

## Video: The USA and Nicaragua Now: Brian Willson

An interview with S. Brian Willson

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*Tortilla con Sal: We're here with Brian Willson, Viet Nam veteran and onetime criminal lawyer. Brian has written extensively about US imperialism and its effects around the world and what people in Nicaragua are especially interested in right now Brian is what's happening in the United States as a result of the murder on May 25<sup>th</sup> of George Floyd. What's your take on that?*

Brian Willson: Well I think that 8 minute 46 second video focused on that policeman with his knee on George Floyd's neck and his hand in his pocket as he's looking at the camera, I think that picture finally disclosed viscerally 400 years of white exceptionalism in a way that people could feel, viscerally, that this is what people had been going through through our entire history in the United States and before it even became the United States. It exposed the fake identity of white supremacy in a way that nothing else has been able to do like that video.

And it changed the whole culture in a way. It affected everybody, not just in the United States but in the world. These demonstrations against police violence are happening all over the world, not just in the United States. Now I'm a white male, who because of that has been privileged and I discovered in Viet Nam that that privilege had become a disability because it had made me in a way, stupid. It had made me so comfortable in a sense that I didn't need to ask serious, penetrating, critical questions about the war, or about my history. But there came a time in Viet Nam where I realized that I am living with a fake identity which was interfering with my capacity to see clearly, think clearly and to operate in a way that represented me as a human being, the way I would think that I wanted to be as a human being.

So what happened on May 25th I think was like a lightning bolt that struck the hearts and minds of virtually everybody in the United States and around the world and including the white supremacists who now know that their fake identity has been exposed and that makes them more violent. Because I know from my experience when I lost my fake identity in Viet Nam, I was suicidal. I took my own pistol and put it to my head because I'd been living a lie and how is that...how is that possible? That everything I had been taught in school, in church, at home, in the community, was not true...

That's an astounding revelation to deal with and it has huge emotional repercussions... of being worthless, of shame, shame is something that I realized that my society had never experienced after genocides against the indigenous and the blacks. And if you can't experience shame, you can't grow. Your development is stopped because you don't find your empathy. Empathy is critical to being a human

being, to being in a collective society. So from that experience I felt that what happened in May and is still happening in Portland for example where I lived for 12 years and still have a home. I think they're in their 86<sup>th</sup> day of protesting police violence every day. And many other cities the same, it's just not as intense as in Portland.

I think there are several cops in Seattle who have just quit saying we just can't do this every night, we can't be putting up with these protests against police brutality. These young people, the young people who are leading these protests in Portland and elsewhere know that they have no future in the United States, they know that protests and the First Amendment means nothing if your going to say something that's really poignant about society it's not protected. If you're going to talk about police brutality, it's not protected because police brutality has been the norm for the whole society in our whole history because policemen have been designed to protect private property.

TcS: Could you talk a bit about the historical development of policing in the United States and how that lead to what happened on May 25<sup>th</sup>?

Brian: Well the concept of police, even before the the word policing, when they had guards or Pinkertons, they were hired to preserve the property of the property owners and of course originally the property owners owned human beings called slaves. So the original systemic version of police was to police human beings meaning that if you ran away, we're going to come and get you, we will kill you if we need to but we will certainly bring you back to your slave master.

After the civil war, basically wage slavery replaced chattel slavery and so we had the rapid development of factories and the robber barons. They all had private, originally, police to maintain order in the factories and if there was any labor union activity of course that was immediately repressed and the history of the United States is that over 800 labor union organizers have been murdered, more than in any other country really. So all through from the 1860s into the 1930s the police were primarily protecting the coal mines, the gold mines, the factories.

Then we had people in cities that said "well maybe we need to protect our neighborhoods" and so they actually hired policemen with uniforms on the public payroll. Then the policemen formed unions and the union heads of all the police departments in the United States are paid from the public police budget. So in a sense police accountability is pretty much neutralized by virtue of police unions which are funded by the public because the union head is paid out of the police budget. So starting in the late '60s the development of SWAT teams appeared.

These were super groups of cops, heavily armed, masked, body shields and they were dealing with the black uprisings in the cities, especially the Black Panthers.

TcS: Would you say the '60s was the moment when the US police began to be seriously militarized?

Brian: Yes. And then subsequent to that the United States Congress has passed several Bills that authorize the military, the Defense Department, the Offense Department to give to police departments all over the United States, free, armored

personnel carriers, jeeps, even tanks. So now we have a totally militarized police, even in small cities like Chattanooga, Tennessee. All police departments are militarized. In fact, increasingly now when the police show up when there's a demonstration, the police themselves are the provocateurs of the uprisings because they are like Martians.

They're so decked out in black and you can't see their faces, you can't see their shields, their IDs. And in Portland now, for 85 or 90 straight days, the police no longer wear their name tags. They use various kinds of projectiles, every day, every night... concussion grenades, tear gas, rubber bullets which really are metal with a rubber covering the metal. There's been several dozen people seriously injured by the police.

TcS: Have any police been killed in Portland?

Brian: No police have been killed so far. The federal thugs have been there. You know Trump's federal thugs came to Portland in early July. And they lasted about three weeks and then they realized that well, this could go on forever and people were saying that those thugs were so brutal that they were creating the violence. Well, they left and the Portland police are worse. They literally are worse.

TcS: You're a member of Veterans for Peace and one of your colleagues in the Veterans for Peace movement, Mike Hastie, was badly attacked by the Portland police, was he not?

Brian: Yes. He's been attacked twice. He was a medic in Viet Nam. He's been in the peace movement for at least 20 years. And he's a photo journalist so he always has two cameras with him with two different lenses and he's quick to go from one camera to the next depending what kind of a shot he wants. He has taken incredible shots every night of what's happening. He was talking... this was with the federal thugs, before they left, he was talking to them up close, about 8 of them. You can't see their faces. You can't see their name tags because they don't have a name tag on them, or it's covered.

He was telling them that this was like Viet Nam and he said that in Viet Nam we committed atrocities every day, every day we were committing atrocities in Viet Nam and you are doing the same with the people of Portland. And then out of the blue, out of the left side of his body one of these thugs, about 12 inches from his face hit him head-on with tear gas, knocked his glasses off. And he kept talking, he kept saying "atrocities this is what we're all about, atrocities, atrocities, atrocities, do you understand? You don't know, this is what it's all about.." and then they left and then the medics of the peace movement then helped him wash out his eyes. he couldn't see for about a day and-a-half.

And then about a week or two after that, he was getting close-ups of the Portland police. They love to use their batons. After they've used the tear gas, after they've used the concussion grenades when people are coughing and choking and bending over they come and club you over and over and over again. And he was filming them doing that and the police just en masse rushed against him and several other people who were also taking pictures and they knocked them on the ground and several cops smashed his face with their feet just as he was on the ground holding his cameras, trying to protect his cameras. He didn't get a fractured skull, but he got a very

severe right eye injury.

Other people, by the way, have had fractured skulls from the rubber bullets, going into the skull. A rubber bullet is still a metal bullet with rubber on the outside and they can penetrate the brain and paralyze you and the wound is not operable. I saw this in the West Bank when I was there and I saw the rubber bullets in people's brains. I went to the hospital to look at the x-rays.

So these demonstrations are happening all over the United States. Portland just happens to be the flashpoint and the young people... well there's moms that are out there together in yellow shirts. There's vets that are out there in a different color shirt and then there's people, the leaf blowers, they push the tear gas back to the police so they have a lot of leaf blowers now. And the young people that are on the front lines, they look like gladiators. They have chest protectors. They have shin guards. They have kidney protectors around their mid-section. They have helmets. They have gas masks. They are there to take the blows. Every night.

And these people know that there's 50 million people unemployed in the United States right now. There's 40 million people about to be evicted. There's no future for these young people. Half of the small businesses will never come back to business. The United States government is doing nothing to help them and meanwhile the ten richest people in the world, the billionaires, the ten most rich billionaires together now own US\$1.1 trillion while more and more people are homeless, more and more people are out of work.

And these young people know, this is our last stand. There's nothing more for us. The government is rigged. The politics are fixed. They're not broken. They're fixed. Fixed in favor of the rich. And we know. We now know it. And that May 25th video of the cop's knee on George Floyd's neck really unleashed a kind of visceral energy that can't be stopped. It's not possible to stop it because it's so clear, emotionally as well as intellectually that this society has always been this way for anybody but the white middle class. And the white middle class has only been prevalent since World War 2 for about 25 years. So they know it's done. The United States is done basically. there's no more normality.

TcS: Brian, you were here during failed coup attempt in 2018 so you were very aware of what was going on here during that time. Is it possible, or fair to ask you to offer some kind of comparison between or contrast perhaps between what was happening here in Nicaragua during April to July 2018 and what you have been witnessing and learning about from your friends in Portland?

Brian: Well I was getting ready to go to the hospital on April 18<sup>th</sup>. I was still at home waiting for my operation date. When the news came out on the 18<sup>th</sup> that the police had massacred the students, that news came on the 18<sup>th</sup>. It wasn't true but it was announced on the news on Channel 63 and Channel 10, Channel 12 and I said to Ulda my partner "there's no way the Nicaraguan police massacred students unless the police were being shot at". It just wouldn't happen. There would be no motive for the Nicaraguan police to shoot students.

And then by the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 22<sup>nd</sup>, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, there were multiple shooting in 8 different cities in Nicaragua. And I said this has been concocted with lies and yes people have died but the description and the narrative around what's happening is not what's really happening and the brutality of the opposition in Nicaragua was grotesque. They were filming themselves and putting it on Facebook. I don't use those others like Twitter or Instagram and so forth. I only use Facebook which is bad enough.

And they were showing, I guess to scare the Nicaraguan people that this is what's going to happen to you if you don't join us. I thought and I told Ulda, this kind of thinking that these opposition people have, they're brain washed by the people in the United States. Because this is the kind of stuff that the National Endowment for Democracy and the CIA and USAID, they would think of things like this. Because they only know how to destroy and be deceitful. In Portland the police keep saying that what the people are saying about the police behavior, police brutality isn't true, and it's all on camera and the police are grotesque.

So anyone in Nicaragua who still listens to their orders from the US, then you know it has an agenda of destroying, not of building. So I'm afraid that money does speak and you bribe people and by the way I failed to mention there are provocateurs in Portland, paid by the police to cause... to commit crimes actually that justify the police coming down even harder. Some of the police have been caught looting and arsoning and smashing windows.

TcS: Sounds very similar to Chile.

Brian: So something has happened in the United States that can't be reversed. It's not just the virus for which the United States is the worst case for responding to the virus in the world , partly because white exceptionalism makes people in the United States think they're invincible. This is a disease, a dis- ease, that permeates the culture. They weren't prepared for the virus and as the President said, it's just going to go away, it's not going to be a big problem. So, you add the virus, the police brutality and Trump in a way gifting the nation with a real truth about American culture, US American culture, without any cosmetic cover.

The disguise is gone. The virus is ruining the economy. The police brutality is so obvious and young people know that there's no future. And now you have Republican and Democrat conventions going though the theater of the absurd, trying to distract people from the fact that we still spend US\$1.25 trillion a year on the military all over the world and not at home. It's so insane.

TcS: One of the thing about the grass roots movement in Portland, Brian is that they're very conscious of the broader reality of United States politics and culture and they want to change it and one of the things that they've been talking a lot about is how to develop more community based policing and how to replace the current police culture like this movement to defund the police I think they call it. Do you think Nicaragua has anything to offer people in Portland by way of examples they might try to set up and follow?



Brian: Well I think community policing requires a trust in the population of the government, a basic trust. In the United States there's absolutely no trust in the government. There's no trust in the media. There's no trust in the health care system because there isn't really a health system. It's a private system that has some public components but never a guarantee of health care. So defund the police and defund the military are both very appropriate slogans but they are not going to be achieved in my opinion through voting or legislation.

It's going to be because people stay in the streets indefinitely for months and months and months until there is some space for a discussion about the destruction of capitalism for profit, of an economic system designed for profit rather than for the needs of the people. I don't see any future in legislation, in other words through the political system or through voting in the political system, which itself is a rigged system, voting.

But it means people have to be in the streets and the question is whether people have the ideology of solidarity with other people around the world and enough tenacity and enough strategy and discipline to remain in the streets indefinitely throughout the country. And there's people in the streets even in Chattanooga and Memphis, Tennessee. It's not just Portland. Portland happens to have a lot of activists that live in Portland. It's a white city. It's predominantly a white city. But their motto now is Black Lives Matter.

So the young people know that all of our lives now are impacted by the collapse of capitalism, which the virus has shown, which police brutality has shown, as President Trump has shown. President Trump really has revealed the true nature of our culture, of United States culture.

TcS: And do you think there's a chance that at a state level or perhaps at a community level that it may be possible to build a movement for community policing? Because here in Nicaragua community policing focuses on youth and they treat youth, they don't see young criminals as delinquents. They see them as "youth at risk". Do you think there's any chance that that culture might take root and develop albeit in a limited way in one place or another in the US?

Brian: It's possible but really what's happening means there has to be a whole change in the consciousness of the culture. Nothing's going to work now without a change. That's why the explosion of empathy from the knee on the neck, that knee is on all our

necks now. That's metaphorically I think how people experience it. "Holy shit! We've all got that knee on us! It's been on us all along but we pretended that we were supreme as white people..."

And that's gone. So I think that it's very likely that new models will emerge of bio-regionalism where sections of the country that have good fertile soil and enough rain will create local economies without supply chains, without long supply chains. That would be what I would call an indigenous model or an early neolithic model. But it would be a local model. It would be de-dollarizing and de-globalizing into a more local community where familiarity is the primary accountability mechanism, not law, but familiarity.

I think that is logically something that would evolve out of the calamity of capitalism which is as far as I'm concerned now is never going to recover. Fortunately. It's a terribly destructive system. And you know that the Iroquois who were destroyed pretty much by George Washington during the 1770s and 1780s during the revolutionary war. I happen to have been born in Iroquois country. The Iroquois chiefs in 1790 called George Washington who was the first elected President, as we call him. They called him the Town Destroyer because he destroyed every Iroquois village to ashes, one of which was my village.

I was born in Geneva, New York, at that time it was called Kanadesaga. And I think the United States has always been the Town Destroyer. That's how we formed as a nation. We stole the land from the Indians. We stole the labor from the Africans. And we called ourselves exceptional. And we have played this game with ourselves for 400 years and it's now crashed. And that's why I think that May 25<sup>th</sup> video is so important because in one 8-minute video you see a picture of 400 years of persecution of whites, indians, poor whites, women, blacks by the whites that feel that they're superior. And you see how sick that is. It's really sick.

So I'm not particularly hopeful or not hopeful. Or optimistic or pessimistic. I think the reality is that the system is no longer going to be functioning and the question is, is there going to be enough of a revolutionary movement to create the space to recreate something different such as a social democracy committed to producing for the needs of the people. And that might be of a bio-regional nature, especially as climate catastrophe becomes more intense.

In other words, the areas that are going to be more habitable will be the areas where there's a temperature that's bearable and that has enough moisture. And that's going to be more limited as the next five, ten years go by. But there will be places that are habitable and those are the areas that might create or recreate the model that we originally destroyed when the Eurocentrics came to the New World and destroyed the indigenous lifestyle. But it's clear now to most people in the United States that something has happened that can't be reversed.

TcS: Brian, in a few days time it's going to be the 33<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the terrible attempt against your life that took place when you were protesting against armaments being sent to the war in Nicaragua. You suffered very very severe injuries and people were amazed that you survived...

Brian: I am too...

TcS: But in all that time you've continued to show solidarity with victims of anti-imperialism around the world, but especially Nicaragua. You've always maintained your strong attachment and affection and admiration for Nicaragua and its Sandinista Revolution, could you talk to people about why you feel that?

Brian: My own personal revolution started in April 1969 in Viet Nam. That's when I had this epiphany that really affected my whole being. It's when I discovered that I really had empathy and I didn't know much about it. I was getting prepared to go to law school. I got drafted out of law school. Had to do my time. I was just going to resume being a lawyer. So something happened in Viet Nam that made me realize that all people are connected and that I fell in love with the Vietnamese Revolution. I didn't even realize it was a revolution until I had my epiphany. "Oh I am dealing with a revolution and I am on the wrong side. I am an invader."

So that kind of awakened me in general to conditions in the world. And in 1986 I had my first opportunity to come to the quote unquote Third World outside of Vietnam when I got a scholarship to study Spanish at the Nica School in Estelí. So I came to Nicaragua in 1986 and I spent two months in Estelí studying Spanish even though I didn't learn it very well. And I was taken by the revolution that I had been reading about. I was living with two families in those two months, watching them in their literacy campaign, studying every night reading and writing on a chalk board, both families with children diligently studying every extra moment.

And knowing that the United States was trying to destroy the revolution, I just became more committed to not only supporting a popular revolution that helps people's lives but to work against my own country's policies that destroy aspirations of people because they're not willing to kiss Uncle Sam's ass in the way Uncle Sam wants them to live and to economically survive according to US rules. And I had learned that from the Vietnamese and I'd also been in El Salvador with the guerrillas, the same kind of a struggle against centuries of oppression.

And I knew how much money the United States was giving to El Salvador every day and I knew how much money the US was giving to the Contras every day because I was following the news, I was following it. I had many file folders of notes and articles. And I was following what was happening in Guatemala. Then in 1994 I went to Chiapas after the uprising in Chiapas after NAFTA. And I had already gone to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. I had been to Iraq after the bombings.

I had been in Haiti before Aristide was overthrown the first time. In fact I arrived in Baghdad after I had been in Haiti to read the headline in the one English language newspaper in Baghdad, called the Baghdad Observer : "Aristide Overthrown in Coup", and I thought you know I can't go any place without being reminded that the United States is just messing with everybody. And so in some way my motivation is that I can't stand the suffering. It's my suffering.

I still hear in the villages in Viet Nam after we left the villages after bombing them I still hear the moaning of the people that weren't yet dead. Some nights I wake up crying, hearing that moaning. And we just left them to die without any medical care at all. What kind of a human being is involved in this kind of behavior? So you know it

really required me to look at myself and realize that my white identity was a disability. Because I had internalized it like most of us have. It was our life. We were lucky. We were white. White males. We didn't even have to work hard to get anything.

And it meant that I couldn't critically think or see what was really happening. And that's what happened to me. That's why I put the pistol to my head in Viet Nam. I thought "Oh my God. I'm a fake. I'm like an ideological robot". And so Nicaragua was a real live revolution when I came here and my country was trying to destroy it. And am I going to support the destruction of a revolution? or am I going to support the revolution? It's kind of a no brainer, once you have had that awakening. I didn't expect to live this long. But here I am talking about it.

TcS: Your support has been very important, especially over the last two, three years over what has been a very difficult time for Nicaragua with so many falsehoods spread about what's been happening in Nicaragua. Do you think that that epiphany that you had those many years ago...

Brian: April 1969

TcS: has made it possible for you to see through all the falsehoods that have been put about...

Brian: Oh yeah... all I see is falsehoods. Then I studied history and the United States is built on falsehoods. It's a whole fake history that we learn. So everything that we learn in the West and certainly in the United States is not true. So we have to keep telling lies to keep concealing the original lie, in order to feel ok. So now I knew it was all bull and I haven't taken LSD and I haven't taken a lot of drugs. It was a raw, raw experience that I was right in the midst of and like my brother said as I put in his obituary, after my parents died, who were very right wing, one of our good friends said to my brother and I "how did you two boys come out of those two parents?" And my brother right away, I didn't have anything to say particularly, my brother right away said "we discovered we had a brain!"

Oh ok... maybe that's true... But we also discovered that we had a heart and my brother later told me the reason he was so anti-racist is that in third grade there was one black girl in his class. This was in Geneva, New York. And the teacher who was our next door neighbor called the black girl up to the class to do something on the blackboard and she didn't get it right and the teacher hit her with a yardstick. And my brother never forgot that. He would talk about it, he said, "from that moment on, I knew something was really wrong with how we're trained, how we're educated".

He was nine and a half years older than me so he kind of led the way for me to have a break from our parents who were very strict, Republican reactionaries, really racist. So my brother who died this last Sunday, his time was due. But knowing he's not around has been really hard for me, realizing that he's no longer somebody I can touch. This happens to everybody in the world, I know, all the time, but I've had a lot of death in my life and I've never felt it like I have with my brother, my sibling. 79 years I've been his younger brother.

TcS: Brian, do you think it's fair to say that your understanding and what you've come to know and learn about the way Nicaragua's revolution has really and truly focused

on – while they may not have got everything right – but their focus has been on improving the lives of their impoverished majority. Would you say that knowing that and experiencing it in its different phases over the last 30 or forty years has been a source of moral strength to you in terms of confirming your feelings about your epiphany and your feelings about your brother and what your brother thought was right. Is there any correspondence between what you know about Nicaragua and all this stuff that you’ve been talking about?

Brian: Well all through the '80s, at least after I was coming to Nicaragua after 1986, '87, '88, '90, every time I had a chance to speak here and in the United States I'd say “the Nicaraguan Revolution is as important to the people of the United States as it is to the Nicaraguans” because we need a revolution. We, the United States. We may... You see we've never had a real revolution. We haven't had the first one yet. We may have it now. Or we may just go extinct.

But yes, experiencing a real revolution with all of its mistakes but an effort, an earnest effort to bring health care and education and literacy to campesinos, I mean, what's more revolutionary than that? Just bringing some very tangible kinds of help and support to people who otherwise would just be forgotten. Like the indigenous in the United States who are totally forgotten. They're worse off than the blacks in terms of their conditions. 80% unemployment. 70% alcoholism. And it was their land...

It's like we are so contaminated with our violence and our lies that it really does require a revolution to break through just like the Sandinista Revolution broke through the Somoza mentality and the Somoza policies. There has to be a break in the way of people's thought process and for me that did happen in Viet Nam. It happened to a lot of vets, not the majority of them but some and I think the May 25<sup>th</sup> video was the beginning, along with the virus, along with Trump is... it's over. The honeymoon is over. The white exceptionalism, phony identity is done.

It may lead to a civil war, because the white males are armed to the teeth and they want to defend their fake identity. Because I know in Viet Nam when I realized I had a fake identity I was thinking about committing suicide... I mean, losing your identity? As a 27 year old or a 30 year old or a 16 or 15year old...that's a tough thing to go through. I mean...everything I've been taught is bull? What! You mean my priest is telling lies? My teacher's telling me lies? My parents are telling me lies? My school books are telling me lies? How can that be?

And yet, the whole history that we learn about the United States is fake. That's the book I'm writing now. The fake history of the United States. And it's screwed us up completely. We can't see clearly. We can't relate to people in any just way because it's our way or no way. And it's blinded us and so I'm glad I'm 79. I've no idea what's going to happen except I know there's not going to be any return to normality and that is good. Because normality in the United States was horrible.

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