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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 TEGUCIGALPA 000459

SIPDIS

MADRID FOR HUGO LLORENS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/14/2018

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SNAR, SMIG, MARR, MASS, MOPS, HO

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT JOSE MANUEL ZELAYA ROSALES: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS OF
AMBASSADOR FORD REF: OFFICIAL BIOS ON FILE

Classified By: AMBASSADOR CHARLES A. FORD FOR REASONS 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (S) Summary: Honduran President Jose Manuel &Mel8 Zelaya Rosales is a throwback to an earlier Central American era, almost a caricature of a land-owner &caudillo8 in terms of his leadership style and tone. Ever the rebellious teenager, Zelaya,s principal goal in office is to enrich 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. Various public statements over his tenure suggest he would be quite comfortable as a martyr who tried but failed honorably in his attempt to seek out social justice for the poor. He is comfortable working with the Armed Forces and until recently with the Catholic Church, yet resents the very existence of the Congress, the Attorney General and Supreme Court. Over his two and a half years in office, he has become increasingly surrounded by those involved in organized crime activities. End Summary.

¶2. (S) I have gotten to know Mel Zelaya quite well over my tenure as Ambassador, and offer these personal reflections on his character, his views of the United States, and on what his presidency means for our interest in the region with the objective of informing future policy choices.

¶3. (S) Personally, I have found Zelaya to be gracious and charming, quite willing to tell me whatever he thinks I want to hear at that moment. For example, in the period June-August 2007, we must have met weekly, with his agenda focused on explaining his nomination of Jorge Arturo Reina (who lost his U.S. visa for past terrorist connections) as the UN Ambassador, his presence in Managua at Sandinista celebrations and his intentions with regard to Hugo Chavez. It was interesting to see how his explanations differed from meeting to meeting, almost as if he had no recollection of our exchange just a few days before.

¶4. (S) In the period May-June 2006, Zelaya pressed me hard to obtain President Bush,s approval of his plan to join PetroCaribe. When he met in early June with President Bush who confirmed our strong opposition to his intention, Zelaya later told me that he was surprised that this item had been on our agenda. In short, over an almost three year period it has become crystal clear to me that Zelaya,s views change by the day or in some cases by the hour, depending on his mood and who he has seen last.

5.(S) Not surprisingly, Zelaya has no real friends outside of his family, as he ridicules publicly those closest to him. In the days preceding his inauguration, Zelaya without prior notification canceled a country

team briefing for his new cabinet. Over a private lunch he explained that he trusted no one in his government and asked me the question: &Who is the most powerful; the person with a knife behind the door or the person outside the door who knows there is someone behind the door with a knife?8 It is clear to me that tactically he will work with almost anyone, but strategically he stands alone.

¶6. (S) Zelaya also has been quite erratic in his behavior. Despite his often harsh public rhetoric, such as describing U.S. immigration policy against illegal aliens as "persecution" by "fascists", Zelaya would meet again with President Bush in a heartbeat. At one point he even planned to go uninvited to a bilateral Bush-Berger meeting in Guatemala. Zelaya not only allowed the first visit of a U.S. warship to mainland Honduras in 22 years, but he delivered a TEGUCIGALP 00000459 002 OF 004 ringing speech extolling bilateral relations on the ship's deck, only briefly expressing pride in Honduras' capture and execution of the American interventionist William Walker. Always suspicious of American intentions, he inexplicably submitted to a psychological profile at my Residence - twice. 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. This approach to problem solving seems to be Zelaya's way of gaining acceptance, challenging the established political power structure, and moving his agenda - which is not populist or ideological, but is based on popular appeal.

¶7. (S) Zelaya remains very much a rebellious teenager, anxious to show his lack of respect for authority figures. Cardinal Andres Rodriguez has told me that not only did he not graduate from university but he actually did not graduate from high school. The Cardinal should know, as he was one of his teachers. The problem is that Mel has acted in this juvenile, rebellious manner his entire life and succeeded in reaching the highest office in the land. No need to change now. He will continue to lead a chaotic, highly disorganized private life.

¶8. (S) There also exists a sinister Zelaya, surrounded by a few close advisors with ties to both Venezuela and Cuba and organized crime. Zelaya's desperate defense of former telecommunications chief Marcelo Chimirri (widely believed to be a murderer, rapist and thief) suggests that Chimirri holds much over Zelaya himself. Zelaya almost assuredly takes strong medication for a severe back problem and perhaps other drugs as well. His vehement attacks on the press have reportedly endangered journalists opposed to Zelaya's policies. His style and tone in order to get his way is one of intimidation and bullying, threatening tax inspections and worse rather than substantive debate on issues. Zelaya's inability to name a Vice Minister for Security lends credibility to those who suggest that narco traffickers have pressured him to name one of their own to this position. Due to his close association with persons believed to be involved with international organized crime, the motivation behind many of his policy decisions can certainly be questioned. I am unable to brief Zelaya on sensitive law enforcement and counter-narcotics actions due my concern that this would put the lives of U.S. officials in jeopardy.

¶9. (S) Finally, Mel is very much a son of Olancho, aware of his roots in the land and his family's ties to Honduras since the 1500s. Unlike most other Honduran leaders in recent times, Zelaya's view of a trip to the big city means Tegucigalpa and not Miami or New Orleans. While he and his family have been part of the Honduran landscape for 400 years, they have not until recently inter-married with the Honduras elite in Tegucigalpa or San Pedro Sula. His son's marriage in 2006 to one of the country's leading Honduran-Arab families was very important to Zelaya yet a complex event, signifying acceptance into the very elite group that he so very much resents.

¶10. (S) I have found Zelaya's real views of the United States hidden not too very deeply below the surface. In a word, he is not a friend. His views are shaped not by ideology or personal ambitions but by an old-fashioned nationalism where he holds the United States accountable for Honduras, current state of poverty and dependency. Zelaya's public position against the Contra War and against the establishment of Joint Task Force Bravo at Soto Cano Air TEGUCIGALPA 00000459 003 OF 004 Force Base are manifestations of this underlying viewpoint.

¶11. (S) Other behavior by the President confirms, in my view, the depth of his feeling. While Zelaya was open to our point of view of the selection of key members of his Cabinet, he was absolutely closed to listening to us on his appointment of his Ambassador to the OAS and to his appointment of Jorge Arturo Reina as Ambassador to the UN. The Honduran voting record in the UN in terms of coincidence with US positions is at the lowest point in decades.

¶12. (S) More revealing, at public events with key officials present, Zelaya will make clear that anyone interested in becoming President of the country needs first to get the blessing of the American Ambassador. Personally, in private conversations at the Residence, Zelaya has recounted to me, multiple times how a previous American Ambassador had ordered the President of the Honduran Congress to accept the Presidential candidacy of Ricardo Maduro, even though in Zelaya's view Maduro was Panamanian-born and thus ineligible. Other sources have documented Zelaya's views on this point where his anger and resentment are more apparent than in his exchanges with me. It is clear by the way he recounts the story that on one level he resents very much this perceived dependency yet accepts it exists and looks to me to define for him the rules of the game. He becomes frustrated at times when he believes I am not carrying out this responsibility.

¶13. (S) Most noticeable to me has been his avoidance of public meetings with visiting US officials. Whether Cabinet officials or CODELs, Zelaya always is a gracious host, but never comes out of the meeting to have his picture taken publicly with our visitors, as he is so anxious to do with other visitors from Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela. Almost all of our meetings take place at my Residence rather than at the more public setting of the Presidential Palace. He made no attempt to disseminate his may photo ops with President Bush after the June 2006 meeting in Washington. The fact is that the President of the

country prefers to meet quite often in the privacy of my Residence but not to be seen in public with American visitors.

¶14. (S) Finally, Zelaya recently is fond of saying that we need to improve our communication, which I interpret to mean that we need to agree with him more often. A similar fate has befallen Cardinal Rodriguez who used to meet, as I do, regularly with the President. As the Cardinal in recent months has found himself in disagreement with Zelaya and is not participating publicly in his projects, Zelaya is working increasingly with pastors in the evangelical community. The Cardinal recently told me that he and the President hardly speak now as the President is unhappy that he doesn't agree with the direction Zelaya is taking the country. For Zelaya, communicating means agreeing unquestionably with his point of view.

¶15. (S) GOING FORWARD: The last year and a half of the 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. Honduran institutions and friendly governments will need to be prepared to act privately and in public to help move Honduras forward.

¶16. (S) We will need, in my view, to continue to engage Zelaya whenever we can in order to minimize damage and to TEGUCIGALP 00000459 004 OF 004 protect our core interests. As a rebellious teenager, he will need a significant space to move, in but we must be very direct in our conversations with him as to our core interests. Despite his feelings towards us, he does respect the role the U.S. Embassy is still perceived to play in Honduran society and will expect us in private to be direct and clear in our views. Using an analogy from American football, we will need to continue to carry out an aggressive bend but not break defensive game plan in the run up to the next elections in November 2009. In this way, I believe we can engage Zelaya intensely in the hope of so as to minimizing damage to Honduran democracy and the economy. Ford