

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting of the President and President-elect
Alfredo Cristiani of El Salvador

PARTICIPANTS: The President
James Baker, Secretary of State
John Sununu, Chief of Staff
Marlin Fitzwater, Assistant to the President
and Press Secretary
Robert Gates, Deputy Assistant to the
President for National Security Affairs
Bernard Aronson, Assistant Secretary of State
for Inter-American Affairs Designate
William Walker, Ambassador to El Salvador
David Pacelli, NSC (Notetaker)

President-elect Alfredo Cristiani
Francisco Merino, Vice President-elect
Ernesto Rivas-Gallont, Ambassador to the
United States

DATE, TIME AND PLACE: April 7, 1989, 2:30 p.m. - 3:08 p.m.
Oval Office

In the informal greetings and comments before the press entered for the photo opportunity, the President told Mr. Cristiani that there was lots of interest in his visit. Nowhere was there more acute interest in the visit than in the Oval Office, with the possible exception of Secretary of State Baker. The President explained that he would not answer questions from the press because if he did it would end up taking up their whole allotted time.

The President welcomed Mr. Cristiani and said we had closely followed the election in El Salvador. The President said that we wanted to have full cooperation with Mr. Cristiani's government and that he wanted to learn about what positions Cristiani would take. He added that we would be telling the Congress that we intended to cooperate, but that it was good that Cristiani himself would be visiting Congressional leaders to put his case to them directly.

The President said he would speak frankly. He said he hoped this would be the first of many visits and he invited Cristiani to return for a working visit.

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The President said he wanted the Congress to know Mr. Cristiani as we know him. He added that Cristiani comes with some baggage because of the reputation of his political party, ARENA. Opponents of Cristiani will focus on the role of [ARENA party leader Roberto] D'Aubuisson. Cristiani is not understood because of the reputation of ARENA for human rights abuses, but he has the ability to change those impressions through his visit.

The President said that his administration is disposed to work with Mr. Cristiani. Cristiani had outlined some reforms, which is what we want. The President praised Cristiani's intervention in the case of a judge who released prisoners accused in a kidnapping ring. The President recognized that Cristiani's actions were not easy to take, and that had caused a good impression here. He predicted that Cristiani would find recognition of that on Capitol Hill.

The President viewed Cristiani's election as a new era, a turning point. He said that he had told President Duarte of his intention to invite Cristiani up for a visit, and Duarte had given his full support and cooperation. The President said he wanted Cristiani "to hear that from me."

The President continued that we will try to exchange information; we do not want to be surprised [in our relationship]. The President said we will work with the aid levels that we have discussed with Cristiani, citing the difficulty of providing more because of tight budgetary times.

The President went on to say that we want Mr. Cristiani's administration to succeed, and we do not view the Salvadoran guerrillas favorably. The President cited the tremendous contradiction between those [Americans] who at the same time attack us for supporting rightwing dictators, yet themselves support Communist guerrillas. Nevertheless, we will work with Mr. Cristiani's government. The President concluded by saying, "The floor is yours."

Mr. Cristiani thanked the President and said it was very good to be here. He said El Salvador is a country with lots of problems. The Salvadoran people have great expectations of the new government because of the way things are, including poor economic conditions. He stated that nothing could be more damaging for El Salvador than a cut in U.S. aid, especially if it were the result of a prejudgment of his administration. This will be his main message to the Congress, "Give us a chance."

The President asked if he were scheduled to go to the Hill; he was not aware.

Mr. Cristiani said yes. He continued by saying that after the vote he did not want to see a letdown for the Salvadoran people. President Duarte's party had lost a lot of support, and he warned that in a democracy, if things turned out wrong the next phase that El Salvador passed through might be a turn to the left.

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Mr. Cristiani said that he was trying to maintain political space in El Salvador for the center--the center-left and the center-right--to keep his own party in power and to not allow extremists to make gains because of his government's lack of performance. In this connection, he cited El Salvador's economic problems.

Mr. Cristiani said he was willing to dialogue with the FMLN to incorporate them into the process. He referred to the visit of Mr. Merino to Mexico for talks with the guerrillas in March as an example of his commitment. He mentioned the new plans of the guerrillas for talks.

The President asked about the key points of the proposals.

Mr. Cristiani said the guerrillas wanted to treat his government as only a government of transition for peace talks. He stated, "Obviously, that is not acceptable." The FMLN position is a setback from earlier plans.

The President asked if Mr. Cristiani knew FMLN leaders personally.

Mr. Cristiani said that he did not know the guerrilla commanders, but that he was acquainted with the FDR [Democratic Revolutionary Front] leaders, [Guillermo] Ungo and [Ruben] Zamora.

The President asked if they are in El Salvador.

Mr. Cristiani replied that they were.

The President asked how they interact with the guerrillas.

Ambassador Walker answered that the FDR leaders go to Managua from time to time to consult with the guerrilla leadership there.

Mr. Aronson said that, in terms of leadership, the guerrillas run the war by themselves; the FDR serves as a political front.

Mr. Cristiani said that now the FMLN is not talking about the Democratic Convergence but talking of creating its own political party. This would be an important shift in their position.

The President asked if there had been any reaction to Gorbachev's statements about not exporting revolution. Had this caused a stir among the left? He added that he assumed it was not perceived as a credible proposal.

Mr. Cristiani said he had not heard much. He added that [Costa Rican President] Arias had put it as well as anyone could. Arias said that everyone had expected more from Gorbachev's meeting with Castro. Cristiani said that he viewed the U.S. statements on the Soviet Union and Central America as positive, but the Gorbachev-Castro meeting was somewhat of a letdown. It had created high hopes.

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The President said he was surprised that Gorbachev said anything at all [about exporting revolution]. No one is suggesting that he will carry through on his statement. At least it was good that he did say it. The President stated that he could see why Cristiani wouldn't be troubled by it until you could see whether it actually was going to happen.

Mr. Cristiani said the main regional problem is Nicaragua. Soviet aid helps to keep the Sandinistas in power; its aid is eight or nine times what El Salvador gets.

Secretary Baker asked about the possibility of appointing an opposition member--such as defeated presidential candidate Chavez Mena--to a high judicial position. Under the Salvadoran constitution, the judiciary is a powerful position. The Secretary said he has testified five or six times on the Hill. Each time El Salvador has come up, there is a tendency for a knee-jerk reaction. He has said each time that the new government has to be given a chance. There has been some talk about cutting our aid to El Salvador, which we have blocked so far. To continue to do so, we will depend upon the actions taken by Cristiani's government. The appointment is something that could help, although the Secretary emphasized that he was not saying it was something that Cristiani ought to do. The Secretary concluded by saying that the other contribution Cristiani could make was "anything you can do on human rights."

The President said that is true. He stated that Cristiani helped the other day with his actions in the case of the judge who freed several people accused of involvement in kidnappings.

Mr. Sununu said that Congressman Coelho came back from his trip to El Salvador very favorably impressed with Cristiani. He also came back very high on Bill [Walker]. He is starting, we are told, with an open mind toward the new administration.

Mr. Aronson said that he was a member of the U.S. observer delegation.

Ambassador Walker said that he was with the Congressman during the trip. Congressman Coelho went on television in La Palma with a very strong statement about how the election had been free and clean.

The President noted that we were doing all the talking.

Mr. Cristiani said that he was glad for the Bipartisan Accord. It was "very opportune" to have such an agreement, especially with the problem of the Nicaraguan Resistance. Mr. Arias has never really complied with his purpose in putting together a plan in which the Contras are dismantled in 90 days. Cristiani believed the Contras should remain united in case the Sandinistas do not meet their commitments to democratize. He felt that Nicaragua would not comply, but there was a greater sense of stability in El Salvador because of the Bipartisan Accord.

The President said he appreciated Cristiani's support. The Secretary of State had worked very hard to secure agreement on the Accord. By being able to speak with one voice, it will help to shape things in Central America. It will also help with El Salvador. Some foreign leaders, such as Felipe Gonzalez, the Germans, and maybe the French ought to be more realistic about Central America. This agreement will help us to get their support. The President then asked Mr. Cristiani if he knew Nicaraguan President Ortega.

Mr. Cristiani replied that he had met Ortega at a meeting in February. He had just met with Mr. Arias.

The President asked about Cristiani's relations with the Christian Democrats. Are they bitter or do they regard the elections as over and now can get on to other things?

Mr. Cristiani said he wanted to bring that up. He brought it up with President Duarte in his first conversation with him. There will be no witch hunt of the Christian Democrats by ARENA. President Duarte is more calm now; he asked Cristiani to relay that to the President. As for Secretary Baker's suggestion, the question of judicial appointments was out of Cristiani's hands. The Executive Branch has nothing to say on nominations, since all had to go through the Congress. Cristiani did concede that he did have some influence, but his role was limited.

Mr. Cristiani said that on the administration of justice, there is bilateral U.S. aid only for the legal system. What is needed is aid for structural change, and his government would promote structural change. The Christian Democrats had declined publicly any participation in the government. Cristiani said we would like them to participate, especially to help solve national problems like the administration of justice and peace. He said he hoped that they would reverse their stand. But the Secretary General of the Christian Democrats had made the announcement. Hopefully, they will change their minds.

The President said President Duarte was held in high regard here; he was in the hall of heroes with Americans. The President asked how he was feeling and coping with his treatments.

Secretary Baker interjected that he sought permission to be excused since he had to go meet Israeli Prime Minister Shamir.

Mr. Cristiani said that Duarte was feeling weak, but well. He had attended Cristiani's credentials ceremony. It was a great political and physical effort, but he ended up feeling at home. Mr. Cristiani described how everyone applauded when President Duarte entered. Cristiani had been informed that Duarte had been surprised, as he was frightened to enter in a theatre full of ARENA people. Cristiani appreciated Duarte's role in supporting democracy in El Salvador.

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The President said he thought that was good. We Americans are fortunate enough to take democracy for granted.

Ambassador Walker said that one good thing that was two fine people had contested the election. Fidel Chavez Mena was ready to form a loyal opposition. Fidel respected Fredy and vice versa.

The President said that he knew Fidel, that he had been Foreign Minister for a while. He concluded by saying that the "door is open" for Mr. Cristiani. The President also said he had confidence in Bill Walker and that Cristiani could speak freely to him. The President said that if Cristiani felt the need to run up his long distance telephone bill, he could make a phone call every once in a while, saying, "That man will answer" [pointing to Robert Gates].

The President continued by saying we want to do what we can to pressure Nicaragua--the cancer in Central America--to comply with its promises to democratize. We may have changed our policy, but we are not naive. We will support the humanitarian aid package to the Resistance. We are not losing our conviction that nothing less than full compliance is necessary from Nicaragua. That means democracy; free press, free elections. The President said he wanted Cristiani to know that. Sometimes there are rumors about our policy. Maybe Nicaragua is an exception to the general rule that Marxists do not accept free elections. We hear Ortega say that he is adopting a Swedish model. "I'm a skeptic," said the President. "If the leopard changes his spots, we'll give it a chance; but let's see first."

The President observed that the Soviet Union was continuing to provide Nicaragua with over a half billion dollars of military aid every year. He stated that we have to start to make it clear to the Soviet Union that its withdrawal from Afghanistan was not enough, although we are glad they did it. The Cuban agreement in Angola was good, but our first goal is preservation of our democratic heritage. We want to be sure the Soviets hear us on that. The President added, "You should know that. There has been no philosophical shift on our part."

The President continued by saying that another part he wanted to make clear was that Cristiani might read about a "breakthrough to Cuba." He said, "I'd love to see it," but that it would not come about until there is demonstrable evidence that Castro will live as the rest of the people do in the Western Hemisphere. He has to cut back his dependency on Gorbachev. He is way back in the Dark Ages on human rights. The President cited UN reports of torture chambers, yet he tells priests in our country that he is improving his human rights record. We also want him to move to democracy.

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The President said, "His side has lost" [referring to Castro's campaign to mislead the world]. The President added that many [on the left] tell him that he should have better relations with Castro, which he characterized as "bullshit." He stated that some people call for unilateral U.S. actions to improve relations, but we cannot do that. We want to see a change; if we can help that effort, good, we will do so.

The President closed by saying that Mr. Cristiani could rely on our Ambassador, "our man on the scene in El Salvador," to pass any messages. He stated that it was nice to see Mr. Cristiani again. The President said he hoped that the Hill visits went well and to let us know what we can do to support Mr. Cristiani.

Mr. Cristiani said he would.

The President ended the conversation by saying that we wanted to be part of the solution, not part of the problem in El Salvador.

The President and Mr. Cristiani then exchanged goodbyes and good wishes.

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