AN INTERVIEW WITH CARLOS HENRIQUEZ CONSALVI, ALIAS "SANTIAGO"

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Venezuelan by birth, Carlos Henríquez Consalvi, alias "Santiago," is a journalist, author, guerrilla fighter, founder and official voice of the FMLN's clandestine radio station *Radio Venceremos* in El Salvador. According to Santiago, this radio station was a committed witness of the historical struggle that finally brought about peace in El Salvador in the early 1990's. Henríquez Consalvi has written an account of his experiences with *Radio Venceremos* in his book, *La terquedad del Izote* [*The Stubborness of the Izote*] (México: Diana, 1992), whose title refers to the national flower of El Salvador, which sprouts forth anew when its stem is hurt . . . it never dies . . .

How did the Salvadoran people perceive Santiago, your guerilla radio persona, both during and after the war?

The injustices of history are like this: he who shows his face, he who speaks, is the one who attracts more of the attention. The radio station was a collective effort of tens and tens of comrades, but they didn't talk in front of the microphones. So, they were the real anonymous builders of the radio station. But being in front of the microphone made my voice, which was always proclaming, announcing victories . . . to become widely recognized. So, after the war was over, after spending twelve years in the mountains, I was surprised by the fact that in the streets of San Salvador the people stop me and recognize me and tell me anecdotes: "Look, I used to listen to the radio under a bed so that the police wouldn't find out that I was supporting you." And it was a surprise to receive such displays of affection from the Salvadoran people.

Why did you choose the name Santiago?

My pseudonym comes from a priest who was with us, who used to say that Santiago was the most rebellious apostle. Therefore, it was a good name, and that's that! I've been Santiago for twelve years now, and I can't go by anything else. Sometimes I get called Carlos, and I don't answer.

You're Venezuelan, but you've always been interested in the political situation of Central America. So, can you tell me what nationality you most identify with?

Well, I feel Salvadoran now. My affective, political roots, and even my very memory, are rooted in that which makes up El Salvador, but before feeling this sensation, I used to feel very Nicaraguan, and I researched Nicaraguan history of the nineteenth century . . . above all, the relations between the U.S. and England in the dispute over the Interoceanic Canal. I wrote a collection of poems called "Nicaragua in my Heart" which are my personal experiences during the earthquake which destroyed Managua in 1972. I experienced a re-encounter with Sandino in the nocturnal stories of the earthquake victims, in the camps for victims after the earthquake. I loved Nicaragua very much, and I felt Nicaraguan, but, well, if I make you list all of the nationalities I ended up assuming, probably I could also point to an Argentine nationality, which I also had in my heart. It was the night of the opening of the political jails in Argentina, after the popular movement that liberated the political prisoners. I arrived in Buenos Aires that same day in 1973. I experienced the Argentine process very personally. To sum up, I feel Latin American, and the blame goes to a guy named Simon Bolívar, who taught us—us Latinos, that there shouldn't be borders.

That's true; in theoretical terms there aren't any borders. But in real terms, there are some things that divide us, aren't there? Can you tell me about specific things that you went through as a Venezuelan trying to identify with the Salvadoran struggle?

Well, yes, obviously when you come from an urban area to join a guerrilla struggle in the mountains, you suffer culture shock. The shock begins in the stomach. In the city, you get used to eating hamburgers, Italian food, whatever. The culinary culture gives you the first culture shock, because in the guerrilla situation for a long time it was only beans and tortillas . . . boiled beans. So, that is perhaps one of the most difficult things about adapting. The other is—

was—the lack of female companionship. In the beginning there were few women, and the few there were, were married. So, anyone who remembers . . . when you ask the urban comrades what the biggest absences were, would say the lack of women, the problem of solitude. But all these quickly . . . , well, in the heat of battle, with so much work, with so many responsibilities, they are things that are really too small, which we overcome easily.

However, there were other details that made life very difficult. Salvadorans are small, and I use a pretty big size shoe. It was very hard in the guerrilla areas to find shoes for me. So many times I had to walk with a torn-up boot, or go on long marches. One time, I had to march about sixty kilometers to the ocean with a shoe three times smaller than these, and you can imagine that that was the most difficult moment, because the feet and the head are everything for being in perfect condition for a struggle of that type, don't you think?

Yes. You had studied journalism before going to El Salvador, and in technical/professional terms, that had already prepared you for a certain aspect of your work. But there were many things which in emotional, psychological terms, had not prepared you for this new experience, right? Or had you had any previous emotional or psychological preparation for being involved in the war?

Well, I did have a kind of preparation before going to El Salvador without knowing that I would be going there. I was given the job of setting up a Mesquito-Spanish bilingual station on the Coco River on Nicaragua/Honduras border when it was foreseen that that zone was going to be used by the CIA in order to utilize the population of that zone as a social base for the counter revolution. So it happened that I was there in an isolated place, setting up the station, and that was something of a previous preparation for the later experience.

This is changing the topic a little. You've described various occasions in which you received orders from army leaders of the FMLN. Obviously you were working in cooperation with them. But can you talk about the differences between being a leader of an armed military, and being the leader or main player in the revolutionary communication media?

Well, you're asking me what difference there is between the attitude, behavior, and thinking of a leader, of a guerrilla commander who attends to the military side, and a communicator—a guerrilla who communicates. The preoccupation of a guerrilla commander is to save his soldiers' lives, and at the same time he has the responsibility of military victories. In the middle of the war, at times, they are very

submerged in military issues. And those of us who were in the area of communications had the capacity to sort of globalize certain situations more . . . that had to do with the way in which the FMLN communicated the message to the population. At times we tried to make our position prevail, and many times, after a discussion, they would decide that our point of view was correct. And lots of times it was the opposite—it was the military leaders who had greater clarity on certain aspects . . . .

I can give you a concrete example of the difference there was between a guerrilla leader and a communicator: After three months of our functioning in Morazán as a guerrilla broadcast, we already had ninety cassettes of programming, which represented to us the war history which was beginning to be preserved. A military leader arrived and said, "No . . . Throw, grab, leave that bag with cassettes. Those are cassettes, they serve no purpose." And we, as communicators, had a different point of view. Well, this is the history that must be conserved for the future, and we have to save it. And the military commander thought that it was a lot of weight to carry on a march and that it could pose a danger for whomever might carry it. And it could slow down the march. So, clearly, you can see the differences between those who have very big military responsibilities where the lives of comrades are on the line, and those who do social communication or journalism, and attend more to the conservation of memory than to the military aspect.

I'd like now to continue a conversation about some things which you mentioned in your lecture here at the UI. You said that it was hard to make the transition from transmitting an hour a day during the war to having to do twenty hours now that they have legalized the radio. Can you explain what percentage of time you dedicated to each section of programming? You mentioned things like having newscasters, commentators, radio dramas, etc. when you were transmitting for an hour. How much time do you dedicate to those different sections now?

During war time, the radio programming was quite varied. When the army was inside the zone, you had to be alert for their advance. Therefore the programming was very . . . there wasn't time to prepare it, but rather we were always walking, moving away from the army troops. And at five in the afternoon we would stop the march and position ourselves at the highest point on a mountain. We took the transmitters off of the mules, we positioned the antennas—which were bipolar—two-cable bipolar—and we took the mixer, the microphones and the tape recorders from our backpacks, and the program was produced very spontaneously. But this made us develop a wonderful capacity for improvisation. And sometimes the improvised programs

would end up better than the ones for which you would sit down in the afternoon to write an editorial, because of the proximity of the army, and because of the fact that you felt that going on the air at six in the afternoon meant overcoming a challenge and beating the forces which were close, but which were not able to keep us from going on the air. It sort of gave us more conviction in our words, and more strength, and sometimes even more clarity in the political arguments and in ideological confrontation with the adversary . . . .

Other times we had periods of peacefulness. Sometimes six months would pass during which the army wouldn't come. Then we had an hour or two hours of programming where we always opened with a ten minute news segment that was called the "News Bullet," which was begun in the year 1981 when all newscasts were prohibited. It was the country's only news source for the months during that ban. We also used to have the editorial—we never missed that—which was our viewpoint not only about military...politico-military aspects, but also we sometimes used to talk about the problem of cultural penetration, or that of the recovery of our cultural patrimony. That is, it was quite varied, and sometimes we held segments . . . we had a space that was called "Workers on Their Feet in Struggle" which was all of the information from the city about workers' marches in the streets, strikes . . . There was one time, especially starting with 1984, where the armed struggle moralized and revitalized an urban movement of workers who were in hiding due to terrorization. So we accompanied that struggle, giving information, nourishing their morale, which in turn nourished ours, with their actions.

We also used to have a *campesino* theater. Various comrades who were peasants formed a theater that was called "The Grinding Stone," and it began with the sound of a stone grinding corn, and the most important events in a guerrilla camp happen around the grinding stone. Of course, the food is prepared, but apart from that, you have political conversations, you drink coffee, and you talk, or you converse about everyday things. Then there were the conversations of peasant comrades who expressed elements of their own culture, or their opinion about the progress of the war.

We also had a segment called "The Creative Power of the People" that was poetry and soldiers' stories. Folk music. We also had a segment of campesino music, performed live by a group that was called—that is called—"Torogoces de Morazán," which became sort of troubadors for the war. They would put stories that told of the everyday things of the war to ranchero music, imitations of ranchero music. Battles were won, but no battle was ever won without two things: first, news of it had to go out on *Radio Venceremos* to be heard by the press and the general population, and second, it had to have a song by Los Torogoces de Morazán. They have songs like "The Battle

of San Felipe," "The Battle of Moscarrón," where they narrate the whole battle in a single song: how many prisoners, how many weapons were captured.

Like the Mexican corridos *of the Revolution.*

It's very similar, yes. We also used to have a space for humor. We had a space called "The Subversive Guacamaya," where we imitated the colonels, the generals. We'd give them nicknames that caused their demoralization. We knew that they did demoralize them because even their own troops called them those nicknames, like "The Loony Sow" or "Doll-face Méndez" or "Colonel Virgin Boots," etc. That is, translating the very guanacan, very Salvadoran, humor that our people have.

We also had direct connections with mobile units transmitting from the trenches, live. Just like football games are transmitted, sometimes we transmitted war situations, partly to accompany our soldiers, to bring to them information about what was happening, and to provide journalistic coverage from the sites where events were being generated. There was a time when the radio became a kind of big open-air school in the year 1984, when we knew that the war was going to be extended, and it was necessary to strengthen morale and political education. We had historical and economic programs. Economic history of the country, trying to bring to the radio-listening public and even to the soldiers . . . to convey, well, their political culture and their ideological formation.

You're mentioning a number of things, and that tells me, therefore, that you didn't have programming that was . . . For example, on the radio here in the U.S. you can always think three minutes for a song, after that one minute for . . .

No, because it was really varied. At times, if there were military operations and you were seeing soldiers disembarking from helicopters close by and everything, then the programming was information about the war, and there wasn't room for anything else; everything was improvised. It was an hour of short musical fragments with revolutionary themes and information, and the editorial. That was all. When things were calmer, yes, you could establish ten minutes of information, two, three, or four minutes of music, but it was quite variable.

And these days, is the programming more established, or is it still continuing with that variety?

Well, yes, because we're in a new situation. From 5-6 a.m. we have a program produced by a campesino comrade who gladdens the campesinos' morning with his guitar. He gives them ecological messages, agricultural information, above all now that the harvest season is starting in winter; they carry a message of optimism. Later, from 6-8 a.m., there's the newscast, very contextualized information with two announcers and two commentators, with mobile units that interrupt the transmission and give up-to-the-minute reports, and correspondents in other parts of the world. When the Trade Center bomb exploded in New York, we immediately had the news from New York, fresh from the moment. Or when we transmitted the coup in Venezuela over the radio, you could hear the bombing that was occurring right then in Caracas. That is, we are trying to use all the forms of radio, so that the informative side of the station, which is the main thing, will have more power, and be of the highest possible quality, right? And, well, there are the other established segments: interviews, political debates, historical programs that try to conserve the historical memory of the struggle. The defense of the pre-Columbian heritage, to conclude . . .

Do you still have radionovelas *(radio dramas)?*

Right now we have . . . it's not properly a *radionovela*, but rather a dramatization of the book I wrote, *The Stubbornness of the Izote*. So it's really a reading, but at certain points dramatization comes into play.

In your lecture, you talked about the role that humor played in the Revolution. What uses of humor do you see in a Salvador in peacetime?

I think that in a world where each morning we encounter news about massacres, about bombings, it's a world that needs humor, and the Salvadoran people have that quality, I would say, of confronting whatever painful situation there may be, with an expression of humor. I think it helped a little that this small group—like David—conquered Goliath . . . partly through that sense of life that has a bit of humor, that has a little perserverance and an iron will. So I think that it's good to use humor in the programming, and we're planning to produce a *radionovela*, using the people who are now going to be entering the electoral game a little bit. And it's a form of editorializing, or rather, humor is a serious way of doing journalism. Editorializing isn't only done with a very serious editorial with a very solemn announcer's voice; no, you can express a political position, a point of view about a government action, by way of a humorous segment.

Can you comment on the types of political satire which you may have heard on radio and television in the United States?

Well, speaking in general terms about humor, I think that it's one of the most difficult forms of radio broadcasting because in order to do humor, you have to use situations intelligently, because there is a very fine line between humor and the ridiculous. And in politics, if you're going to do humor, you have to do it intelligently and to know . . . or rather not do humor for its own sake.

You were telling us that one of the comical programs on Radio Venceremos was a radionovela *in which the protagonists were army commanders and Ronald and Nancy Reagan. What did the satire of Ronald Reagan mean to the average campesino?*

The Salvadoran campesino identified Ronald Reagan with all of that power that was providing bombs and weapons, which were killing their children. So for the campesino, he was the symbol of the power which, in the name of "democracy," was murdering thousands of Salvadorans.

Obviously, the intention of the station in wartime is different from the intention during peaceful times. Could you explain how you perceive the purpose of Radio Venceremos *today, and in what way the format of the programming contributes to that new purpose?*

Well, currently the country is going through a very difficult transition period in politics. The ideological referents have fallen away. We're in a moment which I define, as did Simón Bolívar, a teacher from the last century—that in Latin America, we either invent or we err. In El Salvador, everything is being invented. Or rather, we're opening new paths, in communication, in a new way of doing politics.

In the case of the radio, we, too, are forging a new path. We think that the radio should not remain partisan, a radio of propaganda, but rather be a medium of social communication—pluralist and democratic—not the voice of any specific political party. It should be a voice of civil society, which is really the winner with the peace accords. In that sense, we're opening our microphones to sectors of the country which have been marginalized throughout this century, and not only to let them speak—because it's very easy to open space for protest, and then the protest remains just that—but rather that the words get converted into action which continues to transform society, making more profound that which we are calling the democratic revolution. So in that sense we're playing an orienting role in this

difficult transition period. Above all, doing investigative journalism which might get to the bottom of social problems, and also offer the possibility of solutions. We do a lot of forums, a lot of debates, so that all of the voices in society find answers to their own problems.

In this forum, which I understand to be pretty pluralist, what role does the right wing of Salvadoran society play?

Well, the Salvadoran Right, traditionally opposed to social change, has had to have its arm twisted. Ten years ago the Right was saying that there was nothing to negotiate on in El Salvador. Even so, the political reality that produced the war, ended up creating a double power in El Salvador, with political expression, the expression of territorial control. It is a double power that had belligerent expression in the recognition given to the FMLN by the international community. That is, because of this new situation, and this change in internal relations in the country, the Right had to back down on their anachronistic and anti-negotiation positions. And they have had to accept the fact that the FMLN, without having any formal power, has been able to reform the constitution in order to make profound changes in the country, such as demilitarization, the disappearance of counter-insurgency batallions, of the repressive police, to progress...toward a country with the possibility of deepening its democracy, and to lay the foundation for continuing social transformation in favor of social justice in El Salvador.

Álvarez Córdoba, a member of one of the fourteen families which economically dominated El Salvador, tried to be an intermediary between these voices, right? The voice of the people and that of these fourteen families. Finally, he was murdered. Do you believe that his presence in activities of that sort made the Right—which is also composed of Salvadorans—react? And that he guided them a little more toward accepting this vision of the people in general?

I really think not. And the concrete fact is that he was murdered precisely for being a person who came from the heart of the "ruling" classes. No, fundamentally that which I was telling you before: it was a correlation of internal forces, the product of political and military advancement.

I want to finish with a question which is going to take us back to the past here in the U.S. One of the rallying cries of the civil rights movement here in the 60's with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was "We shall overcome" (Venceremos) *Do you see a relation between that movement in the U.S. and the name of* Radio Venceremos? *And,*

continuing with that idea, if you consider recent events in the U.S., with the "other" King—Rodney King—from 1991 in Los Angeles—racial violence, the abuse of civil rights by the police and the courts here, how do you see the future of Radio Venceremos *and that of civil rights in El Salvador?*

That question contains a thousand other questions, but I think that all social movements which seek transformation . . . respect for human rights, and the dignity of human beings, have something in common: their optimism, which is their conviction that we will overcome, that all struggles will overcome. A struggle that begins with the expectation of losing is not a struggle. In that sense, the thinking of King, of Ché Guevara, the thinking of so many anonymous leaders here in the U.S. who fight for the rights of minorities, for the rights of women . . . have a common link: we believe that we are going to win, and we must win, no matter what adversities we may face or how bad the times in which we live.

But in the experience of the civil rights struggle here in the U.S. with Dr. King in the '60s, many concessions were made—changes in the law, etc. Perhaps changing those laws meant victory then, but here we are thirty years later, and I really don't see much evidence of progress in civil rights up to the '90's. So, thinking about the difficulty of maintaining the movement's forcefulness, how do you see the future of Radio Venceremos, *and that of civil rights in El Salvador in relation to the peace accords which were signed last year?*

Important social transformation has been achieved, but there are two situations which we can't forget. One, that the reasons for the beginning of the war still persist in the country, and no one can think that the peace agreement was a victory, a definitive victory. There is still a lot to do, there's a lot in terms of economics, politics and civil rights in El Salvador which needs transformation. But it must also be taken into account that a military structure, a structure which clamped down on civil society during sixty years of militarism, is not just going to sit back with its arms crossed. So, in that sense we Salvadorans have to be very alert, not sit on our laurels, but rather continue in the struggle with even more determination so that, number one, the transformations become more profound, and two, the obscurantist groups don't make them disappear, as usually happens. Sometimes, very beautiful laws are made, or even won . . . which seem very fair, but in practice the obscurantist sectors insure that those laws are not enforced, right? But definitely, we have always been very optimistic, and we believe that just as our people were immensely creative and lucid during the war, in peace they will have this same strength in

order to guarantee that their dreams come to fruition.

And to that end, what are the future plans, in general, of Radio Venceremos *so that those dreams come true, and this level of public interest can be maintained?*

Well, our goal is to build a powerful medium of social communication, in the sense that it has an audience and credibility so that through the objectivity of our news, by way of investigative journalism which gets to the roots of all the problems, it might guide and create opinions, opinions in concert with the peace accords and with the consolidation of a culture of debate, and finally, of democraticization and of change toward social justice. That is our role.