



Acceptance Speech by President Violeta Chamorro

It has been several years since I visited the National Endowment for Democracy for the first time, when I was a newspaper editor. At the time, the paper I was working for had just recently reopened after being closed for over a year. The former government in Nicaragua, which was not very concerned with the rights of the people, censored the paper and caused it to close down. This newspaper was stripped of its materials and equipment, left without paper or the means to advertise and most of the staff were exiled. On my trip to the Endowment, I was accompanied by representatives of the Nicaraguan unions, private enterprises and owners of small radio stations all groups which the Sandinista regime was trying to suffocate in its attempt to eradicate the last traces of a civil society in Nicaragua.

I later returned as a presidential candidate for a coalition of democratic political parties who opposed this totalitarian government. There were very few people who believed that this coalition and this candidacy would be successful. On both trips the Endowment opened its doors to me, offering assistance and, above all, giving me friendship.

Now I return as President of my country, and I am greeted with the same open doors and friendship and also with the great honor of receiving the Democracy Award that is presented by the Endowment to representatives of different countries of the world for their contributions toward democracy. The 1991 Democracy Award is an honor, as much because of the prestige of the institution that is giving it to me, as for the cause that it represents. - For me the latter is the most noble - so noble that my biggest desire since my husband died for this flag and bequeathed it to me, is to fight for democracy. The prestige becomes more prestigious and the honor becomes even more honorable because I share this award with Vaclav Havel, the President of Czechoslovakia.

Democracy is what unites a city in Europe and a city in Central America, despite historic differences.

In my homeland, the advent of democracy did not occur through violence or force. It took place solely through free elections. For the first time in the history of the twentieth century, the result of a vote ended a totalitarian dictatorship and the two civil war opponents agreed on peace - not because of the victory of one group, but because of the conviction of both.

Democracy was born in Nicaragua patriotically -- it was born democratically. The characteristics of its birth are those which confirm my belief in democracy and encourage me to spread its ideals to others, with patience. For me, patience is the key for promoting peace - I don't believe in using force for any reason, and while I try to maintain due respect for other's viewpoints, I am always trying to convince them of mine. I have even been attacked by both the national and foreign press because I don't personify the image that the world has of a typical Latin government leader who pounds the table with their fist. I govern as a woman and as a woman, I don't believe that violence or force can win anyone over. Those who govern a country have to be the first democrats, so that democracy can exist. Government leaders and the way that they govern provide the best examples of democracy for people.

In Nicaragua, dialogue is what turned our economy around. We did this by having conferences that cost us both time and patience, but through planting the seeds of dialogue, we have harvested both peace and understanding. Another basic requirement, especially in Latin American countries, is that the development of democracy diverges from militaristic ideals. For this reason, from the first day I was elected as President of Nicaragua, I have not stopped fighting for disarming, both morally and physically - not just in Nicaragua, but in all of Central America. I made a decision to bury tons of military arms in Nicaragua -- to pull out the roots of military ideals in a country that has thwarted democracy so many times. Each gun signified at least one human life that would be stricken down. Instead of burying our children, I wanted to bury these arms forever, as a symbol of the new Republic. My country's battle is a difficult one. But true democracy will only happen when we rid the people of the mentality that war and violence present solutions to our problems. Whatever problem arises, it can be resolved democratically. War never brings the answer - it only presents new problems.

Finally, I have to make one last demand before the democratic world: New democracies need moral and effective solidarity. We need help from all of you so that the disastrous economic situation that we inherited from the mistakes of the previous regime does not affect or handicap the development of our growing democracy. Let us be victorious in all of our battles for freedom! Let us achieve solidarity of all free people -- the most beautiful conquest for democracy this century!