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THE AMERICAS | DECEMBER 20, 2010

WikiLeaks, Honduras and the U.S.

Released cables make it clear that the U.S. knew Manuel Zelaya was a threat to democracy in Honduras.

By MARY ANASTASIA O'GRADY



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"The last year and a half of the [President Manuel] Zelaya Administration will be, in my view, extraordinarily difficult for our bilateral relationship. His pursuit of immunity from the numerous activities of organized crime carried out in his administration will cause him to threaten the rule of law and institutional stability."

—Charles Ford, U.S. ambassador to Honduras, May 15, 2008

Lots of hypotheses have been floated to explain why the Obama administration went to such extremes last year to try to force Honduras to reinstate deposed president Manuel Zelaya.

Now the release of two WikiLeaks cables from the U.S. embassy in Tegucigalpa strengthens one of those theories: that the U.S. knew Mr. Zelaya was a threat to democratic Honduras but had decided the country should tolerate his constitutional violations in the interest of realpolitik.

Practically speaking, Hugo Chávez was the man to please. After a decade in power, the president of Venezuela's influence around the region was notable. George W. Bush had clashed with him. Barack Obama was out to prove that they could get along, as evidenced by the warm handshake at the Summit of the Americas in Port of Spain in April 2009.

Honduras offered a bonding opportunity. Mr. Zelaya was a protégé of Mr. Chávez. Standing up for him as democratically elected was a way to score points with Latin America's hard left.



AFP/Getty Images

At a 2008 conference in Caracas, Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez hugs then-President Manuel Zelaya of Honduras.

But Honduras wasn't willing to play the sacrificial lamb. When its other branches of government removed him from office last year, it caught Hugo Llorens, the U.S. ambassador, flat-footed. Saving face became the top priority.

Mr. Ford's cable, written as he was turning his post over to Mr. Llorens after a three-year assignment in Tegucigalpa, supports this premise. In the opening summary, Mr. Ford wrote: "Ever the rebellious teenager, Zelaya's principal goal in office is to enrich

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About Mary Anastasia O'Grady

himself and his family while leaving a public legacy as a martyr who tried to do good but was thwarted at every turn by powerful, unnamed interests." The State Department says it does not comment on classified documents.

The image of a champion of the poor crushed by the rich elite is precisely what Mr. Zelaya's supporters in Washington and Tegucigalpa peddled to the press in the months after he was removed from office. But Mr. Ford had spotted a fraud. "His erratic behavior appears most evident when he deliberately stirs street action in protest against his own government policy—only to resolve the issue (teacher complaints, transportation grievances, etc) at the last moment."

Though Mr. Zelaya can be "gracious and charming," wrote Mr. Ford, "there also exists a sinister Zelaya, surrounded by a few close advisors with ties to both Venezuela and Cuba and organized crime." He eerily observed what Zelaya opponents would repeatedly allege privately in the year to come: "Due to his close association with persons believed to be involved with international organized crime," the president could not be trusted. "I am unable to brief Zelaya on sensitive law enforcement and counter-narcotics actions due [to] my concern that this would put the lives of U.S. officials in jeopardy."

The insightful diplomat also recognized Mr. Zelaya's disdain for other institutions. He "resents the very existence of the Congress, the Attorney General and Supreme Court." That resentment rose to the surface in June 2009 when the Supreme Court ruled that a referendum on his re-election was unconstitutional. Mr. Zelaya responded by leading a mob to break into a military installation where the ballots for his initiative were being stored.

Hondurans were appalled. The Supreme Court issued an arrest warrant, the military deported him, and Congress voted to remove him from office.

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Almost a month later, according to another WikiLeaked cable, Mr. Llorens sent his own legal analysis to Washington. In it he acknowledges that there might have been a case to be made against Mr. Zelaya for a

number of violations of the constitution. But he also claims that there is "no doubt" that the Supreme Court's decision to issue an arrest warrant for Mr. Zelaya was "a conspiracy" with Congress and the attorney general.

This is absurd. The joint, above-board actions of two branches of government and an independent attorney general to uphold the nation's constitution can hardly be called a "conspiracy." Mr. Llorens also claims that Mr. Zelaya was entitled to "the presumption of innocence," but even a first-year law student knows that presumption only applies to criminal cases.

Another bit of bizarre logic relates to the constitution's Article 239, which says that a president may be removed for any attempt to lift the constitutional prohibition on re-election. Mr. Llorens complains that the article "does not stipulate who determines it has been violated or how." Yet he sees himself as better qualified than the Honduran Supreme Court to make that determination.

Throughout the constitutional crisis in Honduras, the State Department refused to release its legal analysis. Now we know why: Its case on behalf of Mr. Zelaya was flimsy and it was well aware that he was a threat to Honduran democracy.

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Mary Anastasia O'Grady is a member of the editorial board at The Wall Street Journal and writes editorial columns on Latin America, trade and international economics. She is also editor of "The Americas," a weekly column that appears every Monday and deals with politics, economics and business in Latin America and Canada.

Ms. O'Grady joined the paper in August 1995 and became a senior editorial page writer in December 1999. She was appointed an editorial board member in November 2005. She previously worked as an options strategist, first for Advest Inc. and then for Thomson McKinnon Securities in 1983. She moved to Merrill Lynch & Co. in 1984 as an options strategist and was also a product manager and a sales manager for Merrill Lynch Canada and Merrill Lynch International during her 10 years with the company.

In 2009 Ms. O'Grady received the Thomas Jefferson Award from The Association of Private Enterprise Education. Recipients of this award are selected because they represent the best that the free enterprise system produces. In 2005 Ms. O'Grady won the Bastiat Prize for Journalism awarded by the International Policy Network for her articles on the World Bank, the underground economy in Brazil and the bad economic advice the U.S. often gives to Latin American countries. The Bastiat Prize was developed to encourage and reward writers whose published works promote the institutions of a free society. In 1997 Ms. O'Grady won the Inter American Press Association's Daily Gleaner Award for editorial commentary, and in 1999 she received an honorable mention in IAPA's opinion award category.

Ms. O'Grady, who was born in Bryn Mawr, Pa., received a bachelor's degree in English from Assumption College and an M.B.A. in financial management from Pace University.

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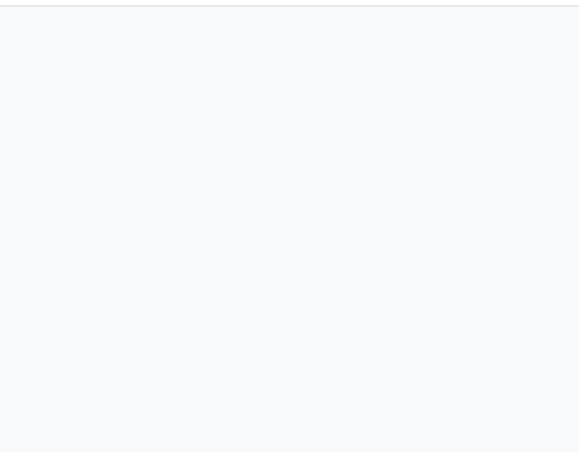
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