

## The Labyrinth of Deception: Secretary Clinton and the Honduran Coup

*By Daniel Beckman,*

At 4 a.m. on June 28, 2009, a battalion of 150 masked Honduran soldiers under orders from Gen. Romeo Vásquez Velásquez initiated a shootout with the Presidential Honor Guard. Honduras's President Manuel Zelaya was then dragged in his pajamas onto a plane at gunpoint and left on the tarmac in San José, Costa Rica. Foreign Minister Patricia Rodas was also seized by Honduran soldiers and flown out in an aircraft belonging to one of Honduras's wealthiest billionaires, Miguel Facussé. Power, cell-phone service, and broadcast facilities were promptly cut throughout the capital city Tegucigalpa, followed by a weeklong curfew enforced by tanks in the streets.

Within days, Honduras reverted to its recurrent role as a *narco*-state due to the coup,<sup>i</sup> as had been in the cases of 1978 and 1987. Public death lists began to circulate.<sup>ii</sup> By 2013 seventy percent of the police would be found “beyond saving,” paid off or themselves engaged in organized crime, including trafficking, extortion, rape, and murder for hire. Twelve percent of Congress was *narco*.<sup>iii</sup> The son of Porfirio Lobo Sosa, President from 2010 to 2014, was a trafficker trading off of his lucrative government ties.<sup>iv</sup> U.S. funds poured into the unrepentantly brutal Miguel Facussé, a supporter of the 2009 coup and a known kingpin<sup>v</sup> who had acquired his billions by defrauding state enterprises and murdering scores of *campesinos* until he owned a fifth of the land in the Aguán Valley.<sup>vi</sup>

The coup similarly represented a full takeover by the country's big ranching, trafficking, oil-palm, and mining interests.<sup>vii</sup> These interlocking political-economic families and cartel chiefs are “violence entrepreneurs” relying on the connections, the budgets, and the impunity provided by the state. This sector of the elite were long accustomed to using terror to get their way economically and politically.

The “continuing coup” has imposed a death toll that is directly caused by the security forces, not due to the surge in the *mara* violence. Over two hundred *campesinos* were killed in what is now the world's most dangerous country for community land advocates.<sup>viii</sup> 215 LGBT people were recorded murdered between July 2009 and 2015, compared to only twenty during 1994-2008, when *mara* violence was already on the rise.<sup>ix</sup> More than 50 journalists and over 100 lawyers and public prosecutors—even Cabinet ministers—have been gunned down by hitmen and *narco*-police.<sup>x</sup> Not even the members of the death squads have been immune.<sup>xi</sup> Deadliest has been the National Party's embezzlement from the public healthcare system, which condemned over 3,000 to their deaths over 2013-15.<sup>xii</sup> Bertha Oliva, founder of the Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared/Detained, who witnessed her husband get dragged away in the night to be murdered in 1981, concludes that the post-coup regimes are unimaginably worse than the death-squad-ridden military-run regimes that prevailed in the 1980s.<sup>xiii</sup>

Decades of hard-won democratization and strengthening of civil society have been permanently reversed by the coup and years of consequent open state aggression.

Despite abundant expert warning, Washington has continuously and directly supported this political violence.<sup>xiv</sup> Over \$57 million in direct military aid has been sent to Tegucigalpa for fiscal years 2009-14, in violation of the 1997 Leahy Amendment forbidding military assistance to governments violating human rights.<sup>xv</sup> The U.S. has rewarded the heavily-compromised military and police with a total of \$200 million.<sup>xvi</sup> The Honduran forces depend on U.S. training and funding, joint exercises, and “counterinsurgency” intelligence-sharing against *campesinos*. U.S. agents have sometimes fought alongside Honduran soldiers.<sup>xvii</sup> The ostensible motive for increasing military aid and training was to provide leverage and influence to improve the forces’ deplorable human-rights record.

This series of disasters has occurred strictly because the coup’s perpetrators were allowed to set out all the terms, setting up a successor regime and institutionalizing the cloak of absolute impunity. The Secretary of State’s goal matched the main goal of the coup—to keep Zelaya out, at all cost. She locked out anyone who understood Honduras’s politics and history, in order to avoid changing course. Clinton concealed the preplanned and criminal nature of the coup as it unfolded, at the time when an official declaration would have had the most potentially significant impact. She repeatedly dismissed internal warnings that she was letting a dangerous and corrupt regime succeed, during the most critical time when it could have been reversed.

U.S. Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Llorens warned Clinton about the coup a week in advance.<sup>xviii</sup> He threatened the plotters that the “heavens would fall” if Zelaya was removed, whether by kangaroo court or by outright coup. Washington and the world community would completely choke them off.<sup>xix</sup> However the State Department had also sent John D. Negroponte to consult with the *golpistas*. As U.S. Ambassador from 1981 to 1985, Negroponte funded and operated the Contra War out of his massive Embassy in Tegucigalpa. He had direct relations with Honduras’s Battalion 3-16, which illegally abducted, clandestinely tortured, and summarily murdered well over 200 victims. He disregarded their atrocities—though he did intervene in selected cases, in order to preserve their secrecy. Negroponte has always vociferously denied the existence of the death squad—as a hoax by the Russian-influenced enemies of freedom.<sup>xx</sup> This was not a case of mixed messages from the Department: the Ambassador had already been sidelined, neutralized by his own superiors.

On the morning of June 28, Ambassador Llorens explicitly reported to Clinton that the coup was preplanned and illegal, a “coordinated effort by the Supreme Court, the Honduran Congress, and the armed forces to prevent President Zelaya from holding a non-binding poll on a possible constituent assembly,” which would have been legal. Llorens told her that “The seizure and expulsion of the President was an intolerable act by the armed forces and we are going to have to say this loud and clear.”<sup>xxi</sup>

But despite being forewarned that either legislative or judiciary removal was going to be flagrantly illegal, Clinton unsteady announced on June 29 that “We are withholding any formal legal determination” on whether the coup legally counted as a coup.<sup>xxii</sup> This open redefinition of the word “coup” signaled to the new regime that expulsion of the

legitimate President was acceptable, so long as the Department certified a subsequent regime as sufficiently “democratic.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Clinton kept all knowledge of the coup’s illegality a state secret before and after the fact, letting the *golpistas* present their act as spontaneous and at least partly legal in its foundation.

Ambassador Llorens’ July 24 cable, “Open and Shut,” clearly underscored to Clinton and to the White House “that the military, Supreme Court and National Congress had conspired on June 28 in what constituted an illegal and unconstitutional coup [...] a hasty, ad-hoc, extralegal, secret, 48-hour process” without even a show trial. Any talk of legality was a sham aimed at those who could reverse the coup—that is, Clinton herself.<sup>xxiv</sup> The Embassy report was a thoroughly-argued smoking gun, but would remain concealed from all public knowledge; it was never used to pressure *de facto* interim President Roberto Micheletti. Coup supporters in the United States—most prominently the interminable hustler Lanny Davis—quickly scheduled themselves on television to “dispute basic facts about the coup which the U.S. Embassy in Honduras had reported were not subject to reasonable dispute.”<sup>xxv</sup>

Clinton’s own well-trusted staffers were stonewalled if they went against the emerging party line. On August 16, 2009, Anne-Marie Slaughter begged Secretary Clinton to change course and take some noticeable action against Micheletti: “The current stalemate favors the status quo; the *de facto* regime has every incentive to run out the clock as long as they think we will have to accept any post-election government,”<sup>xxvi</sup> she warned. Instead, Clinton kept the Micheletti regime afloat by continuing aid through the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which she had chaired as Secretary of State. She has even admitted that, in September 2009, she deliberately chose to break the law that cut off MCC aid to any “country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup or decree.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

Slaughter’s letter had concluded that the Department had to “find that [the] coup was a ‘military coup’ under U.S. law,” or else Clinton would continue damaging Obama and the United States’ image.<sup>xxviii</sup> Clinton instead moved to concoct a factitious distinction between a “coup” and a “military coup.”<sup>xxix</sup> Micheletti received \$17.5 million in U.S. economic assistance in July and August 2009 alone, and Lobo Sosa would be granted another \$100 million for 2010.<sup>xxx</sup> Clinton undoubtedly had wanted to use the money for leverage over Micheletti, but instead it left the *de facto* President completely secure that any U.S. criticism was for show. Washington would back down if pressure meant restoring Zelaya to his constitutional office. In fact, the oligarchs were being fully guaranteed that aid, investment, and credit would resume flowing by 2010, regardless of conditions. No matter what funds had been suspended, the Department reassured the *golpistas* that they did have their backs.

From the beginning, the only entity with the power to restore Zelaya<sup>xxxi</sup> had secretly decided to undercut the White House’s initial denunciation of the coup.<sup>xxxii</sup> The State Department’s only goals were the November 29 elections and Micheletti’s departure from office. But without a legitimate President this strategy actually caused the coup’s moment of ultimate victory rather than its defeat.

Clinton's upbeat view of the election was expressed by Assistant Secretary of State Thomas A. Shannon, Jr., who described it as a way for the Department to keep up the image of being the "only honest broker [...] the only hope of the Honduran people" against the coup.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Therefore they gave Micheletti free rein to do what he wanted, negating even the harshest of State Department warnings—they offered him full impunity instead.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Deputy Assistant Secretary Craig A. Kelly even edited Micheletti's speeches, in order to make him look like an anti-coup statesman,<sup>xxxv</sup> if that was what it would take to get him to step down in 2010.

Kelly had warned Clinton in September that Micheletti was engaging in "a deliberate delaying tactic designed to move the country toward elections without Zelaya."<sup>xxxvi</sup> But on November 3 Shannon attacked the constitutionalists by declaring that Washington recognized the elections whether Zelaya was reinstated or not.<sup>xxxvii</sup> This decision had actually been made in September<sup>xxxviii</sup>: the entirety of the intense San José negotiations between Honduras's two Presidents had been one big Washington-orchestrated sham to neutralize Zelaya's legitimacy and delay Honduras's popular movements.<sup>xxxix</sup> Clinton allowed the Department's anticipated electoral milestone to be turned into a charade: she in fact burned through all of Washington's political capital in Latin America and gave up the U.S.'s entire hand over Micheletti.

Clinton's State Department was in fact rewarding the termination of Honduran democracy. In the weeks before the 2009 election the *de facto* regime suspended all freedom of expression and association, ordering soldiers to storm radio and TV stations. Hundreds were beaten and tortured in custody; female demonstrators were raped for protesting.<sup>xl</sup> This naked despotism provoked the withdrawal of the hundreds of anti-coup politicians from the election. Independent Presidential candidate Carlos H. Reyes withdrew, after his wrist was broken by a police attack.<sup>xli</sup> Micheletti laid a pall of terror over the campaign, strangulating any meaningful democracy: Clinton was the election's ultimate gravedigger.

The United Nations, the European Union, the Organization of American States, the Carter Center, and most Latin American governments unequivocally denounced the November 2009 vote as illegitimate.<sup>xlii</sup> Clinton however called the vote "free and fair." Against the facts she declared in January 2010 that "The Honduras crisis has been managed to a successful conclusion [...] without violence,"<sup>xliii</sup> the country having "restore[d] its constitutional and democratic processes through negotiation, without imposition from the outside."<sup>xliv</sup> Shannon concluded that the election was a triumph for Clinton over both the U.S. Republican Party and those Latin American governments that he deemed "our adversaries in the region" for criticizing the election<sup>xlv</sup>: the election would in fact cost Shannon his initial standing in Latin America.

Clinton's management style constructed a nested—or Maginot-like—succession of proxies, firewalls, buffers, and intermediaries to provide herself with plausible deniability and political protection.<sup>xlvi</sup> As Secretary of State she was not an autocrat ruling her Department,<sup>xlvii</sup> but nevertheless carefully arranged it to produce only those outcomes that she and her most influential lackeys had personally decided upon. Only one viewpoint was allowed to drive foreign-policy outcomes once a decision had been made. She disposed the people around her in such a way that produced a classic "stovepipe" arrangement, which shuts out non-favorable data. Any advisor who



persisted in transmitting anything discordant with a predetermined goal was thus filtered out. Her Department was thus converted into a veritable maze of stovepipes and stonewalls that controlled how Honduras was viewed. Types like Lanny Davis were allowed to bypass the normal structure of the Department, given an Ariadne's thread in the labyrinth.

The Honduran coup plotters immediately hired Washington lobbyists, specifically selecting Clinton insiders for their ties to the head of U.S. foreign policy. Lanny Davis and Bennett Ratcliff were experienced surrogates for the Clintons, which is why they immediately became the coup's two top representatives in Washington. The *de facto* government did not take one move without consulting Ratcliff: he wrote literally everything that the regime said at the negotiating table in San José.<sup>xlviii</sup> Davis was paid over \$350,000 by Micheletti,<sup>xlix</sup> and later \$20,000 a month by Lobo Sosa.<sup>1</sup> As professional name-droppers these lobbyists were valuable to regimes solely for their personal connections to the Secretary of State. The *golpistas* in fact paid these two Clinton confidantes for the very same reasons that the Clintons trusted them.

Despite his highly public commission by the coup's main financiers—Camilo Atala Faraj, Jorge Canahuati Larach, and Miguel Facussé—Davis publicly denied ever discussing Honduras with Clinton in 2009.<sup>li</sup> At the same time he was actually placing himself at the heart of her dealings with Tegucigalpa. He was her secret San José backchannel to Micheletti in October 2009.<sup>lii</sup> She was fully aware that he was the top lobbyist for *golpistas* and traffickers—but since he was a longstanding underling he was allowed to directly feed her every notion that his commissioners fed to him.

Lanny Davis was hardly a stranger to authoritarian clients: he has represented leaders of such heavy caliber as Laurent Gbagbo, Teodoro Obiang Nguema, and Pervez Musharraf. “I’ve been a liberal Democrat all my life. I haven’t changed my values. But what am I supposed to do if the leader of a country comes to me and says he wants to get right with the world, and get right with the United States?”<sup>liii</sup> To Robert Scheer, Davis exemplifies the art of selling out while keeping a progressive or even radical veneer.<sup>liv</sup> Honduran human-rights organizations expressed disgust at Clinton’s willingness to use the Democratic Party’s “liberal sheen” to mask the coup’s atrocities and debase U.S. foreign relations<sup>lv</sup>—to convince Americans that it had been a move against a tyrant trying to reelect himself. Davis himself bragged to Clinton that his dictator public-relations work was getting “hate” from the Republicans and, especially, from the left.<sup>lvi</sup> His view of politics meshed nicely with Clinton’s self-image, that of always pragmatically furthering the most progressive causes possible in the teeth of unfair and extremist criticism from.

Hillary Clinton has indeed asserted that she fought and even defeated the coup.<sup>lvii</sup> But that only meant a redefinition of the election in 2009—regardless of circumstance—and the departure of Micheletti in 2010 for the fraudulently-elected Lobo Sosa. “Defeat” of the coup was a mere illusion without the restoration of the legitimate and democratic President.<sup>lviii</sup> Clinton shared Davis’s rhetoric but also his worldview, where rewarding a dictatorship can liberalize it and guaranteeing the continuation of a coup can be redefined into a democratic outcome.

Davis’s entire aim in 2009 had been to make *golpismo* palatable and plausible to Democrats, to join the Republicans in permitting the coup regimes to continue. Clinton

and Davis readily agreed with hardline right-wingers as Jim DeMint, Roger Noriega, and Otto Reich that the Honduran coup was in fact not a coup.<sup>lix</sup> Davis iterated the *golpistas*' carefully-composed falsehoods that Zelaya had been legally impeached, that Zelaya had incurred automatic destitution from Honduras's Presidency by trying to get himself reelected, that Llorens was a *gringo* interventionist Ambassador for opposing the coup.<sup>lx</sup> Davis's argument that the coup was a legal "civilian ordered arrest warrant" that had gone slightly awry<sup>lxi</sup> was one that only neoconservatives held in 2009—but which Clinton would wholly adopt.

Latin American "adversaries" were chosen on fatuous geopolitical grounds: Clinton and her circle considered Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela as aggressive enemies of the United States bent on dominating the continent. They were certain that Zelaya's Honduras had joined Russia's orbit along with Ecuador, Bolivia, and Paraguay. Under this zero-sum view of the world—a Cold-War vintage that erased local realities—Zelaya's restoration would be a victory for Havana and Moscow, and an unacceptable defeat for Washington.<sup>lxii</sup> In fact she expressed personal revulsion for Zelaya, seeing him as nothing more than "a throwback to the caricature of a Central American strongman"<sup>lxiii</sup>—as really no more legitimate than Micheletti.

Davis had been hired by the *golpistas* to provide not just influence on Capitol Hill or Foggy Bottom, but to generate a parallel epistemology about Honduras in the U.S. media—to make the idea of a *legal* coup plausible, to say that the removal was universally supported by every sector of Honduras. He managed to flabbergast Greg Grandin by declaring that " 'Elite' is an *ad hominem* word."<sup>lxiv</sup> His commission was to rewrite what could be heard, to define whose perceptions on Honduras could be believed. His task was to make U.S. citizens not quite certain about what had happened—to destabilize the U.S. public's ability to perceive history long enough for the coup to make itself irreversible.

Since 2009 Clinton has explicitly excused the coup—legitimizing a political-economic system that relies on death lists, on the criminalization and murder of dissenters fighting the neoliberalism and militarization unleashed on Honduras by the coup regimes. In 2016, after all the atrocities were the topic of public debate, she declared that the *golpistas* "actually followed the law in removing President Zelaya" and had presented "a very strong argument that they had followed the constitution." "I didn't like the way it looked or the way they did it," but at least it was all managed "without bloodshed."<sup>lxv</sup>

Those closest to Clinton in her personal and political life were allowed to set the agenda on Honduras and elsewhere, and she reshaped her interpretation of events to suit them. Other financially-interested outsiders would be allowed influence in the innermost aspects of the State Department's decision-making, notably Sidney Blumenthal's 2011 stovepipe of sensitive intelligence on Libya.<sup>lxvi</sup> Blumenthal's business associates (unsuccessfully) relied on his Clinton connection to get the regime change they needed to derive a profit.<sup>lxvii</sup> As with Honduras, Clinton still saw the Libya of 2016 as a flawed but bloodless success, as a model for intervention in the Syrian Civil War.<sup>lxviii</sup> Clinton's actions in Honduras and in Libya also share a pattern of indecision followed by a hawkish snap judgment—which she never allowed to be second-guessed—in order to compensate for the initial fence-sitting.

Davis and Blumenthal had proven their personal loyalty to the Clintons by going above what was required of them, having said anything they could to attack Barack Obama in 2008, and having defended the Clintons from the Republicans in the 1990s. In return, Clinton put the weight of the Department fully behind the removals of Manuel Zelaya and Muammar Qaddafi because any viewpoint contradicting those of her private favorites was refused completely. Clinton was hardly being “played” by her unconditional friends, but she always defaulted to placing the likes of Davis and Blumenthal ahead of experts and even her own personal confidantes.

The stonewalls against Llorens and Slaughter, the channeling of pro-coup views within the Department through Shannon, and Davis’s ability to leapfrog the entire structure all had the same causation. Clinton had set up the State Department to serve her personal needs—not Honduran democracy, nor a sustainable and honorable foreign policy. Clinton prevented open and honest assessment of Honduras’s realities, locking out the professionals and allowing illusion and falsehood to become unquestionable doctrine.

In a cable from November 2009 Zelaya had “stressed that if he was not restored the elections would not be legitimate and those involved in the coup would not [sic] be able to free themselves from the stigma of their actions [...] He predicted that if he was not restored that Honduras faced a bleak future led by a weak and discredited government and with a high probability of violence and civil conflict.” U.S. Ambassador Llorens irritatedly dismissed this as typical *zelayista* self-importance.<sup>lxix</sup> Even when told exactly what was going to happen to Honduras, it had come from the wrong messenger and bore the wrong message for the Department of State that Hillary Clinton had created.

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