniards who, we discovered, were part of the political organization largely responsible for paralyzing the city and for masterminding the political campaign of Martelly, the successful presidential candidate. The hotel did not run out of rum or food, although the latter was all beginning to taste the same after the second day.

Before long most of us were getting cabin fever. In our case, although the embassy kept telling us not to move, we headed out on our appointments as soon as our driver gave us a "more or less" all-clear. There were still problems and the occasional road blockade. I was told by a pair of foreign journalists that they had been able to navigate the barricades by showing press credentials. I instructed our driver to make two placards reading "*Presse Canadienne*" for the front and rear windows of our battered jeep. If asked by the demonstrators at a barricade "*Quelle Presse Canadienne*?" I would reply, "*Le Manor Park Chronicle*," the community paper I often write for. Unfortunately, I never had to give this explanation.

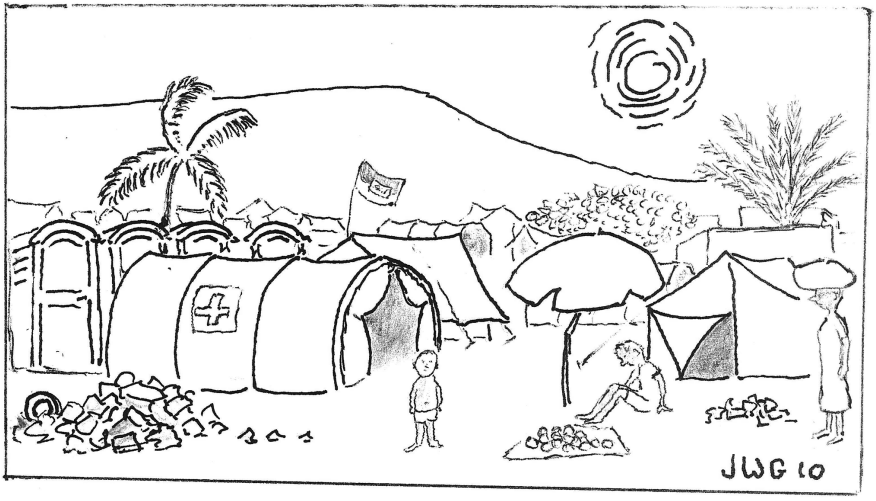
The rioting died down. It seemed that there were few tires left to burn. One interview that we missed was with a leader of the Vodou religion. We were anxious to learn more about Vodou's role as "escape," and the teaching of fatalism (another barrier to change), as well as to discover how influential *houngans* (priests) might facilitate reconciliation. However, we were able to resume most of our program, and were exposed to the bewildering pressures and contradictions involved in "helping" Haiti.

The United Nations, the donor nations and organizations, and Bill Clinton, who co-chairs the rehabilitation commission, were all regularly

chastised for the country's painfully slow recovery and the fact that over 200,000 Haitians still lived in tent cities. Some senior officials admitted mistakes, but of course the reaction time of international bureaucracies is slow, and collisions among these organizations are common. The international community's relationship with the Haitian government and with Haitians generally was suffering from fatigue and frustration.

Scapegoating the internationals had been for many years a popular and perhaps inevitable Haitian pastime. This time it was different. An already fragile relationship was shattered by the revelation that post-earthquake Haiti had been infected with cholera by Nepalese troops working for the United Nations. Since the 2010 outbreak, approximately 6 percent of the population has been infected and thousands have died. A major indictment, and one of the worst the UN has had to bear in this century, but I believe that it is wrong to argue (as some do) that most of the blame for Haiti's appalling ongoing misery can be placed at the door of the international community. Few issues are debated with such lively and at times intolerant passion as who or what accounts for Haiti's chronic chaos and poverty. Writing in the June 6, 2013 *New York Review of Books*, the novelist Mischa Berlinski concludes, "If you believe, as I do, that the presence of vast numbers of culturally insensitive, publicity seeking, bumbling, profiteering foreigners prevents Haiti's descent into some greater disaster, then you will accept some of the corruption as a necessary price of doing business, of alleviating still greater suffering."

Too harsh? Probably. And he does no justice to a number of remarkable and dedicated people, some of whom, including a friend, were killed in the earthquake. But the point that the positive outweighs the negative is fair. The misery of millions would have been beyond imagining if the donor countries and donor organizations had not moved massively to provide disaster relief. Take one example. Tents, blankets, towels, medicines, and all the paraphernalia of emergency relief were shipped in. Tent cities to shelter over a million refugees sprouted like mushrooms in and around Port-au-Prince and other urban areas. Canvas towns need toilets: thousands of portable toilets were sent by USAID, Catholic Relief, and other organizations. However, these would have become instant bogs of human waste and lethal disease if they had not been cleared and cleaned according to a regular timetable – and not just for a month, but for the years it is taking to clear the rubble and build new homes. Haitians drove



the trucks and performed the mucky jobs, but had neither the funds nor the skills to install the infrastructure according to the standards required by basic hygiene.

Our conversations about what was wrong moved in many directions. The country was preparing for a second round of elections to determine the presidency. Exposure to democratic governance had been very uneven, and the setting for the second round was not promising. Pursuing interviews in the interior, we spoke to two powerful political chieftains, one living in a tent beside his partially collapsed mansion and the other in an intact and splendid villa. We learned afterwards that both men apparently ran drug trafficking operations. We learned that all major political parties are beholden, at least in part, to criminal organizations for resources and local intelligence. The finalists in the runoff for president were a university teacher (and grandmother), a political lightweight selected by the outgoing president and his party as someone unlikely to rock the president's boat with investigations, and a pop star celebrated in the past for dropping his pants and mooning his audiences. The pop star, Michel Martelly, won.

Another issue is the almost hopeless legal swamp of land tenure. The corruption of the Haitian legislature has meant that expropriation of land to create new towns is blocked. Poor families attempting to assert claims to small parcels of land stand little chance when judges are easily bought.

But here again, blame comes too easily, and Haitian shortcomings are only part of the answer. Another complication was the collapse of the government building in Port-au-Prince that held the few existing land records.

Of course, there are other very poor countries, and many of them are showing improvement. Why isn't this happening in Haiti? There is no consensus among scholars, but setting aside the role of natural disasters (divinely inspired, according to the evangelist Pat Robertson, to punish those whose ancestors made a pact with the devil), a malignant history has conspired against national progress. Few countries on earth can have had their independence so blighted at birth. Its population ravaged by war and disease, its plantations and wharfs destroyed, and its forests cut to build French warships. Haiti was forced by France to pay crippling reparations for 127 years. It also had the colossal misfortune to have the United States as a neighbour. The slave-owning United States could not abide the emergence of a liberated slave state off the Florida coast, and imposed a trade embargo. Ongoing racial antagonism maintained this policy for almost fifty years beyond the civil war. From having been the most prosperous territory in the entire hemisphere in the eighteenth century.

One of our conversations was with the correspondent for *Le Monde*, an astute, well-connected journalist who had been in and out of Haiti for thirty years. Asked if he could see any potentially good exits from the crisis, he replied crisply, "*Pas de sortie*."

Moving through this strange, at times mystical and disfigured physical kaleidoscope was always an adventure. Because it was sufficiently remote from the capital to have a distinctive political dynamic, we set off for Les Cayes, a mid-sized town near the extremity of a long finger of land that stretches westward below Cuba's Oriente province. We were still in the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, in the wretched garbage-clogged suburb of Carrefour, when the driver's cell phone rang. The customs house and other buildings in Les Cayes were on fire, and there was a report that the local UN military detachment had been shot up. We switched destinations to Jacmel – along the same road initially, but closer and less troubled. Travelling south on this road we passed very close to the epicentre of the earthquake. The asphalt was split as though with a pie knife. Cyril, our driver, expertly navigated past the crevasses. When we came back in the dark, the same road was crowded with ancient, badly- or unlit trucks loaded with fruit or bags of charcoal, "*tap-taps*," the gloriously hand-painted

buses jammed with people, and the occasional bullock cart. Cyril drove like a maniac, but a skilled maniac with lightning reflexes.

Our last drive with Cyril was to the airport, where a car, as usual stuffed with passengers, shot out of a side road directly into our path. Cyril braked, twisted, and barely squeezed past the vehicle. He stopped long enough to shout at the driver, "You son of a misbegotten goat, if you had been killed, I would still have picked you up and beaten the **** out of you!" It sounded better in the original Creole.

Lou Quinn: A Profile

In these travels I met a host of remarkable people, and it is, of course, getting to know the good, the bad, the mischievous, and the fascinating that is most rewarding. I have drawn outlines of many, but they are at best thumbnail sketches. Before drawing the volume to a close with a scattering of final observations, I offer a brief close-up of just one member of this cast, my friend Lou Quinn.

The day after Father Quinn died in a Florida hospital in 2007, the father superior of the Scarboro Missions, a former nun, a cousin, and I met with his cardiac surgeon. Long acquainted with Lou, his wonky heart, his Parkinson's, his discs, and his other afflictions, the distinguished surgeon grumbled that this had not been a "compliant" patient, and then repeated what he had said to his medical team: "This is probably as close as any of us will get to a Mother Teresa."

This view was widely shared in the Dominican Republic, whose people Father Quinn had served for more than half a century. President Fernandez decreed a day of national mourning, and all flags on government buildings across the country were lowered to half-mast. Along with several thousand grieving Dominicans, the president attended the funeral held in Father Quinn's parish, the mountain town of San Jose de Ocoa. So did the previous president, with whom Lou and his parishioners had enjoyed a more materially beneficial relationship. But the ex-president was

not seated on the specially constructed VIP platform, as he was not on speaking terms with the incumbent.

In his eulogy, the diocesan bishop spoke of the many things that Lou had done and of the many things that he had unsuccessfully urged the government to do. One of these was the construction of a solid all-weather road running down the mountains and linking Ocoa to the country's east–west highway, for which Lou had long campaigned. Six days after the funeral, the tropical storm Noel devastated the Ocoa valley. The town and the surrounding villages were isolated when flood waters and mudslides sheered away large sections of the road, the need for whose reconstruction the government had ignored.

I met Lou in 1961, a few months before the assassination of the dictator, Generalissimo Trujillo. It was my job as vice-consul in the tiny Canadian embassy to offer some sort of protection to members of Canadian religious orders who were being harassed and threatened by the secret police. As explained in an early chapter on the Dominican Republic, there was nothing that I could really do except visit and show the flag. I am neither Catholic nor especially religious, but my meeting with Lou was the beginning of a forty-seven-year friendship. Helping to sustain the relationship was a thin stream of limericks and risqué humour.

Lou's mettle was tested almost immediately after his arrival in the Dominican Republic, ruled at the time by the megalomaniacal dictator, who decreed that it was all right to worship God as long as the "Benefactor" was at least equally venerated. This arrangement did not fit Quinn's temperament, and his *lèse majesté* was soon reported by the spies assigned to his church; hence my visit. He survived, but Father Arthur McKinnon, his equally outspoken friend and former assistant curate, did not. McKinnon was murdered in the tumultuous period that followed the dictator's assassination.

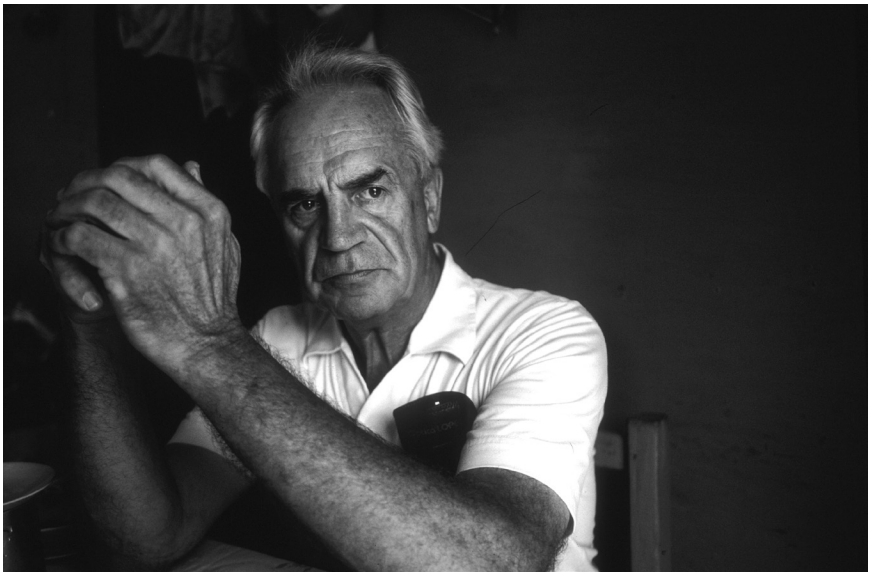
Educated in Toronto, Lou was ordained in 1952 as a priest of the Toronto-based Scarboro Foreign Mission Society, and left almost immediately for the Dominican Republic. Appointed to Ocoa, he found a widely scattered community comprised mostly of *campesinos* leading lives of harsh subsistence. Access to the market town was by a tangle of narrow mountain trails for horse and donkey. A first challenge was to build roads.

A gifted organizer and ingenious fundraiser, he cajoled money and equipment from the Dominican government, mining companies,

charities, and international organizations, including CIDA. As a result of his work with the local development organization that had been founded by his predecessor, 600 kilometres of dirt roads were carved, 69 schools were built, wells were dug, clinics were set up, over 2,000 houses with cement floors and foundations were erected, millions of trees were planted, a small hydro dam was installed, hygienically designed latrines in pastel fibreglass were distributed, irrigation pipes were laid out, agricultural counsel was provided, and cottage industries for cigar boxes, furniture, and jewellery were established. Work on many of these projects continues to be joined each summer by hundreds of students and adults from the Toronto and Hamilton areas.

I saw more of Lou during my visits as non-resident ambassador to the Dominican Republic, and was occasionally able to inflate my leverage on his behalf. On two occasions I persuaded the naval high command in Ottawa to allow Canadian charitable organizations supporting both Lou and the Grey Sisters at the eastern end of the island to take advantage of the visits of Canadian warships to the Caribbean. An assortment of building materials, irrigation equipment, dental chairs, and an old ambulance were carried as deck cargo from Halifax to the Santo Domingo docks, where Lou's almost mystical authority spirited the supplies intact past some of the Caribbean's most notoriously corrupt customs officers. On both occasions Lou invited the ships' officers and men to Ocoa. Toiling in the sun on their free time, the sailors dug foundations, poured cement, and laid irrigation pipes. After work, Lou provided fried chicken and beer. A unilingual Spanish children's choir trained by him sang "O Canada" in English and in French to the astonished sailors.

Gradually the lives of thousands of people were profoundly transformed – and inevitably feathers were ruffled. Concern in high places that his priorities were misplaced led to an order for his removal from the parish. The conservative church hierarchy was troubled that too much time devoted to the quality of life of the people meant not enough time for their souls. However, the people's reaction surprised the cardinal and his associates. After massive demonstrations, the order was rescinded. Devout, but possessed of a mischievous sense of humour, Lou once complained to me over the telephone that what he had most in common with Pope John Paul was Parkinson's. In the end, his integrity and his extraordinary achievements won the hearts of nearly everyone. In 2006 he received a



Father Lou Quinn OC, courtesy of Scarboro Missions.

high decoration from the same Pope. A year before, the National Congress had formally declared him to be "Protector" of the Province of San Jose de Ocoa. Six months after his death the municipal department was renamed "Padre Louis Quinn."

Nicknamed "Guyacan," after the country's strongest hardwood, he was for many years as tough physically as he was in determination. It was often Lou who drove the bulldozer on the precipitous sections of mountain roads. Inspired by the teaching to love both neighbour and enemy, he struggled, often with difficulty, to follow that canon. A fearless advocate for his parishioners, he once challenged a burly policeman to an arm-wrestling competition. If Quinn won, the policeman would liberate an innocent teenager from the local jail, crowded with brutal villains. Quinn won.

Belligerent with rogues, blasphemous when thwarted, Quinn could charm the whiskers off a cat. An alumnus of St. Michael's Choir in Toronto, he sang with a mellow baritone, sometimes accompanying himself in his own compositions on the guitar.

Twenty years ago, I put it to Father Quinn that he might be a candidate for the Order of Canada.

"Why would I want that?" he growled.

"Because, you old rascal, it will help you raise money in Canada."

"Ah," said Quinn. He subsequently became a member of the order.

I don't recall what is etched on Lou's gravestone on the floor of his church, but it could not be much better than this passage from Beryl Markham's extraordinary memoir, *West with the Night*:

"If a man has any greatness in him, it comes to light, not in one flamboyant hour, but in the ledger of his daily work." [2]