



# CrossCurrents

NEWSLETTER OF THE WASHINGTON OFFICE ON LATIN AMERICA • NOVEMBER 2004



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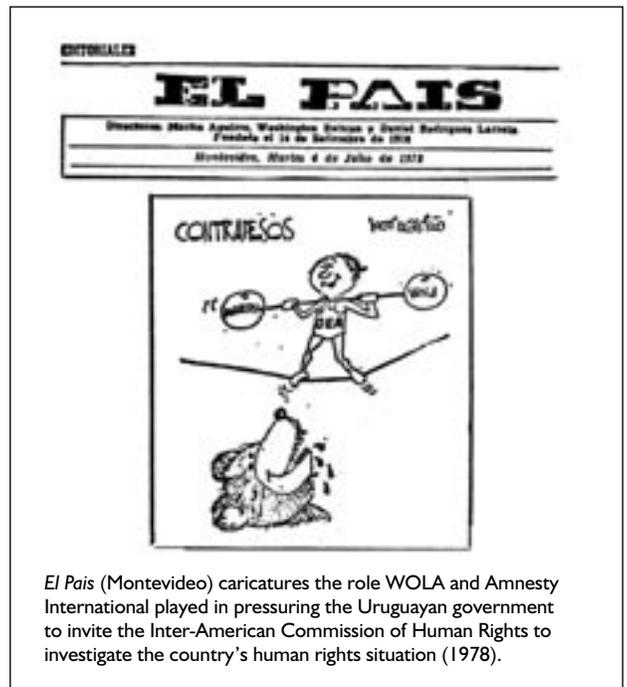
Photos from WOLA archives

## Celebrating 30 years!

For thirty years, the Washington Office on Latin America has actively promoted human rights, democracy and social justice in Latin America and the Caribbean. Founded in 1974 by a coalition of religious and civic leaders in response to the spread of military dictatorships throughout the hemisphere, and out of concern with the role of the United States in supporting those dictatorships, our fundamental objective has remained constant: to promote policies by the U.S. government and the international community that advance human rights, peace, democracy and equitable economic development. Throughout our history, we have served as a bridge to the Washington policy community for Latin American colleagues—individuals and organizations whose hopes for peace and justice we share. Together, we have sought to shape U.S. policies toward the region.

Beginning this fall, in honor of our thirtieth anniversary, we are undertaking a serious effort to write our history. We are asking ourselves what we have accomplished, and what has been learned, from three decades of advocacy in the name of changing the way the United States engages its closest neighbors. As we document our past, we will be talking to people from around the hemisphere with whom we've worked closely over the years. For this special anniversary edition of Cross Currents, we asked a few friends to start us off by sharing their thoughts on WOLA's role and impact. Our authors' reflections are drawn from the 1970s and 1980s, the era of dictatorship in the southern cone and war in Central America, and they celebrate achievements both political and personal. We hope to publish more remembrances in future editions. We would especially like to invite our colleagues in Latin America and the Caribbean to share their reflections with us.

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*El Pais* (Montevideo) caricatures the role WOLA and Amnesty International played in pressuring the Uruguayan government to invite the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights to investigate the country's human rights situation (1978).

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## Celebrating 30 years!

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Today United States foreign policy is at a crossroads. In the face of real challenges to its security, will U.S. commitments to democracy and human rights prove real, or be reduced to rhetoric? Will they guide the means and ends of U.S. policy in the most difficult situations, or only when expedient? The history of the last thirty years of U.S. policy toward Latin America suggests that real gains in democracy and human rights can be won, but sustaining them is a permanent struggle. As we remember and celebrate what has been accomplished in the last three decades, we also challenge ourselves to live up to the legacy of our achievements in a new era. ¡La lucha continua! 🌟

### Selected WOLA accomplishments

- ▶ Helped draft the 1975 Harkin amendment which first prohibited U.S. military aid to governments that abuse human rights.
- ▶ Sponsored among the first U.S. delegations to monitor elections in Latin America, to Bolivia in 1978 and Honduras in 1981.
- ▶ Published the first systematic report on human rights abuses committed by the Nicaraguan “contras” in 1983.
- ▶ In 1989, published a report on El Salvador that was key in convincing U.S. policy-makers that peace negotiations could succeed.
- ▶ In the early 1990s, published the first reports on the need for democratic police reform in post-conflict societies in Central America.
- ▶ In 1997, wrote the first draft of what eventually became the legislation that ended the ban on sales of food and medicine to Cuba.
- ▶ After Hurricane Mitch devastated Central America in 1998, led a major campaign by a coalition of more than 40 organizations that persuaded the Clinton Administration to increase assistance for reconstruction and development to nearly a billion dollars. A parallel campaign in Central America transformed civil society’s relationship with multilateral lending institutions.
- ▶ Helped secure passage of the 1999 Leahy Law, which requires the vetting of soldiers and officers to ensure that human rights abusers do not receive U.S. military training.
- ▶ Between 1996 and 2004, provided training and accompaniment in political advocacy for 1,800 individuals from more than 300 organizations throughout Central America.
- ▶ Monitored the 2000 Mexican presidential election, helping to create the environment that ended the 71-year rule of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI).
- ▶ In 2002, with the National Security Archive and the Democracy Coalition Project, successfully campaigned for the declassification of some 500 U.S. government documents for the Peruvian Truth Commission.
- ▶ In 2002, exposed the existence of a 1,000-person expeditionary force of Bolivian soldiers trained and funded by the U.S. to carry out anti-drug operations outside of the normal structure of the Bolivian military. Information we provided on its abuses led to the unit’s disbanding that summer.
- ▶ Working with the Guatemalan human rights community, helped craft the 2003 proposal for CICIACS, the Commission for the Investigation of Illegal bodies and Clandestine Security Apparatuses, which garnered the support of the UN, the OAS and the U.S. government.

# WOLA, from the Start

Tom Quigley

Juan Méndez writes in a recent article that “It is commonly accepted that the interest and initiative of the U.S. Congress for a more active human rights-based foreign policy came about as a response to Vietnam, due to disillusion with the Nixon-Kissinger-Ford foreign policy, and pressure from the U.S. civil rights movement. With the election of President Carter, human rights were institutionalized as an element of U.S. foreign policy.”<sup>1</sup>

How human rights got to that central position is as much the story of WOLA as it is of the peanut farmer from Georgia. Here’s how it began.

The 9/11 coup in Chile in 1973 is usually taken as the preeminent event that brought WOLA into being, as indeed it was. But WOLA had a pre-history, a pre-existence if you will, as LASC, the Latin America Strategy Committee. LASC was an ecumenical coalition of North American church agencies concerned with Latin American justice and peace issues, essentially with human rights in the region. And while it was limited to just the few staff persons at the National Council of Churches and the U.S. Catholic Conference and their related agencies, it enjoyed a unique relationship with the churches in Latin America, both Catholic and Protestant. It was the churches of Latin America which were experiencing government repression in several of the countries of the region and were themselves at the center of the burgeoning human rights movement in Latin America. That’s the often ignored part of the equation, the role of the Latin American churches in inspiring the nascent human rights movement in the U.S.

It was Brazil, well before Chile, that signaled the birth of the U.S. human rights movement. The 1964 coup against Goulart ushered in a succession of military dictators. The proscription of all political parties in 1965, the closing of the Congress in 1968, and the routine employment of torture on political prisoners made Brazil the symbol of repression in the Americas. The

year the Congress was shut down, 1968, was also the year that so many things exploded or fell apart—*les événements* of the Paris spring, the assassinations of Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy, the Chicago National Democratic Convention, the urban riots, the Tet offensive, the intensification of the Vietnam War and much more. And for the Church in Latin America, it was the year of Medellín, the meeting that was to give rise to a new style of prophetic denunciation of what came to be called “the institutional violence of sinful structures.” Brazilian bishops such as Helder Camara, Paulo Evaristo Arns, Ivo Lorscheider, Luciano Mendes de Almeida and many others played key roles at Medellín.

That year was also the 20th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. When the 25th anniversary came around in 1973, the Brazilian bishops took the occasion to issue some of the strongest denunciations of the status quo yet heard, pastoral letters from three regional conferences. And

that same year an ecumenical group, under the tenuous protection of Dom Paulo Arns, published the Universal Declaration in broadside form that could be posted on parish bulletin boards, each of the 28 articles followed by relevant citations from Scripture and brief quotations from Catholic and Protestant documents. A clearly subversive act, but one which the government found difficult to suppress. It was that same team, headed by the late Presbyterian pastor Jaime Wright and Dom Paulo, that years later would publish the scandalous record of the military’s human rights violations, *Nunca Mais*, a truth report without benefit of a truth commission, the documentation all having been surreptitiously secreted from government files, photo-copied and returned before a stunned military could react.

It is hard for us today to imagine how gutsy, how courageous those people were in the face

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The Campaign for the NO! unified opposition political parties against incumbent dictator Augusto Pinochet (1985).

<sup>1</sup> Juan E. Méndez and Javier Mariezcurrena, draft manuscript of “Prospects for human rights advocacy in the wake of September 11, 2001.” The final version of the article was published in *Law and Inequality Journal*, Summer 2004: Volume XXII, No. 2, 223-263.

# Greetings and Congratulations

*Nancy Soderberg*

It is with great pleasure that I extend warmest congratulations to WOLA on your 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. From Chile in the 1970s, to Central America in the 80s, and in Mexico today, WOLA has made a lasting difference in the lives of the people of Latin America.

I first came to appreciate WOLA's importance during the 1980s as an aide to Senator Edward M. Kennedy. Many of us on Capital Hill relied heavily on WOLA, led at the time by the dedicated and brilliant Joe Eldridge, for accurate information on human rights abuses of the region's regimes and the illegal policies of the Reagan administration in Central America. The WOLA-sponsored Harkin amendment, prohibiting U.S. military aid to governments which abused human rights, helped steer American foreign policy throughout that difficult decade. As Congress fought the administration's policies in Central America, WOLA drafted legislation, provided crucial information on events in the region, and took congressional delegations to see for themselves the reality on the ground. Whether the issue was exposing the human rights abuses of the Pinochet regime, the Nicaraguan Contras, or the government of El Salvador, WOLA was instrumental to shaping the debate, promoting peace, and altering U.S. policy for the better.

Since that time, WOLA has continued to promote human rights and democracy in Latin America and develop more enlightened policies in Washington. While I was on the national Security Council in the mid-1990s, my colleagues and I relied on WOLA to provide important grassroots information on charting American policy towards the region. A consistent source of accurate information and a voice of conscience, WOLA achieves concrete results, including the Advocacy Training Program to strengthen democracy in Central America, declassification of documents, galvanizing assistance following Hurricane Mitch, improving the Inter-American Development Bank's support of civil society, and supporting security sector reforms in Guatemala, electoral reform in Mexico, and improvements in U.S. drug policies. Because of WOLA's efforts, U.S. policies are sounder and Latin America is more democratic, with a stronger civil society.

It is a great honor to join in paying tribute to WOLA's impressive record of accomplishment

over the last three decades. You will no doubt continue to improve lives throughout the region in the decades to come. 🌿

*Nancy Soderberg has served as Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (1993-1997), Alternate U.S. Representative to the United Nations (1997-2001), and foreign policy advisor for Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (1985-1992). In April 2001, Ms. Soderberg joined the International Crisis Group (ICG) as Vice President and Director of the New York Office.*

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## WOLA, from the start

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of an omni-present and utterly ruthless national security state, the very definition of a rights-violating state.

Incidentally, the Spanish version of the same flyer, with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights articles, Bible texts and church statements, was published in Chile after the coup by COPACHI, the ecumenical Commission for Peace in Chile.

And so back to 9/11 of 1973. LASC was meeting for a prescheduled get together on September 13, originally set to put final touches on a publication about the military takeover in Uruguay that spring. But of course the *golpe* of the 11th changed everything. It was agreed at that meeting that our feeble attempts to urge a more enlightened Latin America policy on the Nixon administration should move into higher gear, with primary attention now on the Congress. And, using the models of the then-recently-formed Washington Office on Africa and the much earlier Friends Committee on National Legislation, we resolved to get ourselves a Washington Office on Latin America.

The rest of the story, the next 30 years of it, is well known, as WOLA became and remains the preeminent U.S. policy advocacy group on Latin America. *Ad multos annos!* 🌿

*Thomas E. Quigley is Policy Advisor, Latin American, Caribbean and Asian Affairs, for the Department of Social Development and World Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.*

# A Turning Point for Congress

Donald M. Fraser

The year was 1973. President Nixon was in the White House and Henry Kissinger was Secretary of State. The Nixon administration foreign policy gave little consideration to American values in how it determined relations with other governments. More specifically, the Nixon/Kissinger foreign policy gave little consideration to how a government treated its own people in determining relations with other governments. If a government was anti-communist, that was sufficient to win United States approval, as well as military and economic assistance.

This characteristic of U.S. foreign policy was perhaps most evident in our relations with Latin America. Dictatorships flourished in that region, as exemplified by General Somoza (a West Point graduate, no less) in Nicaragua, Alfredo Stroessner in Paraguay, General Emílio Garrastazú Médici in Brazil, to name just a few. With the exception of Costa Rica, all the Central American republics were run by right-wing repressive regimes. The United States provided these regimes with military assistance which was used primarily to put down any internal rebellion to their rule.

The United States was failing to give importance to human rights in deciding upon relations with other governments, even though the U.S., under the leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt, had played an important role in the United Nations adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Subsequently, the UN had adopted the twin Covenants on Civil and Political Rights, and Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, followed by conventions on torture, women's rights and racial discrimination. Surely, how governments adhere to these conventions and declarations should be an important consideration in determining relations with other governments.

As Chairman of the Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, I set about to conduct hearings on human rights and foreign policy. Non-governmental organizations provided key witnesses which were often juxtaposed with representatives from the Department of State. It was my hope that by exposing to Congress and the American people the conditions in countries where serious human



Participants present their positions at a WOLA-sponsored Capitol Hill briefing entitled "Chile on a Path to Change" (September 26, 1986).

rights violations were occurring, our government would be persuaded to change its policies.

The Washington Office on Latin America during the period that I chaired the Subcommittee (until 1979) provided key witnesses for these hearings. WOLA was one of our principal links to Latin America. With its expertise in the region and its credibility, I knew witnesses recommended by WOLA would provide reliable and accurate information on the human rights conditions in Latin America. Some of the witnesses were U.S. nationals who visited the country as part of an observer mission sponsored by non-governmental organizations. In other instances, WOLA was able to bring persons from the region who, often at some risk to their own life, gave especially moving but accurate accounts of the conditions in their countries.

It was only a few months after our hearings began that on September 11, 1973 the democratically-elected government of President Salvador Allende of Chile was overthrown. The United States undertook covert actions that led to this coup d'état, in which President Allende died. The Subcommittee began an extensive series of hearings on this situation. Chile dramatized the need for change in our relations towards Latin America.

From these hearings and other congressional initiatives came legislation that restricted military

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# WOLA's impact: Political and personal

*Débora Benchoam and George Rogers*

**W**OLA began its work in an era when violent dictatorial regimes governed many Latin American countries.

During that period, for many victims of human rights violations and for struggling human rights organizations throughout the region, WOLA became an impassioned vehicle that partnered with victims and organizations to denounce human right violations in Washington and to a national audience. WOLA gave voice in Washington to those who felt they had no voice. WOLA injected their plight into a policy debate that had rarely considered such stakeholders.

Through such voices, WOLA brought critical pressure to bear on U.S. foreign policy, first, towards the dictatorial regimes in the southern

path. Of course, these regimes benefited from the U.S. support and did not show any greater interest in democracy or human rights than they had before Reagan came to office. Yet Reagan pressed the Congress to repeal provisions of the foreign assistance act prohibiting any military aid or training for these two nations, legislation that had been enacted by the Congress in the late 1970s, and signed by President Jimmy Carter.

Reagan and the Republican supporters of his plan in Congress brought mainly right-wing ideologues, the likes of Mrs. Kirkpatrick, to testify. Those members of Congress opposed to the repeal of the prohibition invited human rights activists, Amnesty International, WOLA, a nascent Americas Watch, and others to testify on the

WOLA gave voice in Washington to those who felt they had no voice. WOLA injected their plight into a policy debate that had rarely considered such stakeholders.

cone, then responding to the ongoing violence in various Andean countries, and in the 1980s, on Central America. Not only did WOLA host Raúl Alfonsín and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, opposition political leaders who later became the presidents of Argentina and Brazil, respectively, but WOLA also brought to Washington the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, relatives of the disappeared and killed in Chile, and innumerable political figures from Central American nations where the violence continued to escalate.

When Ronald Reagan became president in 1981, he decided, at the urging of his Secretary of State, Al Haig, and U.S. Representative to the UN Jeanne Kirkpatrick, that he would cozy up to the authoritarian regimes in the world, and reject cooperation with the communist or socialist “totalitarian” regimes. In addition to sending millions of dollars and advisors to El Salvador and intervening in other Central American nations (whether overtly or covertly), Reagan and Kirkpatrick pressed to give recognition and support to the military leaders ruling Argentina and Chile, theoretically to encourage an eventual democratic

brutality of the two regimes and the uselessness of extending a symbolic gesture of support. Jacobo Timmerman, renowned critical newspaper publisher whom the Argentine military detained, tortured, and exiled, described the brutality of his experience as one of the “disappeared,” revealed in his book *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*. WOLA helped arrange for members of Congress or their aides to meet with a constant stream of human rights activists from Argentina, including from the *Madres* and *Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo*, the *Asamblea Permanente de Derechos Humanos, Servicio Paz y Justicia* (whose leader Adolfo Pérez Esquivel won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1980), Emilio Mignone of the *Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales*, and many others.

In 1981, Jacobo Timmerman told the members the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee of the House about Débora, one of Argentina’s youngest political prisoners, who was detained as she witnessed the assassination of her brother in their home, both minors. Rep. William Lehman from Miami, and other members of Congress, took a special interest in her story, and wrote to the military

junta and U.S. State Department, pressing for her release. Débora by then had been held without charges in a maximum security prison for over four years. She was released into exile in the United States in late 1981. Soon after she began to meet with members of Congress and aides to describe the horrors she had so recently experienced, and provide them with information about other political prisoners and disappeared persons. George Rogers was one of two WOLA staffers<sup>1</sup> who accompanied Débora to various meetings in the Congress, urging the legislators not to re-open the window to military aid, but to maintain the symbolic castigation of the Argentine junta, until such time as it put power back in the hands of civilians. Débora eventually observed the House-Senate conference committee where the two chambers agreed not to renew military aid outright, but to permit it only after one of many new presidential “certifications” that gross violations of human rights had ceased.

In April 1982, the delirious General Galtieri ordered the invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas Islands, controlled for over a century by Great Britain. When the British threw the Argentine military off the islands months later, the Argentine regime collapsed. WOLA was present to monitor the 1983 election of civilian president Raúl Alfonsín. The generals left power defeated and constrained by popular sentiment never again to repeat the terrors of the recent past.

WOLA participated in important fact-finding missions not only in Argentina and Chile, where its testimony had an important effect in limiting U.S. re-engagement with the military regimes, but also in Peru and Colombia. WOLA brought fresh accounts of the human rights violations occurring on a massive scale in those nations, even though they had elected democratic governments. WOLA staff traveled to Ayacucho on two occasions, and used some of the testimonies gathered to initiate, with legal assistance, cases against the government of Peru before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. In one of those missions, WOLA joined with delegations of religious and NGO leaders from Europe, and Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, to document in detail the grave deterioration in human rights for those living in areas frequented by the violent maoist group *Sendero Luminoso*, and by military and paramilitary groups.

On one of the trips to Colombia, George was asked to join a group of journalists observing one



Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva with former WOLA staffer, Jo Marie Griesgraber at a WOLA sponsored event in Washington DC.

of the simultaneous signings of a peace treaty between the government and the M-19 guerrillas. The group gathered with M-19 commander Carlos Pizarro León Gómez on a road outside of Cali, leading to the town of La Florida where the signing was to take place. On the way, the group was stopped by anti-terror police forces, who attempted to kill Mr. Pizarro to derail the signing of the truce. WOLA carried the news of this and other atrocities in Colombia to the United States at a time when Colombia was just beginning to appear on the foreign policy radar screen.

Upon reaching thirty years of important activism promoting awareness of human rights issues in Washington and beyond, we celebrate WOLA’s unique ability to stay in close touch with affected persons and groups, and bring their message to the U.S. foreign policy community—as relevant now as it was in the “early days” of WOLA’s history. 🇺🇸

**Débora Benchoam** works as a human rights specialist at the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights of the Organization of American States. **George Rogers** was a member of WOLA’s staff from 1980-1987. Presently he is an attorney for the Inter-American Development Bank. *Débora and George were married in 1984.*

<sup>1</sup> The second was Arthur Sisk.

# The Reagan Years

*Michael Barnes*

**T**he election of Ronald Reagan changed the terms of the foreign policy debate. Reagan said explicitly that he would not base his foreign policy on human rights. He brought in a foreign policy team which threw down the gantlet: human rights and democracy weren't going to be a priority. Authoritarian regimes opposed to communism would get U.S. support. Even State Department desk officers made clear that the agenda was to overthrow the advances under Jimmy Carter. This unequivocal position forced Democratic members of Congress into opposition, and created a whole new dynamic between the Hill and human rights NGOs like WOLA. It was also the reason that I became chairman of the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs. We knew that Latin America would be a key point of confrontation.

During the Reagan years, the Subcommittee worked closely with WOLA and other advocacy groups on a number of human rights issues, especially in Central America. WOLA's contribution was expertise, and contacts with

popular organizations in the different countries. WOLA brought people up to meet with us, helped us set up meetings beyond the official agenda when members or staff traveled down to the region, and even organized unofficial delegations for staff without travel budgets. Meeting people affected by U.S. policy had a real impact. Members got first-hand accounts from victims of human rights violations, and could testify about what was happening on the ground. Sometimes constituents were among the victims; the four nuns killed in El Salvador greatly affected Tip O'Neill. Anything that served to counter the administration's disinformation, and insert accurate information into the debate, helped us during those years.

In the early 1980s, the House was still passing an annual foreign aid authorization bill. That became the vehicle for imposing human rights conditions on military aid to El Salvador. We utilized the conditions to force the Reagan administration to defend its policies in terms of human rights and democracy. The conditions

PHOTO: ANTHONY ALLISON



Graffiti on a wall in San Salvador reads: "The blood of the fallen will serve as the seeds for liberty" (1990).

required Congress to hold hearings and create a public record every six months on the question of whether the policy served basic U.S. values. Every six months the administration had to certify conditions that weren't certifiable; they had to certify a lie. The conditions didn't serve to cut off aid—the certification requirement itself was a recognition that we couldn't cut off aid. But we undercut the legitimacy of the policy, and we forced the administration to support the establishment at least of forms of democracy in El Salvador. There was some positive movement on the ground because of the certification policy.

The other issue that was constantly with us during the 1980s was contra aid. We never had the votes to kill contra aid entirely, only partially, until Iran/Contra. We knew very early in the Reagan years that the administration had a policy of covert action to aid the contras. We needed to get the intelligence committee involved, but there wasn't much interest there. So we managed to have the Foreign Affairs Committee report out legislation prohibiting assistance for the purpose of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government. That caused a jurisdictional debate, and led Edward Boland, Democrat from Massachusetts and chair of the Intelligence Committee, to author several amendments between 1982 and 1985 that restricted aid. The Republicans responded by looking to divert other funds. When Congress passed humanitarian assistance for the contras, the Republicans broadened the definition of "humanitarian" to include logistical aid for the army. But we were able to pass strict accountability requirements, which the GAO later found had not been met. We subpoenaed the relevant bank records, and made this a major embarrassment for the administration.

Throughout the 1980s, our opposition claimed that we had no alternative to existing U.S. policy. But in fact, through the certification process and all our other work on Central America, we built a record in support of a negotiated end to the conflicts. We created the environment in which a new administration could say there was a need to move forward and here's how to do it. When the first President Bush was elected, he adopted all our policies. He wanted to get past the contention and work on other issues. Various peace processes were able to move forward.

Our victories in the 1980s were temporary; the Reagan administration always found a way to work around them. But we succeeded in de-legitimizing

Reagan's policies, and keeping human rights and democracy at the forefront of the foreign policy debate. WOLA helped us achieve that. Today the debate is circling back to where it was twenty years ago; some people never learn anything. And that's why WOLA is as important today as it was in the 1980s. Congratulations on your 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and keep up the good work! 🦋

**Rep. Michael Barnes**, Democrat from Maryland, was Chairman of the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the House Foreign Affairs Committee from January 1981 until January 1987. Vic Johnson, former Staff Director of the Subcommittee, also contributed to this article. Mr. Johnson joined the Subcommittee with Mr. Barnes and continued to serve on Foreign Affairs until 1993. Mr. Barnes is today the President and CEO of the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence. Mr. Johnson is Associate Executive Director for Public Policy at NAFSA, the Association of International Educators.

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## Turning Point

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and economic assistance to governments engaged in gross violations of human rights, established a human rights bureau within the Department of State, and mandated annual country reports on human rights.

The Washington Office on Latin America gave invaluable assistance to the Subcommittee in its efforts to influence U.S. foreign policy. The critical role played by WOLA in the Subcommittee's work was due to the full confidence we had in its Executive Director, Joseph Eldridge, and his competent staff. We knew that their information was reliable. We knew their commitment to human rights was complete.

The challenge to give greater importance to human rights in developing relations with Latin America is a continuing saga. We need WOLA to continue its great work on behalf of an enlightened U.S. policy towards Latin America. Such a policy is in the interest of the American people and the people of Latin America as well. 🦋

**Rep. Donald M. Fraser**, Democrat from Minnesota, served on the House Foreign Affairs Committee throughout his tenure in Congress (1963-1979). Today he is a member of the board of directors of Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, and continues to defend human rights in the new context of the global war on terrorism.

# El Amigo Americano

Roberto Cuéllar M.

Para rendir un breve y sentido homenaje WOLA en su trigésimo aniversario, nada más oportuno que retomar el título de aquella película alemana inspirada en una novela de Patricia Highsmith: *El amigo americano*. Y es que para mí en aquella época como Director de la Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispo Óscar Romero—y estoy seguro que para muchísimas organizaciones no gubernamentales de América Latina comprometidas con los derechos humanos y con la justicia social—al pensar en “el amigo americano” viene a nuestra mente WOLA como organización y las personas que la forjaron y ahí trabajan, y no el de aquel “sujeto” sofisticado que protagoniza las novelas de la famosa escritora norteamericana.

Ese *amigo americano* tan necesario para nuestra región, dispuesto siempre a respaldar las causas más justas con seriedad, con profesionalismo y con un enfoque equilibrado; ese *amigo americano* capaz de mitigar nuestro desamparo y de orientarnos en los laberintos del poder; ese *amigo americano* capaz también de reflexionar conjuntamente con nosotros acerca de nuestra realidad, para ayudarnos en algunas ocasiones a tomar distancia y a mirarla con un sano y necesario “extrañamiento”, con otros ojos, como si fuera la primera vez.; ese amigo americano es hoy WOLA y lo ha sido durante las tres últimas décadas.

Quisiera insistir sobre ese último punto. Es una fatalidad de la vida que uno se encuentre en el punto ciego de su propia visión. Por ello, de un *amigo americano* se espera no solo empatía y comprensión —ciertamente muy necesarias—, sino también consejo, interlocución sincera y calificada, y una mirada crítica que nos devuelva otras imágenes de nosotros mismos.

En este sentido, además de los numerosos logros concretos alcanzados mediante su trabajo, los espacios de interlocución creados por WOLA entre la comunidad política de Estados Unidos y las organizaciones de derechos humanos de América Latina, han sido —sin proponérselo quizás—, auténticos espacios de encuentro y diálogo intercultural. Y créanme que en este diálogo todos crecemos y aprendemos, todos nos enriquecemos.

La celebración del trigésimo aniversario de WOLA, la primera organización civil de los Estados Unidos que conocimos en América Latina durante las dictaduras y las guerras de finales de los años 70, invita a reflexionar desde una perspectiva actual.

WOLA no es una organización más; las dictaduras y la represión en Argentina, Uruguay, Brasil, Nicaragua y El Salvador le hicieron acercarse a la región y dedicar sus primeros esfuerzos a establecer los problemas de derechos humanos. Rápidamente se convirtió en vocero ante el Congreso norteamericano informando de las atrocidades cometidas por los gobernantes de facto en Latinoamérica.

El testimonio de WOLA le proporcionaba al Congreso una visión autorizada de los problemas en derechos humanos que dañaron los derechos humanos en la región; a la vez, WOLA nos ofrecía una visión más cercana de la política exterior de los Estados Unidos durante aquellos años.

Los derechos humanos se constituyeron en un tema crítico capaz de hacer pensar a los congresistas que los gobernantes de facto no eran tan demócratas como ellos creían, ni las elecciones tan libres y tan limpias como certificaban las embajadas de la época.

Para esta finalidad, sin convenios internacionales ni tratados regionales de protección a los derechos humanos, el foro congresal americano “fue indispensable”, tal como nos lo hizo ver WOLA.

Al señalar las violaciones a los derechos humanos en las Américas como un fracaso del empuje a la democracia promovido por Estados Unidos, Joe Eldridge y su equipo lograron modificar la legislación del Congreso norteamericano hacia la región. Entre otros logros, WOLA estableció un sistema de documentación en derechos humanos que fue pionero en su tipo, y de esa forma promovió los derechos humanos y la democracia entre pueblos muy cercanos a los Estados Unidos, pero tan lejanos y distantes de los preciados ideales, valores e instituciones que forjaron a los Estados Unidos de América.

WOLA nació en un momento en el que América Latina estaba en el centro del torbellino y ocupaba un lugar destacado en la agenda política internacional. Algunos de quienes vivimos aquella época dramática sabemos de la importante labor que cumplió esta organización en los procesos de transición democrática que vivió la región durante la década de los 80. En el entorno de los derechos humanos, es ampliamente reconocido el decisivo papel que jugó WOLA para que la Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos de la OEA



Salvadorans pay their respects to Monseñor Oscar Romero at his grave (1984).

realizara visitas *in loco* a Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay y Bolivia, como resultado de las cuales los gobiernos de esos países fueron finalmente condenados. En nuestros países, no todo el mundo es conciente del impacto que han tenido las acciones de WOLA llevando y trayendo congresistas y senadores a conocer de primera mano la realidad política de Latinoamérica. En este sentido, creo que estamos en deuda con ellos. En lo personal, me correspondió rendir testimonio de las matanzas consumadas por el Ejército salvadoreño y del asesinato del Arzobispo Romero ante comisiones del Congreso norteamericano, en audiencias gestionadas directamente por WOLA.

Cumplida la etapa de transición a la democracia WOLA no se borró del mapa, y ha continuado brindando su asesoría, interlocución y acompañamiento en la no menos complicada etapa histórica que vivimos hoy. Los retos que enfrenta nuestra región, como sabemos, son enormes, y los objetivos de WOLA siguen siendo los mismos de entonces: promover políticas de respeto a los derechos humanos, la democracia y la justicia, en el marco de las relaciones entre América Latina y el gobierno de los Estados Unidos.

Como todas las organizaciones exitosas, WOLA ha sabido adecuarse a las nuevas circunstancias

globales sin perder su misión, su orientación. Por ello nos resulta acertadísimo el que más recientemente se hayan propuesto abrir espacios de cabildeo e interlocución para las organizaciones de América Latina ante otras instancias, como el Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo y el Banco Mundial.

Sabemos que la agenda política internacional está colmada hoy por otros asuntos, y que América Latina figura en ella solo marginalmente, y solo cuando las cosas se complican con huracanes, terremotos, migración y recesiones retoma vigencia.

Por ello, hoy más que nunca se requiere de este amigo americano que nos ayude a mantener presentes en las altas instancias del gobierno norteamericano, los temas de derechos humanos, democracia y equidad en América Latina. Este *amigo americano*, para dicha nuestra, no es uno, son muchos, y tiene nombres y tiene rostros... Y aquí permítanme mencionar a Joe Eldridge, a Heather Foote, a George Vickers, y a todas las personas que los han acompañado durante estos 30 años de intensa y fructífera labor. A todos ustedes: ¡muchas gracias! 🇺🇸

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**CrossCurrents**

Vol. 6 No. 2 • November 2004  
ISSN 1059-6402

*Edited by Kimberly Stanton*

UNCREDITED PHOTOS FROM WOLA ARCHIVES

Our thanks to the Ford Foundation for supporting our special anniversary issue of *Cross Currents*.

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