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**MISERY  
IN THE NAME OF  
FREEDOM**

**THE UNITED STATES IN NICARAGUA**

**1909 – 1990**

**AL BURKE**

SECOND EDITION

NORDIC NEWS NETWORK

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## CONTENTS

- 1 PREFACE
  
- 5 STARS & STRIPES WHEREVER  
Manifest Destiny and the Nicaraguan Canal route. "Dollar Diplomacy". Occupation by U.S. Marines; protests at home. Revolt of Sandino. The "communist threat" of Mexico.
  
- 21 THE BLOOD OF THE PEOPLE  
Somoza dynasty and *La Guardia Nacional*; usefulness to Washington. 1972 earthquake and political aftermath. Insurrection. Fall and legacy of Somoza.
  
- 39 THE SANDINISTA PROCESS  
Provisional government. Conflict between Sandinistas and economic elite. Coals and achievements of the revolution. Effects of internal divisions and "Reagan Doctrine" on reconstruction.
  
- 91 AITACK OF THE REAGANITES  
Nicaragua and the "post-Vietnam syndrome". Ascendancy of the New Right. CIA destabilization campaigns; the example of Chile. Origins and practices of CIA-*contra* terrorists. Economic aggression. The pro-*contra* opposition. Costs of the war.
  
- 163 PACKAGING THE ACTIVITY  
Disinformation techniques employed by Reagan White House; basic themes. Complicity of mainstream press. Comparison of Nicaragua with the U.S. and its client-states. The "crazy quilt" of Nicaraguan society.

(continued...)

CONTENTS (*cont.*)

- 314 OBSTRUCTING INJUSTICE  
U.S. solidarity movement. Vacillation of Congress; role of "moderates". Fallout from Iran/Contragate scandal. Reaganite violations of U.S. and international law; World Court ruling. International solidarity movement. Response of Latin America; Contadora group and Arias plan. Sabotage of peace initiatives; role of Congress and the press.
- 438 THE NEXT NICARAGUA  
Alternative explanations for attack of the Reaganites. The future of "low intensity conflict" and covert operations. Challenging the crusade: significance of congressional campaigns, role of solidarity movement. The future of a good example.
- 509 EPILOGUE  
The United States continues to plague Nicaragua with various forms of military and economic aggression. The Sandinista process is interrupted in 1990 by an "electoral *coup d'état*".
- 518 APPENDIX  
Information and Solidarity Resources
- 521 ENDNOTES
- 549 REFERENCES
- 555 INDEX

## COMMENTS ON FIRST EDITION

I thought I knew the story of Nicaragua, but not like this. That small country has suffered every kind of natural disaster, yet none can compare with the heedless cruelty and devastation inflicted on it by a succession of U.S. governments. *Misery in the Name of Freedom* puts it all together with passion and compassion. It demonstrates that, to a public as manipulated and disinformed as ours, nothing is so surprising as the truth. Burke writes like a house afire, and not just their house — ours, too.

— *George Wald, Nobel laureate and prof. emeritus, Harvard Univ.*

Anyone who reads this book will come away with an understanding of how it has been possible that in the United States, with its supposedly free press, the big liars have managed to sell the big lies of the Reagan administration's campaign of terror against Nicaragua. Burke has put the facts together in a way that will shock and anger newcomers to the subject, while providing even well-versed readers with fresh data and perspectives. *Misery in the Name of Freedom* will be the one indispensable book on Nicaragua for years to come.

— *David MacMichael, former C.I.A. analyst*

The record is full of lies by officials at all levels of the Reagan administration about what this country is doing in Nicaragua and, indeed, in all of Central America. But as our collective memory becomes hazy, the lies become accepted as truth. This book is a good corrective and reminder.... The book's value is in being almost an index to a record of unjustified brutality by the most powerful nation on earth to one of the poorest and most miserable. Not least of the pictures it presents is the duplicity practiced by the Reagan administration on the American public. A shameful record.

— *Mike Layton, review in Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

MISERY IN THE NAME OF FREEDOM

If I were preparing to confront the distortions of the Reagan administration in a public debate, *Misery in the Name of Freedom* would be the first resource I would turn to.

— *Charlie Clements, M.D., subject of "Witness to War",  
Academy Award-winning documentary*

*Misery in the Name of Freedom* is a brilliant and highly readable account of the muddled mess that passes for U.S. policy in Nicaragua. It fully documents the shameful actions of the murderous bullyboys who call themselves our leaders while carrying out disgraceful acts of international brigandage in our names. Here is the unpleasant truth about the United States' greatest disgrace since Vietnam."

— *Jack Olsen, author of Give a Boy a Gun*

This book makes an invaluable contribution to our knowledge of recent events in Nicaragua. Much of the information assembled here is not readily available elsewhere. Like I.F. Stone during the Vietnam War, Burke has gone to original sources to document the folly and hypocrisy of U.S. policies in Central America. He shows how cruelly the public has been deceived by the White House and how, with a few honorable exceptions, the mainstream press has failed to report accurately what is happening in Nicaragua today. *Misery in the Name of Freedom* is required reading for anyone wishing to understand the current crisis in Central America.

— *Giovanni Costigan, Prof. of History, University of Washington*

\* \* \*



# PREFACE

## SECOND EDITION

First published in 1988, the intended purpose of this book is to provide an introduction to the lengthy and often brutal history of United States intervention in Nicaragua, with a particular focus on the activities of the Reagan administration then in power and abusing it. A related purpose is to suggest a frame of reference for interpreting events in Latin America, generally, and in other parts of the Third World.

Above all, it is a response to one of the most intensive propaganda attacks ever inflicted by one nation on another. The U.S. government has become increasingly sophisticated and expansive in its manipulation of public opinion, principally through the offices of the mainstream media. It is a crucial process in the conduct of foreign policy, and a matter of life and death to the people of any nation targeted as inimical to the "national interest" of the United States. When the leaders of a democracy choose to exorcise a foreign devil, they must first give the dog a bad name before killing it; otherwise, too many voters might start asking questions.

To anyone influenced by the U.S. war of words and images waged against the progressive forces of Nicaragua during the past four decades — an influence nearly impossible for anyone subjected to Western mainstream media to avoid — much of the following account may be difficult to credit. If so, please compare the information and arguments presented here with those favored by the Reaganites and their successors.

Mere logic and reliable data may not suffice, however. With most polemics, it is usually more important to understand the basic premises adopted, since they largely determine which varieties of information are accepted as relevant, and which kinds of argument as valid.

The Reagan administration was the deadly embodiment of Cold War anti-communism, a strain of thought and action which has survived that conflict's indeterminate conclusion

sometime around year 1990. Nowadays, the term “socialism” is often substituted for the perceived or imagined threat formerly labeled as communism. But the target in Latin America and elsewhere is much the same — i.e. any serious effort to improve the conditions of impoverished masses.

Nations undergoing such a process are seldom, if ever, approached by the United States on their own terms. Instead, they are perceived through the compound distorting lenses of the holy war against communism/socialism and fabricated anxiety about U.S. national security. Thus, it matters little how the people of Nicaragua characterize their own project — the occupants of the White House and their collaborators will determine whether or not it constitutes A Threat to Freedom, thank you very much.

My own prejudices in such matters are, I hope, quite the opposite. I have tried to consider the situation of Nicaragua with at least half as much sympathy and understanding as I would wish a citizen of any other nation to view my own, and have proceeded from these premises:

- The exercise of great power implies a corresponding measure of responsibility. (Every time the U.S. shifts its weight against a perceived threat, some other nation seems to get crushed.)
- The Golden Rule applies to international relations; if the U.S. were to treat other nations with a healthy portion of the consideration and respect which it arrogates to itself, it would have little to fear from them.
- Before organizing the economic distress, rape, torture and slaughter of another people, one ought to have very compelling reasons; the burden of proof is not on the victims.

Anyone offended by such notions will probably find little wisdom and less comfort in the following pages. Those who choose to read on will find an outline of yet another great crime committed in the name of Freedom, and of the methods used to perpetrate it.

As a small gesture of atonement by a dissenting member of the criminal enterprise — the United States of America — all proceeds from the sale of the first edition were donated to a USA–Nicaragua sister city project. This second edition is freely available in digital format via the Internet, so there will be no proceeds to donate. But for anyone wishing to learn more about and/or support the Nicaraguan struggle for independence and human progress, a selection of information and solidarity resources is provided in the Appendix.

For this version, the book's original text has been slightly revised, primarily to correct some relatively minor errors. There is also an Epilogue which summarizes events during the years from 1988 to 1990, when the United States financed and orchestrated an electoral farce that inaugurated seventeen more years of misery in the name of freedom.

*Al Burke*

*October 2015*

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is especially indebted to Emmett Murray for his critical review of the text, and for the use of his extensive personal knowledge and library. Also to: Marion Appleton, for her arduous labors on the Index; to Mary Carbray, David Mitchell and Kim Esterberg, for proofreading assistance; to Mary Wheeler, Ann Dlouhy and Mary Gleysteen for a variety of other helpful chores; and to several generous spirits who preferred to remain anonymous, lest they end up on some FBI or CIA list of subversives.

"Providence seems to have ordained the United States to plague Latin America with misery in the name of freedom."

— *Simon Bolívar, 1829*

## STARS & STRIPES WHEREVER

NICARAGUA IN THE 1980s finds itself in the vortex of a U.S. government's preoccupations with Central America. It is not the first time: This small country's sad experience of the twentieth century has been misshaped largely by notions conceived and decisions made in Washington, D.C.

United States interests in Central America can be traced back at least to 1823 and the uninvited proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine, which ostensibly warned European powers to keep out of America's "backyard". This famous doctrine was subsequently elaborated into the mythology of "manifest destiny", with its incitement to extend U.S. dominion over other lands, ready or not.

As it turned out, the initial manifestation of Nicaragua's destiny was executed not by the government in Washington, but by an entrepreneurial spirit named William Walker. Hired to assist one faction of an ongoing civil war, Walker instead used financial backing from U.S. robber barons to install himself as Nicaragua's president, declare English the official language, reinstitute slavery, and appropriate much of the country's wealth to himself and his comrades in arms. His government was eventually granted recognition by the administration of President Franklin Pierce.

That was in 1856, on the eve of the U.S. Civil War. A son of Dixie, Walker aimed to forge a single slave state from the five nations of Central America as leverage against the mounting influence of Yankee abolitionists back home.

His designs, however, were not approved by the four other intended slave states of the region — nor by the British, who had long-standing interests on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua and throughout the Caribbean basin. Together they arranged Walker's demise: he was captured by the British navy in 1860, and turned over to Honduras for execution.<sup>1</sup>

*“My attention was called toward the south, where a rather inhospitable-looking, dry, and partly barren ridge stood out solitary against the sky. Our driver kept pointing out to me that blessed ridge, while his eyes shone like burning black diamonds.... ‘Senor, it was on that ridge of San Jacinto that our Indians caught, about seventy years ago, that cursed gringo buccaneer Walker and his band of outlaws, whom they dragged at the ends of their lariats over this very road to Managua’. His speech was a revelation to me; for it went to show that, if he grandchildren of those who fought against Walker at that time kept hating his very memory, the future generation of Nicaraguans will probably never forget the incredible and unpardonable crimes which have been committed in their unhappy country from 1909 up to the present time. The American armed intervention in Nicaragua since then can justly be put down as a crime.”*

— Rafael de Nogales, *The Looting of Nicaragua*, 1928

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For the balance of the nineteenth century, there were few instances of direct military intervention by the rapidly growing colossus to the north. The Navy and its Marines did occupy small coastal areas on four occasions from 1894-99, for the declared purpose of protecting U.S. lives and property during local disturbances. The longest such occupation lasted only one month, and Washington evinced no interest at that time in taking over the country.

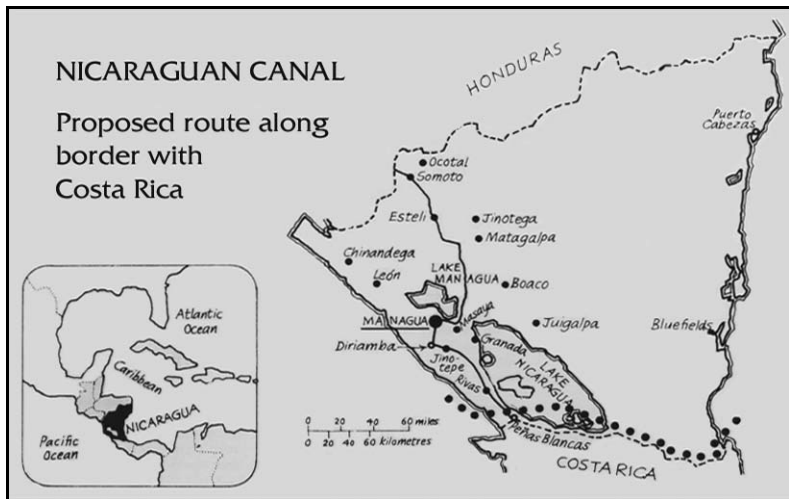
But Nicaragua is rich in natural resources — especially lumber, precious metals, and prime agricultural land — and these began to attract large amounts of investment capital from the U.S.

Nicaragua was very attractive for another reason: It had been recognized since the days of the *conquistadores* that it provided the best route for a canal linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. U.S. Ambassador William Merry put the case this way in 1890: “The construction of the Nicaragua canal will secure the domination of the United States over the American Continent, politically as well as commercially.... One great advantage possessed by the Nicaraguan canal over

any other project of the kind is the fertility and resources of the territory through which it passes. Nicaragua is one of the garden spots of the world."<sup>2</sup>

It was understood to be just a matter of time before sufficient resources and national will could be drummed up for the project. Partly in response to the California gold rush, but also to stake a claim to the anticipated canal route, transportation mogul Cornelius Vanderbilt had established a coach-and-ferry transit system across the isthmus in the 1850s.

Money and power, and lots of it — that's what world leaders saw as they contemplated the map of Nicaragua at the turn of the century. As a *New York Times* writer observed: "It has been Nicaragua's fate, often an evil fate like that of a woman too lovely, to be desired by many nations. Geological



*Had it been built, the Nicaraguan Canal would have followed Vanderbilt's coach-and-ferry system along the border with Costa Rica; the approximate route is indicated by the heavy dotted line. The empty spaces in the eastern two thirds of the country are not a mapmaker's oversight: The region remains undeveloped and sparsely populated today, a fact of some significance during the Reagan administration's assault during the 1980s.*

forces have laid out the area at a point destined to be of enormous strategic importance to the great powers of the world."<sup>3</sup>

In this age of ICBMS, such talk may sound a trifle peculiar, but only until it is recalled that in those days naval power was the key to military and commercial supremacy.

## Dollar Diplomacy

Techniques of exploitation have altered substantially since that era of unfettered "Dollar Diplomacy", as it was candidly styled by its practitioners. But even today, large piles of cash planted on the capitol doorstep of a hungry nation can yield extremely favorable trade agreements.

What that meant for Nicaragua is suggested by a 1928 account of the mahogany export trade, most of it conducted by foreigners. Under terms purchased from the appropriate Nicaraguan authorities, there were virtually no restrictions as to the length, width, and other characteristics of trees cut. There was no reforestation, and the negligible duty of five dollars per 1000 board feet applied only to logs actually loaded on ships.

Transportation from forest to loading dock depended on river levels. "If the rainy season should turn out good, they are bound to make a 'killing'. Whereas, if the rivers should not carry enough water, they always would be able to float down enough logs to cover their expenses, no matter if eighty or ninety per cent of the remaining logs be left to rot in the forests or on the dry river beds. For a comfortable bribe, the forestry inspectors sent down from Managua are willing to close not only one eye, but both; and, if they had three or four, also those."<sup>4</sup>

Just such a concession, one for gold mining, figured prominently in the United States' first seizure of Nicaragua.

After the Walker episode, political power in Nicaragua seesawed between rival parties, one based in the city of León and the other in Granada. The mechanism of political succession was usually an armed revolt, sometimes a sort of election.



*“American factories are making more than the American people can use.... Fate has written our policy. The trade of the world must and can be ours. And we shall get it.... We shall cover the ocean with our merchant marine. We will build a navy to the measure of our greatness. Great colonies, governing themselves, flying our flag, and trading with us, will grow about our ports of trade. Our institutions will follow. And American law, American order, American civilization and the American flag will plant themselves on shores, hitherto bloody and benighted, by those agents of God henceforth made beautiful and bright.”*

— Senator Albert J. Beveridge, 1898

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The peasant masses — dispossessed by a series of oligarchical land grabs — had no voice in any government. The political franchise was limited almost exclusively to the landowning elite.

In 1909, President Santos Zelaya was completing his sixteenth year in office, a remarkably lengthy term. He didn't make it to his seventeenth year.

One mistake was his reaction to an unexpected decision to build the long-awaited Nicaragua Canal through Panama, instead. The U.S. had in 1902 been diverted from its historic intent, principally by an offer it could hardly refuse. A French company had started construction through what was then still part of Colombia, but had given up after spending \$265,000,000 (1902 dollars). The U.S. acquired the French interest for a mere \$40,000,000, and arranged other details to its liking by engineering a revolt that led to Panama's secession from Colombia.

In response, Zelaya went shopping for another country to build a rival canal through Nicaragua. England, which retained some vestigial influence in the region, was one obvious prospect; Japan was also mentioned.

But the thought of a competing canal held no amusement for the United States, recently elevated to the status of world power by dint of its facile success in the Spanish-American War. A proud empire, burdened with the awful responsibilities

of manifest destiny, was not about to tolerate an intruder in its backyard. Something would clearly have to be done about this Zelaya fellow.

## **Tell it to the Marines**

The other *faux pas* committed by Zelaya was his attempt to revoke the concession of the La Luz and Los Angeles Mining Company. As he was perhaps not aware, its principal shareholder was Secretary of State Philander Knox, and that worthy's nephew was the company's manager.

As it happened, Zelaya's threat to the Secretary of State's income coincided with another of Nicaragua's sporadic revolts. This one, led by General Juan Estrada, had been defeated in every area of the country save Bluefields. But when Zelaya's army surrounded that Atlantic coast port by land and sea, Secretary Knox sent Marines into the town on the customary pretext of protecting American lives and property, and set up a naval blockade around Zelaya's little boats.

Estrada's revolt was further encouraged by the Secretary of State's threat to dispatch up to 10,000 Marines, and by large amounts of cash. The latter was funneled through a company employee, Adolfo Diaz. "A minor clerk at a salary of \$20-25 a week, Diaz suddenly had \$600,000 to contribute to the cause."<sup>5</sup>

After six months of this, Zelaya resigned. Knox replaced him with Estrada and, when he proved too independent, once again called upon Adolfo Diaz.

Diaz was installed as president and for many years thereafter served as a loyal functionary of the U.S. government. He was not what you might call popular with his own people. But he did have the Marines on his side; they would remain there for a long time.

The assigned task of Diaz and his successors was to consolidate U.S. control of the Nicaraguan government and economy, along much the same lines employed by Washington elsewhere in the Caribbean region — most notably in Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Having installed a compliant president, the next step was to surround him with a legislature willing to ratify subsequent treaties without too much fuss. This was accomplished by restricting the vote to supporters of Diaz: "In Leon, one of the two largest cities of Nicaragua, only eighty out of its fifty thousand inhabitants were allowed to vote during the election of 1912. American Marines were also kept in the country and, during the next three presidential elections, they took an active part, not only being stationed at the polls, but also doing electioneering for the candidates favored by the New York investors!"<sup>6</sup>

### Wall Street, Managua

The way was thus cleared for the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty of 1916, which was read to the assembled legislators in English, as a contingent of Marines enforced the solemnity of the occasion by standing guard outside the chamber. By the terms of the treaty, Nicaragua ceded to the U.S. "in perpetuity and for all time, free from all taxation or other public charge, the exclusive proprietary rights necessary and convenient for the construction of a canal, by way of any route over Nicaraguan territory."

In return, Nicaragua was to receive the not-entirely-handsome sum of \$3 million — but not *exactly*. Most of the money was held back by Washington as a sort of anticipatory collateral against future indebtedness.

The country was also compelled to trade in its British loans. They were replaced by more costly loans from U.S. bankers, who took control of the national bank, the railroad, and customs revenues, as "security".

The sole fiscal agent of the government would henceforth be the National Bank of Nicaragua — incorporated in Connecticut. Tariff duties were paid directly to U.S. agents. The National Railroad of Nicaragua was chartered in Maine, and enjoyed a tax-free monopoly on rail transport, telecommunications, electricity and hydropower; it was also given lucrative lumber and mineral rights.

*“The day, is not far distant when three Stars and Stripes at three equidistant points will mark our territory: one at the North Pole, another at the Panama Canal, and the third at the South Pole. The whole hemisphere will be ours in fact as, by virtue of our superiority of race, it already is ours morally.... The Monroe Doctrine may well be made to include intervention to secure for our merchants and our capitalists opportunity for profitable investments.”*

— President William H. Taft, 1912

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These arrangements offered a great deal more than security, as this glimpse of the railroad’s management suggests: “Not a mile of new track was built, not a single new engine was bought and few, if any, new cars.... The management corporation was getting fifteen thousand dollars a year for managing said railroad. They also had the right to buy for, and sell to, the railroad company rolling material and other equipment at a price stipulated by themselves. Almost one-half of the gross receipts of the railroad were paid out in dividends, and the operating expenses of the road were increased from the equivalent of about \$30,000 a year to about \$350,000. No wonder the bankers were so anxious to retain control of the railroad!”<sup>7</sup>

## **Proxy governments**

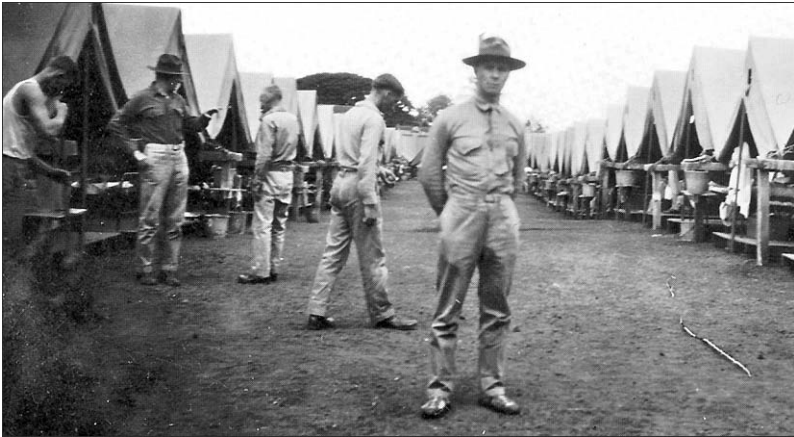
Not surprisingly, there soon arose a general suspicion that the U.S. proxy government had something other than the nation’s best interests at heart. In 1910 the U.S. Ambassador in Managua would cable his superiors that, “The natural sentiment of an overwhelming majority of Nicaraguans is antagonistic to the United States.”<sup>8</sup>

By 1915, Senator Elihu Root would be writing to a colleague: “Reviewing the report of the Commander of our Forces in Nicaragua, I find the following: ‘The present government of Nicaragua is not in power by the will of the people; the elections were in their greater part fraudulent....

The opposition party constitutes three-fourths of the inhabitants of the country'. From this report and others, which have accidentally reached my hands, I have come to the conclusion that the present government is in power because of the presence of United States troops in Nicaragua."<sup>9</sup>

Except for a one-year hiatus in the mid-1920s, the Marines and the Navy remained there until 1933, propping up a succession of U.S. proxy governments.

The short-lived withdrawal of troops in 1925-26 resulted from that rare event, a relatively honest election. Apparently confident that its interests in Nicaragua were now secure, the



Collection of Paul Lory

*Marine encampment in Managua, 1927.* Standing in the foreground is Paul Lory, now a retired postman living in Seattle. One of the few Yankee invaders to learn Spanish and circulate among the people, Lory came to doubt the official rationale for his presence in Nicaragua: "If you ask me whether or not we promoted democracy down there, I'd have to say that I didn't see any evidence of it. As for that nonsense about protecting U.S. lives and property, all I ever saw was what we brought with us. We lost a lot of both." Lory's disaffection with U.S. policy toward Nicaragua extends to the present case: "Reagan is a liar. He is using terrorists to assassinate those people. He has no right to destroy that country."

U.S. had permitted the long-silent majority of Nicaragua's few eligible voters to elect a genuinely popular president, Carlos Solarzano. He was almost immediately supplanted by a right-wing coup.

A civil war soon broke out, and the Marines were once again sent in to "restore order". This time, however, simmering doubts about U.S. policy in Nicaragua boiled over into a very hot debate.

The Marines returned in August of 1926, and their numbers ultimately reached the level of 7500. Given that the Nicaraguan population was then estimated at 700,000, that is roughly proportionate in 1987 to some 2.5 million foreign soldiers roaming the United States.

## **Bombing civilians**

The Marines were supported by eight Navy cruisers, and by 26 airplanes that made history at Chinandega with perhaps the first aerial bombing of a civilian population — anticipating by a decade the more famous bombing of Guernica by fascists during the Spanish Civil War.

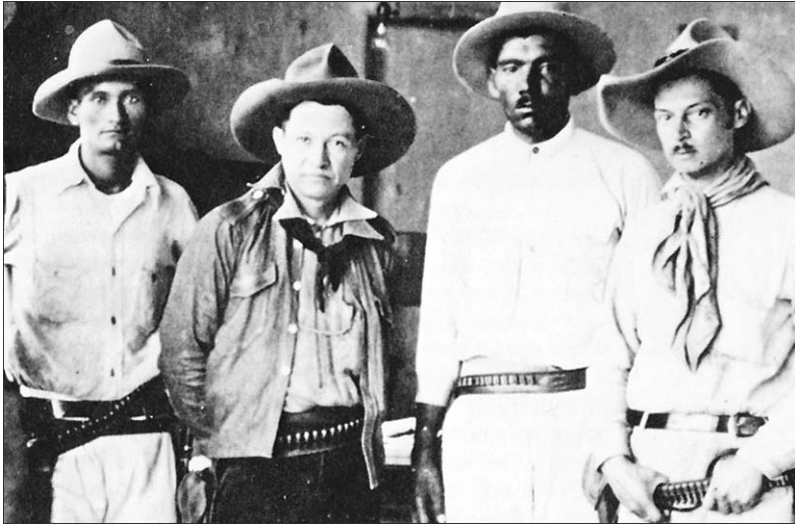
The U.S. solution to the commotion in Nicaragua was to trot Adolfo Diaz out of retirement and sit him in the president's chair once again. This was not a popular decision, and the revolt sputtered on. But by July of 1927, all save one of the opposition generals had been intimidated and or bribed into submission.

The lone holdout was Augusto Sandino, who retreated to the hills with a band of 400 followers. A fervent nationalist, Sandino's call to cast off the yoke of Yankee domination struck a responsive chord and his ranks soon swelled to several thousands.

In time-honored fashion, the U.S. government and its proxies labeled Sandino and his followers as "common bandits", advertising the Marine invasion as a co-operative police action.

But it was a hard sell. Sandino quickly became an international symbol of heroic resistance to oppression:

“Numerous accounts appeared in Spanish, glorifying Sandino and condemning Americans as savages and oppressors of free people. Sandino’s fame even reached China, where one of the Kuomintang’s divisions was named after him.”<sup>10</sup>



*Augusto Sandino and associates. Answering his critics, the original Sandinista (second from left) argued: “Do you think that we could have existed half a year with all the might of the United States against us if we had been merely bandits? If we were bandits, every man’s hand would be against us; every man would be a secret enemy. Instead, every home harbors a friend.*

*“We have taken up arms from the love of our country, because all other leaders have betrayed it and sold themselves out to the foreigner.... We are no more bandits than was Washington. If the American people had not become calloused to justice and to the elemental rights of mankind, it would not so easily forget its own past.... If their consciences had not become dulled by their scramble for wealth, Americans would not so easily forget the lesson that, sooner or later, every nation, however weak, achieves freedom, and that every abuse of power hastens the destruction of the one who wields it.”*

Meanwhile, congressional opposition to administration policies was sharpening under the biting criticism of senators Wheeler of Montana and Borah of Idaho. A large segment of the mainstream press denounced the blatant imperialism, and solidarity groups openly solicited funds for Sandino's army.

"Europe again had its derisive attention directed toward American difficulties in the Caribbean.... The White House was picketed by men and women protesting against American rule in Nicaragua, carrying such signs as 'Wall Street and not Sandino is the Real Bandit', and calling for the withdrawal of the Marines. The pickets were driven off and 107 were arrested. Opponents of the policy even obtained the names of Marines going to Nicaragua and mailed them appeals to refuse to fight Sandino but to join him in his 'war for freedom'."<sup>11</sup>

## The Mexicans are coming

The little "police action" was starting to make a big dent in the national budget, and in the ranks of the Marines. By 1928, the administration was facing intense pressure to get out of Nicaragua.

In response to all the clatter, Coolidge revealed that the entire business was the fault of, guess what — Communism.

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*"Any well-informed American citizen is now aware that our present Latin-American policy is frankly one of economic aggression involving political dictatorship. It is still covered by the name of the Monroe Doctrine, but it has nothing in common with that doctrine as originally enunciated.... The moral issue cannot be evaded. An unconscious boycott of American goods, based on growing enmity, is obviously beginning to grow in Latin America. And every day that our present hypocritical Latin-American policy goes on, we are losing prestige in the field of international relations; every day we are gaining the increased enmity of all the American continent outside of our borders. The time may come when we shall need friends in the Western Continent, and elsewhere in the world!"*

— Senator Henrik Shipstead, 1927





*Scene of 1926 air raid. Picasso's famous depiction of terror from the skies might more aptly have been entitled "Chinandega".*

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This time, The Threat to Our Hemisphere was said to be emanating from Mexico, then in the first blush of what had been conceived as a socialist revolution.

"I have the most conclusive evidence," said the president whom Ronald Reagan has identified as his favorite predecessor, "that arms and munitions in large quantities have been on several occasions since August, 1926, shipped to the revolutionists in Nicaragua.... It also appears that the ships were fitted out with the full knowledge and, in some cases, with the encouragement of Mexican officials and were in one instance, at least, commanded by a Mexican naval reserve officer....

"I am sure it is not the desire of the United States to intervene in the internal affairs of Nicaragua or of any other Central America Republic. Nevertheless, it must be said that we have a very definite and special interest in the maintenance of order and good government in Nicaragua at the present time."<sup>12</sup>

While Coolidge was carrying on in this fashion, his staff tried to alarm Congress in a series of classified briefings, and the propaganda mills of the State Dept. lurched into action. In a memorandum to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,

*(continued on page 19)*

## **“Testifying to the terror of empire”**

*St. Louis Post-Dispatch editorial, 1927*

The country demanded that we get out of Nicaragua, but we never did; on the contrary, the Administration has continued to tighten its grip upon the country.....

Our innate sense of what is fair and decent has many times been flouted, but it has never before been so ruthlessly ignored as Messrs. Coolidge and Kellogg have ignored it in their dealings with Nicaragua. They have violated every pledge of friendship made to the Latin-American peoples. They have moved counter to what almost the whole country considers to be the part of wisdom. They have aroused against us not only the protests of Latin America, but of Europe and Asia. All these brand us the world's most heartless empire....

Mr. Coolidge once said: “The business of the United States is business.” The record in Nicaragua shows that under his leadership it is. He has not shown the slightest consideration for anything else. The rights of the people of Nicaragua have been as completely thrust aside as has been public opinion. It has been a complete triumph for imperialism....

Apparently, the American people have made a great mistake in believing that the protests of conscience have any place in the councils of the Coolidge Administration. The story of Nicaragua belies it. We may think ourselves better or more merciful than that, but in truth we are not. There are the transports, the warships, the marines, the cannon, the troop trains, the airplanes and the Stars and Stripes — all testifying to the terror of Empire....

*"The Coolidge policy has led to armed intervention on behalf of an American-made puppet president foisted upon the people against their own will [in order] to serve the New York bankers who are, and who for 17 years have been, mercilessly exploiting Nicaragua under the aegis of the State Department.... No American citizen now living who remains silent while this gross indecency is perpetrated can escape some measure of responsibility."*

— Senator Burton K. Wheeler, 1927

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*(continued from page 17)*

Secretary of State Kellogg took as his text past communist incantations against American imperialism. Incendiary proclamations by an international convention of trade unions held especially ominous portent for Mr. Secretary, as he labored to document the threat of "a Mexican-fostered Bolshevistic hegemony" over Central America.<sup>13</sup>

Despite such rhetorical effusions, key players in Congress remained unconvinced, as did a large portion of the press and general public. The debate raged on, and several nearly successful attempts were made in the Senate to cut off funds for the occupation.

Meanwhile, the Marines weren't catching much of anything except death and dysentery from their fitful skirmishing with Sandino and his *compañeros*. It was becoming a very costly business, both fiscally and politically. Whether for that or other reasons, the Hoover administration which succeeded Coolidge's announced its intention to withdraw the troops after the Nicaraguan elections scheduled for 1932.

This did not mean that the U.S. was prepared to relinquish control. As the Marines continued chasing Sandino fruitlessly through the coffee plantations, the White House cast about for some entirely native device to maintain its kind of order in Nicaragua — something that would not have to be lubricated with U.S. blood.

The thing that evolved was a voracious creature with the head of a Somoza and a body of 15,000 soldier-police.

"I spent 33 years and four months in active service as a member of our country's most agile military force — the Marine corps. During that period, I spent most of my time being a high-class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street, and for the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer for capitalism.... I helped make Mexico and especially Tampico safe for American oil interests n 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for National City Bank to collect revenues in.... I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers in 1909-1912.... I helped in the rape of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street."

— General Smedley Butler, *War Is a Racket*, 1935

## THE BLOOD OF THE PEOPLE

ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS during its occupation of Nicaragua, the United States had tried to establish an indigenous modern army to replace the Marines. All such efforts had withered from inadequate funding, and from the political confusion which U.S. interference had done so much to aggravate.

But in 1932, confronting the Great Depression and relentless opposition to its Nicaragua policy at home, the Hoover administration decided to install an apparatus that would enforce a semblance of U.S. law and order on its fractious colony. Pitched to Congress as the vehicle for expediting troop withdrawals, *La Guardia Nacional* quickly won the blessing of a grateful nation — i.e. the United States.

A small detachment of Marines remained in Nicaragua to train and supervise the officer corps of the new National Guard during a transitional period. In the crucial position of Chief Director, the Marines deposited Anastasio Somoza, “an American-educated former toilet inspector and used car salesman”.<sup>14</sup>

Somoza was an ardent admirer of the United States. Fluent in English and possessed of an ingratiating manner, he had served the Yankees as a sort of “fixer” during their last few years of occupation.

The 1932 elections were held on schedule and nearly all of the Marines went home. As per his constant declaration, Sandino then stopped fighting and started negotiating with the new government. The negotiations did not go very well

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*Who are we?*

*We are tigers!*

*What do tigers eat?*

*Blood!*

*Whose blood?*

*The blood of the people!*

— *Marching chant of*  
*La Guardia Nacional*

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for Sandino. Having ventured into Managua under a truce, he was murdered by agents of Somoza. Deprived of Sandino's charismatic leadership, his movement was soon crushed by *La Guardia*.

Somoza wasted no time in consolidating his position as *El Jefe*, the unchallenged head of the combined army and police force. Within a few years he had grown powerful enough to depose the president and install himself in that position, with the rigged elections of 1936.

During the twenty years of his reign, Somoza would occasionally relinquish the presidency for a brief interlude. But he would never loosen his grip on the country's real center of power, *La Guardia Nacional*. In effect, the country became an absolute monarchy, with the trappings of democracy.

This was not entirely unexpected. A State Department official had warned in 1932 that, "A strictly non-partisan military organization is not, at the present time, a possibility".<sup>15</sup>

Decades later, a U.S. historian of Somoza's reign confirmed that assessment: "Any attempt to create an honest, non-political military force without changing the nation's basic social and economic situation was probably impossible. Nicaragua suffered from economic underdevelopment, concentration of wealth, mass illiteracy, strong regionalism, and weak nationalism. The original American conception of the *Guardia* bore no relation to any of these realities.... The attempt to impose an American solution on a Nicaraguan problem had destroyed, not promoted, democratic government."<sup>16</sup>

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*"The people who created the G.N. had no adequate understanding of the psychology of the people here. Otherwise they would not have bequeathed Nicaragua an instrument to blast constitutional procedure off the map.... In my opinion, it is one of the sorriest examples on our part of our inability to understand that we should not meddle in other people's affairs. "*

— Ambassador Arthur Lane, 1935

## Hero of the Depression

Somoza seized power in the depths of the Great Depression, which had an especially devastating effect on Central American economies. Worst hit were the extremely low classes who comprised then, as now, the vast majority of the population. Throughout the region, peasants were evicted in droves from their tiny plots, and urban workers lost their jobs or most of their buying power.

Desperate revolts began to flare up all over the landscape, and ruling oligarchies let slip their national guards. In El Salvador some 30,000 peasants were massacred while U.S. naval forces waited offshore “in case of trouble”.

Similar support was provided elsewhere in the region, with similar consequences. By the end of the decade, the U.S. backyard was thick with client strongmen — Somoza, Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Batista in Cuba, Ubico in Guatemala, Andino in Honduras, Martinez in El Salvador, etc.

“A U.S.-trained army and a friendly dictator became the established and favored means of maintaining order in the region and protecting American interests. It was only a minor embarrassment that these dictators shared basic characteristics of extreme cruelty, corruption and megalomania, and that their rule reinforced the already-grinding poverty in which the majority of the people lived.”<sup>17</sup>

## Founding fertilizer

Somoza flourished in this rich compost of human misery. With troops stationed in every sector of the economy, *La Guardia* set about harvesting its many and diverse fruits: “Control over the postal service and over immigration and emigration was tightened. Military control over all imports of guns and ammunition was firmly established, and even commercial companies had to obtain a special *Guardia* permit to import dynamite. Finally, the *Direccion General de Sanidad*, the national sanitation service, was placed under military control.

“The combined effect of these actions was to give the *Guardia* an awesome amount of power. It was the nation’s only armed force, including all police and even customs inspectors within its ranks. It controlled the postal, telegraph, and internal radio services, operated an extensive domestic intelligence service, and controlled the importation and sale of all arms and explosives. No one could enter or leave the country or even start a business without *Guardia* permission.”<sup>18</sup>

As in most impoverished countries, graft was commonplace. Immigration, customs and police jobs were especially lucrative appointments, and there were practically no restraints. The general public was powerless against the local constables, who could with impunity enter a home and take food, money, women — whatever they craved.

Having substantially magnified the scale of corruption, Somoza systematized it until the dynasty he founded came to own a quarter of the nation’s best land, along with large holdings in key industries — shipping, newspapers, banks, airlines, etc. One of the most profitable ventures was a plasma center, known to the irreverent as “The House of the Vampires”, which drained off the blood of the people for export to the United States.

### **“Our son of a bitch”**

None of this particularly endeared Somoza to his fellow statesmen in Washington, D.C., where his reputation fluctuated with the turn of administrations and world events. There is little doubt that his masters in the White House would have much preferred a less revolting proxy in Nicaragua. But given its conception of strategic necessity, the U.S. was self-evidently prepared to settle for any arrangement that offered “stability”.

And Somoza was only too happy to oblige. He liked to boast of a fictive special relationship with Franklin Roosevelt, and was forever linking his regime with its big brother to the north through word and symbol. During one period of the unrest that from time to time disturbed the realm, he went so



far as to invoke a national celebration of the Fourth of July — not generally regarded as a Nicaraguan holiday.

Somoza's stock was probably at its height during World War II, when the U.S. was worried about the possibility of Axis meddling in or around the Canal Zone. Somoza took full advantage of the occasion, bracing *La Guardia* with heavy injections of U.S. military supplies. He also suspended constitutional guarantees, such as they were, with a "state of siege" regrettably necessitated by the war.

Through it all, his devotion and loyalty to the United States were never in question. As Roosevelt is said to have observed: "He may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch." There is some question as to whether or not Roosevelt actually uttered that famous epigram. But in any event, it conveys the essence of the U.S. government's attitude toward Somoza and his regime.

## The dynasty congeals

Despite recurrent misgivings, Somoza's usefulness to the fellows in Washington kept him fairly snug in their political bed. In 1954 the CIA used Nicaragua as a base for the overthrow of Guatemala's president, Jacobo Arbenz. Though freely elected by a wide margin, Arbenz had been found guilty of unseemly independence and creeping socialism. The folks at United Fruit Company, anxious at the threat to their bananas, entreated the White House to get rid of him.

As rent for the CIA's Guatemalan "freedom fighters", Somoza collected large quantities of U.S. arms for *La Guardia*. It was business as usual.

Then, in 1956 the son of a bitch went and got himself killed; his assassin was a young poet named Rigoberto Lopez Perez. At first, the old pirate's death seemed to invite a return to something like constitutional government. Competing factions of the normally ineffectual political opposition actually began to co-operate toward that end.

At that crucial moment, U.S. Ambassador Thomas E. Whelan — whose devotion to the departed had earned him the

sobriquet of “Somoza’s shadow” — threw the formidable weight of his office behind the dictator’s sons. That alliance prevailed, and the flickering threat of democracy was soon extinguished.

Luis, the older and less brutal of the two little Somozas, moved to restore civil liberties and temper the worst excesses of *La Guardia*. His death in 1967 — apparently of natural causes — cleared the way for Anastasio, Jr. (nicknamed ‘Tachito’) to take power and nullify the modest reforms of his brother.



*Somoza family portrait:  
Anastasio the elder in front,  
“Tachito” standing at left, and Luis.*

*La Guardia* was once again unleashed on the hapless populace, as Somoza set about adding to the family’s financial empire with feverish intensity. The Vietnam War provided a splendid boost to the economy, as it increased demand for Nicaragua exports.

Tachito made sure he got his share. By 1979, he was estimated to be the ninth richest man in the world even though handicapped by one of the world’s most dreadfully impoverished populations.

But resentment was starting to build nearly as fast as the balances in *El Jefe’s* Miami and Swiss bank accounts. It would erupt into open rebellion when he clutched too greedily at a commercial prize dangled before him by an act of Mother Nature

## The earth trembles

Managua is situated on a major geological fault, and its history is punctuated with destructive earthquakes. The one that occurred on December 23, 1972, was especially severe; some 10,000 were killed outright, and hundreds of thousands were injured or left homeless.

The disaster aroused sympathy all over the world; large quantities of relief funds and supplies poured into the country. But it also created a tempting business opportunity, since all the destroyed buildings, roads, household goods, etc. would have to be replaced or restored.

It was all too much for Tachito to resist. He constructed a memorial to rapacious cupidity from the suffering of his countrymen — and in the process reaped his last straw.

Much of the donated cash was simply siphoned off. Food and other necessities contributed by relief agencies began to show up on the shelves of Somoza's stores. New insurance, banking and construction firms were set up to absorb the flow of relief funds. Damaged asphalt roads were repaved with tiles from a company owned by Somoza.

Meanwhile, the *guardias* dissolved into a mob of looters, and used their privileged positions to get first crack at relief supplies. What they couldn't use, themselves, they sold for hefty profits at hastily arranged black markets. The result was a total collapse of public order, and Somoza seemed powerless or unwilling to bring his troops under control.

Once again the U.S. embassy came to the rescue. President Nixon and Ambassador Turner Shelton, both staunch supporters of the regime, arranged for 600 troops from other Central American countries and the United States to keep the peace during the crisis.

But *La Guardia* had suffered a major loss of face: "Any remaining public respect for the military evaporated. Until the *Guardia* recovered its discipline, Managua residents described the city as under virtual American occupation, leaving an indelible impression of U.S. troops storming through the devastated streets, shouting orders in English to a bewildered population and incinerating corpses with flame-throwers."<sup>19</sup>

## “Unfair competition”

The carnival of corruption set off by the '72 earthquake was so blatant and widespread that it aroused much more than the usual disgust at home and abroad.

Nicaragua's small but expanding business community was outraged at the crude fashion in which *El Jefe* gobbled up the choicer slices of the reconstruction pie. The phrase *competencia desleal* (“unfair competition”) entered the vocabulary of everyday discourse, and the thoughts of businessmen turned increasingly to open defiance of the regime in which they had previously been content to acquiesce.

They were joined by such disparate interests as landowners and labor leaders — even some priests of the Catholic Church, which under Somoza enjoyed the privileged status so typical of Latin American despotisms preying to deflect their starving masses from earthly aspirations. From the provinces came reports of *campesinos* forcibly repossessing lands stolen from them by various means in the past.

World opinion, never one of Somoza's strong points, plummeted to new depths. Articles written in 1975 by Alan Riding for the *Financial Times* of London and the *New York Times* mortified the regime with the abundant evidence of its stinking corruption.

More damaging, for relations with the powers in Washington, was a series by the widely read U.S. columnist, Jack Anderson, who documented his reasons for labeling Somoza as “the world's greediest ruler”.

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*“Somoza had become wealthy in a variety of ways. He demanded a tribute of 1.5 cents per pound on exported cattle. Contributions were exacted from various industries such as mining and textiles. All government employees were forced to contribute 5% of their salaries.... The General also bought up underdeveloped land, then had the government build a road to it or dredge out a new harbor in its vicinity. Using such techniques, he soon became the wealthiest man in Nicaragua's history. ”*

— Richard Millet, *Guardians of the Dynasty*

Worse still, Somoza lost his chief ally and protector when Richard Nixon slinked out of office to avoid impeachment. By the mid-1970s, things were starting to get very hot for Somoza.

### Sandinino's resurrection

There was never any shortage of opposition to the Somoza dynasty. One of its ongoing chores was intimidating, imprisoning, annihilating or buying off the little bands of trouble-makers that popped up from time to time.

One such group, animated by the success of the Cuban revolution, was founded in 1961 by a handful of young intellectuals who dubbed themselves the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista National Liberation Front).

They were well-educated, and steeped in Sandino's mythic struggle to extricate Nicaragua from the yoke of U.S. dominion. Most were also traitors to their class, forsaking middle-class backgrounds for a socialist revolution whose intended beneficiaries were the urban poor and the peasants of the countryside who comprised the vast majority of the population.

Those aims, and the willingness to pursue them through armed insurrection, sharply distinguished the FSLN from the traditional political opposition.

Not that the Sandinistas ever succumbed to doctrinal harmony: The diverse politics of the little group ranged from fire-breathing "Marxist-Leninism" to a pragmatic social



"Tachito" Somoza greets his friend, U.S. Amb. Turner Shelton (right).

democracy that would not have seemed out of place in Paris, London or Amsterdam.

For reasons that U.S. leaders seem to find enormously difficult to understand or acknowledge, the socialist perspective often makes a great deal of sense to people exploited into grinding poverty and kept there by despotic rule. The new Sandinistas gradually developed strong support among the oppressed majority; and in his ham-fisted way, Somoza would assist them in their labors.

In the beginning, though, the FSLN was just another flea in the ear of *La Guardia*. After being nearly wiped out in a 1967 skirmish at Pancasan, the young revolutionaries withdrew to lick their wounds and reconsider their strategy.

## Reluctant opposition

The Somoza family had never tried to snatch every commercial crumb for itself. Several short bursts of economic expansion after World War II added a dollop of wealth and membership to the business community; and the old cotton, coffee, and sugar plantations remained pretty much intact. The latter had been patched together over centuries in a series of land grabs that had converted a nation of independent small farmers into a system of semi-feudal peonage.

Commercial and plantation interests had offered Somoza a sputtering opposition that intensified when times were bad and subsided when the cash was rolling in. With a few notable exceptions, it was these people whom Richard Millet had in mind when he referred to the "great numbers of those willing to be corrupted".<sup>20</sup>

They became less willing in the 1970s. For one thing, there was Somoza's grotesquely acquisitive response to the '72 earthquake. On top of that, the economy began to experience difficulties that affected a wide range of interests. Inflation shot up, there were factory closures, layoffs, strikes — a sea of troubles.

Prodded into co-operation, a coalition of political parties and labor unions (Spanish acronym: UDEL) was formed in

1974. Just two weeks later, the FSLN leaped dramatically back into view by spoiling a Christmas party for the bulk of Managua's diplomatic corps. Hostages were taken, then released in exchange for imprisoned Sandinistas, millions of dollars, and publication of an FSLN broadside against the regime.

Somoza countered with a state of emergency and martial law. The FSLN was once again hunted to the edge of extinction, and this time a great many other Nicaraguans shared the grim consequences. Strikes and student protests were brutally suppressed, and peasants were subjected to the full wrath of *La Guardia*.

### **“Idealistic? Extremely so.”**

The FSLN was a small group, essentially of middle class and university youth — males, very much under the influence of the Cuban Revolution, the dominant historical event of the time.... A wave of hope spread through many groups and sectors in Latin America — that if the Cubans with Fidel Castro could get rid of Batista, there was hope for other countries where similar conditions seemed to prevail....

That doesn't mean that they were directed by the Cubans; but the Sandinista movement was born on this wave of hope in the early '60s.... Almost all in that original group were killed.

Most of them had at least some university education. They were fiercely nationalistic.... They were of that student generation basically ashamed, embarrassed and angry about what their country was and how it was ruled, and determined to free Nicaragua from foreign domination and from the domination of the Somoza family.

Idealistic? Extremely so.

— *Richard Fagen*<sup>21</sup>

As for the “united opposition”, it was powerless to halt the slaughter — a fact duly noted by the general populace.

By September of 1977, Somoza calculated that the crisis had passed, and lifted the state of emergency in exchange for the resumption of suspended U.S. military credits. But a month later the FSLN resurfaced, this time with a series of attacks on *Guardia* outposts.

Shortly thereafter, twelve leading citizens — lawyers, authors, priests, businessmen — called for a democratic alternative to Somoza in an open statement published by the daily newspaper, *La Prensa*.

“*Los Doce*”, as they came to be known, authenticated the growing significance of the FSLN and called for its participation in the political process.

Then came “the spark that lit the fire”: Pedro Chamorro’s assassination. Chamorro, whose family’s feud with the Somozas reached back into the 19th century, was a leading figure of the traditional opposition. As editor of *La Prensa*, he had been using the newspaper to voice the general displeasure with the regime. Chamorro’s murder, universally assumed to have been carried out at Somoza’s behest, inflamed all sorts of smoldering resentments and ignited mass protests throughout the nation. Soon, *La Guardia* would be at war with the entire population.

Having barely avoided extermination, the FSLN dispersed into three skeletal factions. One concentrated on grooming the peasantry for guerilla warfare, another on organizing urban workers.

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*“The younger Somoza attended West Point Military Academy, and was said to be more at home in English than Spanish. He made his territory available to the CIA for the launching of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961. In 1972 he went so far as to have the current U.S. ambassador’s face engraved on the twenty-cordoba currency note.”*

— Joel Kovel, *Blueprint for Social Justice*



The third faction, or “*terceristas*”, alienated their more doctrinaire associates by establishing links with the traditional bourgeois opposition, which in 1978 had regrouped under an umbrella organization called *Frente Amplio de Oposicion (FAO)*.

### Uneasy alliance

FAO leaders understood that the Sandinistas had won the allegiance of the masses, and hoped to use them in building pressure against Somoza. The *terceristas*, on the other hand, favored precisely the opposite view of the relationship: They would use the financial and institutional prominence of the bourgeoisie to facilitate the revolution. It was an exercise in mutual manipulation, but it had the effect of intensifying Somoza’s predicament.

His difficulties were compounded by dreadful public relations outside of Nicaragua, particularly in the U.S. President Jimmy Carter’s foreign policy was informed by a novel concern for human rights around the world. This led inevitably to a cooling of relations with Somoza. It was hoped that the CIA and FAO would together find a way to replace him with a less appalling substitute.

Meanwhile, the masses were moving so fast that even the FSLN had difficulty keeping up. All over the country, poor people inured to suffering in miserable isolation began to join together in Christian base communities and Sandinista defense committees. Often they were led or encouraged by priests applying the logic of “liberation theology”. The poor were rattling their chains.

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*Who is the enemy  
of La Guardia?  
The people!*

*Who is La Guardia’s father?  
Somoza!*

*Up with La Guardia!  
Down with the people!*

— *Marching chant of  
La Guardia Nacional*

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(continued on page 35)

### **“Great numbers willing to be corrupted”**

In 1976 Nicaragua was clearly a nation occupied by its own army. Far from producing a professional, non-political force, U.S. influence had helped create one of the most totally corrupt military establishments in the world....

General Somoza likes to boast that a higher percentage of his officers and men have been trained abroad, by the U. S., than those of any other Latin American army. Most of this training has been in the School of the Americas in the Canal Zone. By mid-1975, 4252 Nicaraguan officers and men had been trained there, a greater number than from any other Latin American nation. Without all this training and support it is unlikely that the *Guardia* could have maintained its monopoly over Nicaraguan politics.

Greater responsibility must rest upon overall U.S. policy in Latin America. This policy has generally equated verbal opposition to America's current enemies... with a convergency of interests and, consequently, has led to American nurture, support, and defense of the *Guardia* and the Somozas on repeated occasions....

The bulk of the responsibility for the current status of the *Guardia*, however, probably rests with the upper classes and the traditional opposition political leaders. They have repeatedly allowed concern with their personal interests and fear of any basic change in the nation's social and economic structures to outweigh their dislike of the Somozas and have supported, compromised with, or at least muted their opposition to the dynasty's rule. For a system such as that maintained in Nicaragua... there must be great numbers of those willing to be corrupted, as well as a dominant family willing to do the corrupting.

— *Richard Millet, Guardians of the Dynasty*<sup>22</sup>

Reflecting on the momentum of that time, FSLN military coordinator Humberto Ortega would later note, "The truth is that we always thought of the masses, seeing them however as a prop for the guerilla campaign that would enable it to deal some blows at the National Guard. The reality was quite different: Guerilla activity served as a prop for the masses, who crushed the enemy by means of insurrection."<sup>23</sup>

They did so at extraordinary cost. Somoza took to bombing his own cities, collecting an enormous toll in human suffering. Brief FSLN actions at Leon and Esteli in September of 1978 left over 6000 civilians dead in their wake, as *La Guardia* sought to demoralize the growing insurrection. The National Guard attacked anyone suspected of sympathy with the Sandinistas, concentrating on teenagers. In many areas, to be a teenaged male was virtually a capital offense; girls were generally let off with mere torture and rape.

## Losing control

At this point the Carter administration offered a solution — a form of "Somocismo without Somoza". It would involve: a new government from which both Somoza and the FSLN would be excluded; preservation of *La Guardia*; and full protection of all Somoza property.

The bourgeois elements of the FAO were perfectly content with this proposal, since they would be its chief beneficiaries. Somoza and the FSLN rejected it outright.

After that demonstration of national unity, the *terceristas* resigned from the FAO; other member organizations soon followed their example.

To punish Somoza for his lack of co-operation, the Carter administration cut off military assistance — although some continued to reach *La Guardia* through the back doors of Israel and Argentina.

Something of crucial significance had taken place: The FAO had expired, and with it the last chance for the CIA and the bourgeois opposition to control the revolution.

At the same time, the three factions of the FSLN reunited and stepped up their efforts to organize the masses. "The

leadership of the mass movement had now changed hands. The bourgeoisie and imperialists had lost the initiative.”<sup>24</sup>

Somoza now had just a few months left. In early June of 1979, the FSLN called for an “insurreccional general strike” and it had the intended effect. The country was completely paralyzed, except for *La Guardia* which descended into a frenzy of murder and destruction. “To punish the oppositional bourgeoisie, Somoza systema-tically bombed its factories. In Managua’s industrial zone, all along the north motorway, their burnt-out shells pointed accusing fingers to the heavens. Only the clan factories remained intact.”<sup>25</sup>

In Washington, meanwhile, 130 congressmen demanded that military aid be restored to Somoza. As a halfway measure, the Carter administration leaned on the Organization of American States, to dispatch yet another “peace-keeping” force.

But in a rare display of independence, Latin America refused to be bullied into invading invading one of its own; only the military junta in Argentina voted with the United States. In fact, Somoza had so thoroughly alienated his neighbors that several were actively assisting the Sandinistas.

Much quicker than anyone had imagined possible, it was over. On 17 July 1979, Somoza fled to Miami with his daddy’s coffin and most of the national treasury. *La Guardia* disintegrated instantly upon learning of its “father’s” abrupt departure.

On July 19 the Sandinistas led a triumphant march into Managua. They were joined by tens of the thousands maimed in *La Guardia*’s final bloodbath. Not present were the 50,000 killed outright — roughly proportional to a 1987 U.S. total of five million dead.

## The legacy of Somoza

When Tachito fluttered off to Miami in a U.S. military aircraft, he neglected to take with him the staggering national debt piled up on his behalf. He did take nearly all of the cash, however. Anticipating his imminent departure, Somoza had employed a variety of means to ensure a comfortable retirement.

At least \$33 million of the nation's International Monetary Fund loans were transferred to his own foreign bank accounts. Some 2.5 million cattle were slaughtered, and the beef shipped to cold storage facilities in Miami for subsequent resale. He also "borrowed heavily from private foreign banks, double-mortgaged his businesses, left innumerable unpaid bills from multi-national corporations — bills which the new government would have to pay before receiving new credits".<sup>26</sup> His cronies performed similar feats of financial legerdemain.

It is estimated that at least \$700 million was spirited out of the country by such devices. Other debits awaiting the new government included a 25% reduction in the size of the cattle herd, \$200 million in lost cotton exports, and \$500 million in physical damage. Inflation was running at 80%, and nearly half the work force was idle.

All of this at a time when market prices for Nicaragua's export goods were plummeting in relation to the cost of imports: "In 1977, 4.4 tons of coffee bought a tractor; in 1982, 11.2 tons... were needed to buy a tractor."<sup>27</sup>

Then there were the enormous costs in human lives and suffering. In addition to the 50,000 dead and 100,000 wounded, 40,000 children had been orphaned, 200,000 families were without shelter, and 750,000 people were starving.

Not that Nicaraguans needed a war to teach them about suffering. Statistics from 1971 suggest the peacetime blessings flowing from the reign of Somoza:

- literacy among the general population was less than 50%; in rural areas it was less than 30% and among women only 7%
- 60% were classified as living in extreme poverty, and 95% of city-dwellers barely subsisted
- the annual income of half the rural population was less than \$39

\* 50% of all children over five years old suffered from malnutrition

\* 46% died before the age of four.<sup>28</sup>

Such grim statistics are hardly surprising for the Central American nation with the highest per capita military budget and the lowest rate of spending on social services — a nation where one percent of landowners controlled over half the land, and by far the better half, while 70% of the rural population squeezed onto a meager two percent.

To cope with all this, Somoza left his successors \$3.5 million in the treasury, and a national debt of \$1.6 billion.



Cindy Wolpin

*While Somoza was busy developing himself from a small landowner into one of the richest men in the world, his countrymen suffered the worst poverty in Central America. Nearly half of all children died before reaching age four, and half of those over five years old were chronically undernourished.*

## THE SANDINISTA PROCESS

BY THE FINAL STAGES of the insurrection, it was clear to everyone that the Sandinistas had earned the allegiance of most Nicaraguans. The fate of the country was in their hands, for the time being at least, and they confronted the choice of imposing their own vision of the future, or trying to accommodate discordant interests — most notably the traditional opposition, whose political and economic views differed from Somoza's less in substance than in degree.

Actually, the choice was predetermined by the historic goal inherited from Sandino: to liberate Nicaragua from U.S. domination. Such an undertaking would require an intense program of economic reconstruction and a spirit of national unity, neither of which could be achieved without the support of planters and merchants. Although the middle and upper classes comprised a very narrow segment of the population, their experience, access to markets, and financial resources were essential to any reconstruction effort.

If, on the other hand, they chose to obstruct the revolution, it could easily tear the country apart again. The new Reagan administration was hoping they would do just that: By 1981 it was already circling Nicaragua with money and guns to scratch every counter-revolutionary itch it could detect.

The situation was rendered even more delicate by the Sandinistas' other principal goal: to dramatically improve the social and economic status of Nicaragua's impoverished majority within the space of a few years, a project that would require a fundamental restructuring of the entire society. Obviously, it would be extremely difficult to achieve such an end without pinching the prerogatives of the bourgeoisie.

As the nation embarked on what came to be known as "the process" of the revolution, it remained to be seen whether or

not the Sandinistas would be able to keep the peace with the economic elite, and still keep faith with their natural constituency — the vast majority of Nicaraguans.

Carlos Fonseca, a co-founder of the FSLN and its most revered martyr, had anticipated this inevitable tension when he wrote: “One must be alert to the danger that the reactionary force in the opposition to the Somoza regime could climb on the back of the revolutionary insurrection. The revolutionary movement has a dual goal. On the one hand, to overthrow the criminal and traitorous clique that has usurped the power for so many years; and on the other; to prevent the capitalist opposition — of proven submission to Yankee imperialism — from taking advantage of the situation which the guerilla struggle has unleashed.... The policy we follow later on regarding the old parties that now have a capitalist leadership will be determined by the attitude that the people as a whole have toward these parties.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Provisional government**

In addition to economic disaster, the people of Nicaragua inherited a political vacuum. Whatever administrative apparatus existed under Somoza had totally collapsed upon his removal to Miami.

But at least there were no questions about the identity of the new leadership. The FSLN had the army, and the devotion of Nicaragua’s masses. After a brief period of confusion, it took up the formidable tasks of national reconstruction and reconciliation.

The Sandinistas’ program was based on three principles: political pluralism, mixed economy, and international non-alignment. The structures it devised to govern the country during its first few years consisted primarily of a five-member junta, an 18-member cabinet, and an interim legislature with 47 seats, the Council of State.

Membership in all three bodies was designed to reflect a broad spectrum of interests, and this was especially true of

*(continued on page 42)*





Dan Bothell

*“Managua, July 20, 1979. Radio Sandino, still broadcasting from a hidden location, began calling people to the Plaza de la Republica. But they were already there... The girls who had grown up knowing that at any moment a guardia could look at them and like them and have them, and the boys who had seen their friends stretched out on sidewalks, questioned, crying, and shot through the head and burned on the streets — they found their way to the new plaza. They came from the dusty slums made of plywood and unfinished boards and cardboard, and they came, too, from the cool white houses of Las Colinas. They burned tires and they danced....”*

— Christopher Dickey, *With the Contras*

the Council of State. It included representatives from labor unions, farm workers, the traditional opposition parties, soldiers, teachers, clergymen, women, journalists, indigenous peoples, business groups, cattle ranchers, etc.

The Council of State was empowered to submit new legislation to the junta, and to amend or revoke junta decisions. But its chief function was to involve as many different interest groups as possible in debate over the future of the nation. Voices never before heard in councils of power were now getting a full workout.

This was especially true of the peasants and workers who had previously suffered silently at the bottom of the social ladder. Their inclusion in the Council of State led to the first serious confrontation between the Sandinistas and the traditional opposition, which split into factions over the question of support for the FSLN.

## **Conflicting interests**

Particularly offensive to the anti-FSLN faction were the nine Council seats — the largest single bloc — allocated to Sandinista Defense Committees (CDS). These small local groups, pieced together over many years by FSLN organizers, had provided the heart, body and soul of the insurrection. To a large extent, their membership overlapped the Christian base communities of the “popular church”, the alternative Catholicism that emerged from liberation theology.

The substantial presence of the CDS in the Council of State signaled that the Sandinistas were quite serious about their promise to restructure Nicaraguan society.

As any practicing democrat might have wished, the Council of State’s composition mirrored the new balance of interests within the nation.<sup>30</sup> But that fact aroused great consternation among certain elements of the elite — those who had assumed or hoped that the new order would bestow upon them a measure of power and influence in proportion to their wealth.

Instead, they were left disappointed with the present, and fearful of the future. Complained one who would later assist the Reagan administration's destabilization campaign, "Marxism is too hard to reason with. Nicaragua is not Marxist now, but it is heading in that direction. The Sandinistas talk out of both sides of their mouths."<sup>31</sup>

Most who shared such sentiments banded together in the Higher Council of Private Enterprise (Spanish acronym: COSEP), which in the years ahead would become the center of internal opposition to the Sandinistas, much quoted by the Reagan administration and supported by the CIA.

But not all members of the business community were so quick to give up on the FSLN. Many even agreed with the basic aims of the revolution and reasoned that it was possible to prosper within it. As one observed in 1983, "You have to know how to live with this government. Some of the businessmen don't even want to try.... Business now is better than it was last year, and it was better last year than the year before. The government helps the private sector and encourages us as much as possible.... I think the private sector will keep on as long as the Sandinistas need it, and I can't imagine a time when they won't need it. North American pressure makes it harder to do business and encourages Marxism. Is that what they want? Who knows what the Americans will do?"<sup>32</sup>

*The chief economic goal of the Sandinistas was to improve conditions for the impoverished majority, personified by this landless campesino.*



Dan Bothell

The business community was not the only sector riven by conflicting attitudes toward the Sandinistas. Labor unions, churches, teachers, indigenous peoples, etc. — all contained plenty of sceptics, opponents, and passive onlookers. Even among those whom the revolution was primarily intended to serve — the urban poor and the peasants of the countryside — there were pockets of resistance to the new government.

Thus, while it was clear that a large majority of the populace was enthusiastically “with the process”, anyone who wanted to stir up some trouble could find plenty of material to work with.

## ECONOMIC RECONSTRUCTION

Even before assuming power in the United States, the Reagan administration had turned its hateful gaze on Nicaragua; extirpation of the Sandinistas was to be one of its foremost foreign policy objectives. But it would take awhile to assemble a suitable engine of destruction.

In the meantime, the provisional government had a grace period of two or three years in which to start fulfilling the proliferating hopes of the revolution. What it achieved in that short time earned widespread admiration, while in many respects providing a model for other Third World nations.

The reconstruction effort was predicated on the establishment of a mixed economy. The state’s share derived almost entirely from confiscation of Somoza’s empire and the lesser duchies of his cronies. That included some 100 factories and two million acres of prime agricultural land. The banking and export-import systems were also nationalized. The state ended up with about 40 percent of the economy — less than in Mexico or Brazil, for example.

Most private property was left intact, and accounted for the remaining 60 percent of the economy. The private sector was encouraged to make the highest profits possible, but was warned that economic sabotage and obstruction would earn rough treatment.

The message was: "Invest and produce, and your profits will be assured, your future guaranteed. Undermine the economy by decapitalizing or by halting production, and your factory or farm will be taken over by the state."<sup>33</sup>

This was not an idle threat. A small number of businesses and plantations were indeed expropriated during 1980, often at the insistence of angry workers and peasants. Only the worst offenses were punished to that extent, for example: diversion of state development loans to personal use, refusal to plant or harvest vital crops, and destruction of valuable equipment.

Lesser forms of obstruction, such as refusal to observe safety standards or to pay the paltry minimum wage, were handled through mediated negotiations between workers and employers.

There was, in short, a "period of adjustment" during which the more recalcitrant segment of the business community tested the ability and resolve of the new government to make its regulations stick. By the end of 1980, there were very few doubts remaining in that regard. The bulk of the business community settled into a truce with the Sandinistas, and resigned itself to such hardships as profit margins averaging a mere 25 percent.

There would be no 25 percent bonuses for the workers, who were read a lesson in austerity. Wage increases, they were told, would have to wait until the economy was back on its feet.

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*"We start from the people as a whole, as a group, the way Christ considered humanity as a flock. His crucifixion was for the salvation of the whole flock, not just the strong ones. In our revolution we, too, begin with the idea, the need, to serve the multitude, and the multitude in Nicaragua has historically been extremely poor, ignorant and subject to early death.... We want the rights of the individual to flow from the needs of the people.... We don't want the democracy of oppression and the freedom of exploitation that the administration in Washington wants to impose on us."*

— President Daniel Ortega<sup>34</sup>

As compensation, the government offered a basic “social wage” in place of hefty pay increases: “Rents were halved, food prices regulated, public transport heavily subsidized, education and health care extended, land rentals slashed for small peasants.... Immediately upon taking power, the FSLN began to sow the seeds of democracy and worker participation in the planning of production — fixing budgets and targets, understanding shortages and price fluctuations — to further enhance the purely economic benefits.”<sup>35</sup>

Most workers reluctantly conceded the necessity of restraint, but not without a measure of discontent. The logic of the mixed economy and the requirements of national unity sorely tested the patience of many, especially Nicaragua’s two small communist parties. In an irony lost on the cold warriors in Washington, the most serious threat to the new government during its first year of existence came not from the political right, but from the far left.

Angrily denouncing the Sandinistas for betraying the revolution to “bourgeois democracy”, communists organized some demonstrations and strikes, demanding impossible wage increases of up to 150%. After heated negotiations, the government managed to reconcile the strikers to its policies, and the communists soon receded to an obscurity from which they have yet to emerge.<sup>36</sup>

*The lot of children has improved significantly under the revolution.*



Wendy Van Roojen

## Unparalleled achievements

Despite everything — the daunting legacy of Somoza, the discord and confusion in the marketplace, the admitted inexperience of the new leadership, and the frankly experimental nature of “the process” — the economy started to perk up:

- Inflation dropped from 84% to 18%.
- Unemployment fell to 16%, down from 45%.
- By 1982, per capita consumption of milk, rice, soap and poultry had increased by 10%.
- A major expansion of social services was initiated.
- Markets were expanded and diversified, to reduce dependence on the U.S.
- New export crops such as cocoa and African palm were introduced.
- The economic infrastructure was greatly expanded; by 1985 there were 50,000 new telephone lines, 500 miles of new roads, and extension of electricity to 32 new communities.
- From 1980-83, while most other Central American countries were in decline, Nicaragua’s GNP rapidly expanded, with growth rates of 11% in 1980 and 7% in 1981.

No other Central American country could point to comparable results for the same period.<sup>37</sup>



*Agencia Nueva Nicaragua*

*Campeño musicians help their neighbors celebrate distribution of new land titles; such ceremonies have become a familiar sight in recent years.*

## LAND REFORM

Apart from simply surviving, the most urgent priority of the revolution was to rectify the grosser distortions of the agricultural sector. As a result of historical trends culminating under Somoza, less than one percent of all farmers controlled the richest 50 percent of the land, and up to one-third of that was left idle at any given time. Furthermore, there was a growing emphasis on profitable export crops such as cotton and coffee, while the production of food desperately needed for domestic consumption was neglected.

Thus, the two primary goals for the Agriculture Ministry were: to increase production of staple foods, while continuing to produce export crops for essential foreign exchange; and to significantly increase the two percent of marginal land owned by the poorest 70 percent of the population.



The government was under enormous pressure to redistribute the land forthwith. At great risk to their lives, peasants had “liberated” idle portions of large estates in the final stages of the insurrection, and were ready for long-deferred social justice to be served immediately. They wanted action.

Instead, they got “the process” and many were far from happy about it. “I don’t understand at all,” complained a peasant in Chinandega. “One minute, seizing the land is revolutionary; then they tell you its counter-revolutionary.”<sup>38</sup>

It was a lament echoed throughout the countryside, as the government struggled to develop an equitable policy that would ensure continued production in the midst of a profound transformation of rural society.

Experimentation and nearly two years of consultation with other countries finally resulted in the Agrarian Reform Act of 1981, which was revised in 1986. Its basic provisions are:

- All private farms, no matter how large, remain intact as long as the land is productively employed.
- The government can redistribute any farmland left idle, as well as portions of exceptionally large estates in regions (such as Masaya) where the needs of the landless far exceed available supply; in either case, the original owners are compensated.
- Temporarily, at least, most of the large export-oriented estates of the departed Somocistas are operated by the Agriculture Ministry in order to generate foreign exchange and provide staples for the domestic market. In the meantime, they offer steady employment and improved social services to thousands of landless laborers.
- All remaining land is distributed at no cost to anyone willing to farm it. Priority is granted to peasants with little or no land, and to those who fought in the revolution.

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*“Before the revolution, the growers made enormous profits. Now, they must pay taxes, they must pay minimum wage, they must provide decent working conditions. No wonder they weep.”*

— “Patriotic” plantation owner<sup>39</sup>

At first the government tried to steer all new landowners into cooperatives, in the belief that those would permit the most efficient utilization of scarce resources such as technical assistance, credit, seed stock, fertilizer, military protection, etc. There are now some 3000 co-ops, and their productivity has established them as an increasingly significant component of the farm economy. They occupy just over 20 percent of the nation's farmland, and are operated by 71,000 *campesinos*.

Despite the gains of the co-op movement, resistance from a large segment of the peasantry has persuaded the government to shift its redistribution policy in the direction of independent farms.<sup>40</sup> Since 1985, they have accounted for nearly half of all new allotments.

Many problems remain to be solved in the agricultural sector, but nothing can diminish the accomplishments to date. By the end of 1986, nearly 35 percent of the nation's farmland had been distributed free of charge to more than 100,000 of Nicaragua's poorest families, roughly 70 percent of the rural population. No other country in the world has such a record of land reform.

Joy at this achievement is less than universal, however. The wealthiest landowners, predictably enough, tend to be deeply offended that the upstart Sandinistas dare to threaten them with expropriation if they decline to farm the tracts that they or their forefathers stole fair-and-square.

They have even unearthed solicitude for the welfare of their *campesinos*, as expressed by the spokesman for the largest growers, who warns that the reform program will "transform the peasant into a peon of the state, a slave of the state who is going to do whatever the state says.... Here we are worse off than under Somoza.... Do you know what it means for them to take away your livelihood, your means of feeding yourself, and give it to someone else without justification, without law?"

But the president of the National Union of Farmers and Ranchers, whose 124,000 members account for 60 percent of Nicaragua's total production, dismisses such alarms: "After six years of revolution, 80 percent of the land is still in private

hands and 20 percent in the hands of the state. I'd say that the agrarian reform law to date has been very prudent; you might even say conservative. The new law is also consistent with a mixed economy and political pluralism."<sup>41</sup>

Since those remarks were made, the state's portion of farmland has decreased to 14 percent, and the trend is toward increasing "privatization" of agricultural production.

## SOCIAL SERVICES

Recognizing that literacy is a precondition of full participation in a modern society, the FSLN was from its inception committed to the promotion of basic literacy. "And also teach them to read" was a watchword of the revolution; Sandinista organizers mixed training in the use of weapons with lessons in reading and writing.

One of the first initiatives of the new government was a "Literacy Crusade" that would have a major impact on the entire nation. From March to August of 1980, the city *barrios* and rural villages were flooded with some 81,000 specially trained volunteers who explained the mysteries of the alphabet to small groups.

The 26,000 "alphabetizers" in the cities were for the most part adults who stayed after work to teach co-workers and neighborhood residents. Most of the 55,000 who went to the countryside were school children no older than 16. During the day, they worked in the fields alongside the *campesinos*; at night, with chalk and portable blackboard, they instructed their elders under the light of gas lamps.

By August, some 400,000 Nicaraguans possessed a new skill. In six months the nation had reduced its rate of illiteracy from 52 to 23 percent of the population over ten years old. This achievement earned international acclaim and UNESCO's highest award.

There were some not entirely unintended political effects, as well. The nation's most disadvantaged citizens had been

given a concrete demonstration of their worth as human beings. Their youthful teachers, preponderantly from middle-class homes, acquired a first-hand appreciation of the harsh conditions under which most of their countrymen lived. It was for many a revolutionary experience, arousing considerable resentment among some of their parents, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and the conservative political opposition. Fifty-six of the young teachers died, including six murdered by the CIA-contras.



*Ramon Zamora*

*A young student, turned teacher of an isolated campesino.*

*“We have seen the joy of peasants learning to read, the improved health of children vaccinated against polio and other childhood diseases, the pride of farmers who have title to their own land for the first time.... Nicaragua is one of the few Central American countries in which these efforts by the poor are echoed rather than repressed by the government. We do not deny problems, nor mistakes — but we must not confuse mistakes with systematic repression. We know repression. In other Central American countries we have all lost friends who were killed for their work with the poor. ”*

— *Statement by 47 U.S. clergy working in Nicaragua, 1983*<sup>44</sup>

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The literacy campaign has been institutionalized as an ongoing process. Some 17,000 education units in fields, workplaces and neighborhoods provide ongoing instruction to over 200,000 workers, many of them children whose chores preclude their attendance at regular schools.

By 1986, 1400 new elementary schools and 50 high schools had been constructed. Student enrollment had risen from 500,000 under Somoza to just under one million, while the number of teachers increased from 12,700 to 53,000 (including adult education teachers). All education is provided free of charge.<sup>42</sup>

There were many ancillary benefits of the literacy crusade. Perhaps most significantly, it created a spirit of involvement in a genuinely national enterprise, and inspired a large number of young people to embrace the revolution. “Last year in the insurrection,” explained a 17-year-old *brigadista*, “I took up a gun; this year it’s an exercise book, but I don’t see any real difference. I want to go into the countryside, and learn what it means to be a peasant in Nicaragua, to get rid of this stupid idea that here’s the town and there’s the country, and they’re two different things. We’re all in this revolution together.”<sup>43</sup>

As they wove the nation into a common effort for perhaps the first time in its history, the young alphabetizers performed several duties. They laid the groundwork for disease control and health education campaigns, gathered biological specimens, catalogued mineral deposits and archaeological sites,

*"Somoza did not want us to be able to read. Now we feel as if we are coming out of the darkness."*

— 40-year-old peasant woman

*"Now I can read. Now you won't push me around anymore."*

— Peasant's letter to right-wing critics of literacy campaign<sup>45</sup>

collected basic social and economic data, recorded thousands of oral histories, and stimulated a renaissance of Nicaraguan folk culture by collecting every manner of song, story, dance, poem, handcraft, etc., for inclusion in a planned Nicaraguan Cultural Atlas.

The Reagan administration's assault on the revolution has caused many setbacks, but the work continues. Despite a severe shortage of paper, 3.7 million new textbooks and manuals were printed in 1987. The literacy crusade has been extended to the indigenous peoples of the Atlantic Coast region, with instruction in their native tongues.

Labor, professional and volunteer groups have developed specialized programs to build on the general curriculum of the crusade. Teachers' salaries have been increased to levels comparable with other professionals, and their workloads have been sharply reduced. There are ongoing experiments with new teaching methods that emphasize practical applications of theoretical knowledge to the world beyond the classroom.

In these and many other ways, the government has confirmed its commitment to expanding educational opportunities.

## Healthy developments

The general health of the populace under Somoza was appalling by any standards. Infant mortality was estimated at 130 per thousand, compared to Panama's rate of 30. Lack of food was a contributing factor in most illnesses. Estimates of malnutrition among children ranged as high as 83 percent; half of those suffered from the more severe secondary and tertiary forms.

One third of the general populace contracted malaria at least once in their lives. Dengue, tuberculosis, polio, measles, tetanus and parasitic diseases were also widespread. Life expectancy was 53 years. Approximately 90 percent of all medical services were consumed by 10 percent of the population, and only 28 percent had access to any kind of medical care on a regular basis.

Characteristically, the Sandinistas attacked this syndrome by mobilizing the entire populace. "The people are extremely capable," says Dora Maria Tellez, Minister of Health. "One of the reasons for the great achievements in the health field is popular participation. It's not that the state provides people with health services; it's a national effort in search of health."<sup>46</sup>

The government has underwritten that search by allocating 14 percent of the national budget to public health, up from three percent under Somoza. Results of that new investment



Yesli Neumann

*The "national effort in search of health" is carried out primarily by the people, themselves, with the help of government training and supplies. Midwives are a key link in the new health care delivery system.*

include: an increase in the number of medical students from 150 to 500 per year; ten times the number of student nurses; training for over 1000 paramedicals (there were none before the revolution); construction of 153 health clinics and 17 new hospitals, including the country's first children's hospital; and over 200 innovative rehydration centers for treating chronic diarrhea, the leading cause of infant mortality.

Essential to the new delivery system are 25,000 volunteers trained for the many public health campaigns initiated since 1979. Following in the paths of the literacy *brigadistas*, they teach fundamentals of sanitation and preventive medicine, organize inoculation programs, and acquaint their countrymen with the facilities and opportunities now available to them under the system of free basic medical care.

The measurable effects of all this effort are dramatic. Infant mortality has fallen from 130 to 72 per thousand, and life expectancy has risen from 53 to 60 years. Malaria cases have declined by 40 percent, and measles by 97 percent. Polio, once a serious problem, has been eliminated.

## Food security

In all of this, the democratization of food supply has played a vital part. Increased opportunities for steady employment, enforcement of a minimum wage, and state subsidies for basic foods such as rice and beans have made it possible for even the poorest to maintain a healthy diet. Mothers and children in the countryside are among the prime beneficiaries.

Among the losers are city-dwellers accustomed to some finer things now in short supply. Inexpensive beef and refined sugar are especially missed; their unavailability, or exorbitant black market price, provokes dissatisfaction with the Sandinistas.

To the peasant woman watching her children grow up healthy and strong, however, there is much to be grateful for.

A U.S. physician who has studied all this concludes that, "The poorest country in Central America used to be the sickest. That has changed, and part of the success of this emerging



health care system is non-medical; it's an obvious change of morale. The government is trying to make the people healthier and they know it. I think pride has a lot to do with the incredible cooperation at the grass roots level. In Nicaragua you see tremendous poverty, but you don't see squalor."<sup>47</sup>

In 1982, the World Health Organization and UNICEF recognized Nicaragua's accomplishments by citing it as a model for other Third World countries to emulate.

## WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The status of women is being transformed by the Sandinista revolution, in a process that began with the insurrection. Approximately 25 percent of FSLN troops were women, and their participation was very significant.

They included the likes of Dora Maria Tellez, the former medical student and current Minister of Health, who at age 22 was leading men and other women into battle as a *comandante*. Thousands of her *compañeras* contributed in other ways: providing food, shelter and medical services; carrying messages, making bombs; storing ammunition, etc., etc.

Such decidedly non-domestic tasks, and the risks taken by women, had a sobering effect on the cult of *machismo* which during the Somoza era had "reached grotesque proportions even by Latin American standards".<sup>48</sup>

Many programs of the new government have affected the prevailing image of women, but none more so than the literacy crusade. Teen-age girls who volunteered to teach challenged cultural stereotypes in more ways than one: "Parents of young literacy teachers were also transformed by their children's experience. They no longer saw their daughters as dependent girls in need of protection, but as self-confident young women able to defend themselves and eager to contribute to the transformation of Nicaraguan society. The farm workers with whom the *brigadistas* had lived saw, in turn, a new role model, a woman not confined to home, husband, and children, but dedicated to working for social change."<sup>49</sup>

That role model was especially instructive to peasant women, among whom both literacy and self-esteem were in exceedingly short supply.

In general, Nicaraguan women have benefited more than men from the entire range of Sandinista initiatives in health care, education, housing and other social services. "This is because these programs are oriented toward the poor, and women represent 60 per cent of the poorest stratum."<sup>50</sup>

The government has also promoted women's rights through legislation. The 1969 Historic Program of the FSLN proclaimed that it would "abolish the odious discrimination that women have been subjected to compared to men"; and one of the Sandinistas' first acts was to ban discrimination "by race, national origin, creed, or sex". That was followed by a law

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*"One of the explicit objectives of Agrarian Reform is the full and equal participation of women [including] the rights of land ownership, equal pay, cooperative membership and management."*

— Nancy Conover,  
Nicaraguan Perspectives

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stipulating equal pay and job opportunity, and another abolishing the traditional practice of paying a woman's wages to her husband or father. A key provision of the Agrarian Reform Act entitles women to land ownership, and equal rights of participation in farm co-operatives. It is also illegal to portray women as sexual objects in advertising.

To advance their interests, Nicaraguan women have formed the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Women's Association ("AMNLAE"). Named after the first woman killed in the revolution, AMNLAE now claims some 90,000 members. Its goal is "to fully integrate women into the economic, social and political life of the country", and it attempts to do so by keeping pressure on the government.

High on AMNLAE's list of priorities is greater opportunity in the workplace through continuing education and job training. That emphasis implies the need for more day care centers, community kitchens, laundries, etc. There has been a slow but steady increase in job opportunities, but the heavy cost of

defending the country against U.S. aggression has effectively halted construction of new support facilities.

In other ways, as well, the promise of equality remains far short of fulfillment. The new equal rights laws are often neglected, and the attitudes they seek to instill have yet to be absorbed by most Nicaraguan men; domestic chores and access to union leadership positions are two points of particularly strong male resistance.

As in the United States, most working women assume the entire burden of child-rearing and home-related chores — except that in Nicaragua the laundry is done on

some stones at the riverside, and the family's water supply is likely to be a community well several hundred yards down the street.

Still, there is hope for the future. The Sandinistas have demonstrated a clear and consistent commitment to women's rights, and it is more than just talk. For instance, female workers are now entitled to receive 60 percent of their earnings during a 10-week maternity leave. Over 45 percent of university students are women. They hold thirteen of the FSLN's 61 seats in the National Assembly, and over 35 percent of government leadership positions.<sup>51</sup>

For a nation so deeply entranced by the manly fantasies of *machismo*, these are noteworthy developments.



Wendy Van Roojen

*Nicaraguan women fought for the right to participate fully in the army. This young woman commands 200 troops, most of them men, in Rivas.*

## ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

In 1976 an intrepid group of environmentalists proposed to Somoza the establishment of a ministry of natural resources. They were dismissed out of hand, and warned that any repetition of such foolishness would be harshly punished.

But they did meet again — with leaders of the FSLN, three days after the victory celebration in Managua on July 19, 1979. One result of that encounter was the Nicaraguan Institute of Natural Resources (“IRENA”).

The new agency was given the task of restoring the health of a land that had suffered much the same fate as its people — rape and despoliation by a conglomerate of local elites and foreign corporations. The U.S.-owned Nicaraguan Long Leaf Pine Company, for example, had nearly wiped out the country’s northeast coastal pines. There was no reforestation, nothing given back to the land — just a cut of the action paid directly to Somoza.

Another U.S. company, Penwalt, managed to avoid environmental regulations back home by setting up shop on the shore of Lake Managua. Its chemical plant has dumped so much mercury and other pollutants into the lake that much of it is now a biological wasteland. In order to prevent contamination of its neighboring reservoir, Managua has adopted a strict water-rationing program which includes a complete shutdown for two days a week.

### The cat food connection

The nation’s forests have been decimated by the “hamburger/cat food connection” established during the Somoza years. Muscled off their tiny plots by rapacious cattle ranchers almost as fast as they could clear them, peasant farmers steadily ate into the forest. This process was repeated over and over again, so that the peasants were in effect clearing the land free of charge to the ever-advancing ranchers.

Most of the beef that resulted was shipped to the fast-food chains and pet food manufacturers of North America. From next to nothing in 1967, Nicaragua had by 1970 become the number one Latin American supplier of beef to the U.S.

The worst problem confronting IRENA is pesticide contamination from agriculture. Nicaragua has been a world leader in pesticide poisonings, with 400 deaths and countless disabilities attributed to that cause every year. The long-term effects can only be guessed at, but they are certain to exact a price for decades to come.

The use of pesticides in Nicaragua increased exponentially with the development of cotton as an export crop starting in the 1950s. Since regulations protecting workers and the environment were virtually non-existent, the country "quickly became a deadly playground where chemical companies peddled their wares..... In the 1960s and 1970s, 40 percent of all U.S. pesticide exports went to Central America. In the 1970s, Nicaragua consistently led the region in the total volume of pesticides applied. By the mid-70s, Nicaragua was one of the world's leading users of DDT. Nicaragua and its neighbors also widely used other compounds that were banned or restricted in the USA, such as endrin, dieldrin and lindane."<sup>52</sup>

In a familiar pattern of escalation, targeted pests soon adapted to the deadly chemicals, so that heavier doses were required for the same effect. This cycle was repeated many times and, by the late 1970s, water sources and food chains near the prime cotton lands of the Pacific coastal plain were drenched in pesticides. A study of mothers' breast milk detected levels of DDT 45 times greater than the World Health Organization's recommended maximum.

As it tries to cope with such challenges, IRENA confronts two hard realities: the country desperately needs the foreign exchange generated by cotton and other exports; and most environmental programs can "only" promise future benefits which must be purchased with current funds — in especially short supply since the onset of the CIA-*contra* war.

Nevertheless, IRENA has been able to make substantial progress. Perhaps its easiest task has been to slow down the

rate of forest depletion. The nation's extensive land reform program has removed the main source of pressure on forests by awarding titles to the majority of landless peasants.

### **Appropriate technology**

The expansion of cattle ranches has thus been restrained, but there remains the demand created by the 90 percent of households and 25 percent of industries that use wood for fuel. At present rates of use, Nicaragua's forests could entirely disappear by the year 2025.

To reduce that possibility, an alternative energy program is being developed. It includes wind and solar power, biogas, generators run by geothermal energy, and small-to-medium hydroelectric installations. It is expected that the development of such resources will lessen the nation's dependency on costly oil, all of which must be imported. The target date for energy self-sufficiency is the year 2000.

Pesticide contamination remains a serious problem, but its use has already been cut in half. This is mainly due to a new policy that emphasizes natural biological controls. Growers are required to participate, but the government provides subsidies and insures against any resulting losses. The program has proven to be a great success, increasing profits by reducing the need for expensive chemicals while at the same time decreasing damage to the environment.

In addition, the most dangerous chemicals, such as DDT, endrin and dieldrin have been completely banned, and replaced by less harmful alternatives. There are also new regulations for the protection of workers' health; for instance, all pesticide containers must now be color-coded and labeled in Spanish, and there are strict guidelines on application procedures.

"Thus, an effort to safeguard environmental and human health has also increased economic productivity, making the Sandinista government's pesticide policy a model for 'productive conservation' in the Third World."<sup>53</sup>

Other projects currently in progress or under development:

- restoration of Lake Managua
- a system of tree windbreaks to inhibit soil erosion; 700 miles are already in place
- nurseries producing two million tree seedlings per year for reforestation
- a seed bank for native plants and food crops
- research and development of more efficient home cooking stoves, substitution of adobe for concrete and rice hulls for asbestos
- protection of tropical rainforests
- restrictions on hunting of 49 endangered species (Nicaragua's fauna includes some 750 bird species, 600 reptiles and amphibians, 200 mammals, and 100 freshwater fish)
- plans for 18% of nation's territory in national parks, one of the highest percentages in world
- proposal for "demilitarized biosphere reserve" to be created from rain forest region shared by Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica
- nationwide effort to clean up polluted drinking water, the leading cause of illness and death.<sup>54</sup>

It all adds up to the only comprehensive environmental protection program in Latin America, one that addresses many of the problems also found in more "advanced" industrial countries.

Nothing illustrates the government's commitment to ecological integrity more clearly than its 1987 decision to back away from a major logging project near the San Juan River, which runs along the southeastern border with Costa Rica.

The 3200 square kilometers scheduled to be cut would have yielded millions in desperately needed foreign exchange. But the Nicaraguan Association of Biologists and

Ecologists warned that the logging would cause damage to the San Juan watershed far in excess of any short-term cash benefits. Reluctantly, the government agreed, and cancelled the project. Hard choices of that variety are rarely made by wealthy nations, let alone one so miserably poor as Nicaragua, struggling to survive an attack by the most powerful of them all.

## CIVIL RIGHTS

One of the most striking aspects of the Sandinista revolution is the general freedom it allows in the throes of an assault by the United States and its reactionary minions within the country. Visitors from the U.S., primed by the Reagan administration to confront a "totalitarian dungeon", discover instead a nation openly engaged in lively and often ferocious debate.

The oppressive atmosphere of the Somoza years has been lifted. It is no longer necessary to avert one's eyes from the police for fear of harassment, or worse. Girls no longer grow up with the knowledge that "at any moment a *guardia* could look at them and like them and have them".

Capital punishment and torture have been abolished. There are no death squads, no sudden "disappearances" of friends and relatives never seen again, as in those Central American countries beholden to the United States. "Human rights are afforded far greater respect in Nicaragua than in the nearby states of El Salvador and Guatemala," notes the human rights organization, Americas Watch. "The Nicaraguan government does not engage in practices of torturing, murdering or abducting its citizens."<sup>55</sup>

The government does prosecute soldiers and other officials who abuse their power. Over 600 security personnel have been convicted of crimes against civilians; many have received the maximum penalty of 30 years' imprisonment. Again, this stands in painfully sharp contrast to the region's U.S. client-states, where hundreds of thousands of civilians — including nuns, priests, and an archbishop — have been slaughtered with utter impunity.



With the possible exception of Costa Rica, Nicaragua's record on human rights is the cleanest in the region. "This is an extraordinarily free country," contends a U.S. citizen who lives 60 miles from the border with Honduras. "Above all, there is freedom from terror. Here, people do not get murdered for speaking out against the government or trying to create a better society. The only terror that's here comes from the *contras* in Honduras and Costa Rica and from Washington."<sup>56</sup>

Another U.S. observer wryly notes: "A State Department official condemns the 'asphyxiating corruption and oppression' in Nicaragua, but it is the only Central American country where the United States ambassador can go around without bodyguards."<sup>57</sup>

A critical index of the government's commitment to human rights is its treatment of Somoza's captured henchmen. Although very few families were left untouched by their cruelty, the former members of *La Guardia* have been largely spared the flood of retribution which normally engulfs the agents of a fallen despot.

Some rough and vengeful justice was dispensed during the brief period of chaos following Somoza's hurried departure to Miami. But through example and constant indoctrination, the Sandinistas have for the most part succeeded in planting the idea that members of *La Guardia* were themselves victims of "Somocismo" and deserved an opportunity for rehabilitation.

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*"It's hard to feel any generosity at first for these people, when you know what they've done. I lost members of my family in the bombing of Leon and... all I wanted to do was to take revenge. But with discipline and time your feelings change, gradually. You realize a lot of things — how most of La Guardia are only humble peasants, just like you.... Somoza told them what would happen if they lost, and they swallowed it — that we would rape their wives and murder their children. And now they see what really happens, and it's terrible for them. They realize that they were fighting for a lie. So, when you see what this generosity means in practice, you know its right. "*

— Teenage prison guard<sup>58</sup>

## A dimension of forgiveness

“One of the most distinctive features of this process is its dimension of forgiveness,” says an Irish psychologist working with Nicaragua’s social service system.

But it has not been an easy sell, as suggested by this recollection of FSLN co-founder Tomas Borge: “When people tried to lynch prisoners who were in the Red Cross building, I personally went to see the relatives of our martyrs who were there ready to take their revenge. I needed all the powers of persuasion I possessed, and I managed to persuade them not to kill the National Guard. We were able to convince the people by saying that we could not kill the Somocistas because we had made this revolution in order to put a stop to killings. The revolution teaches us respect for other people.”<sup>59</sup>

In an episode that has gathered the weight of legend, Borge obeyed his own counsel: “A few days ago, my wife’s murderer was captured. When he saw me coming — that woman had been savagely tortured, she had been raped, her fingernails had been pulled out — he thought I was going to kill him, or at least hit him. He was totally terrified when we arrived, but we treated him like a human being. He did not understand then, nor can he understand now. I think he may never understand.”

After serving a short prison sentence, the torturer of Borge’s wife rejoined those of his former associates who now lead the CIA-*contra* terrorists in their assault on the revolution.

Reforming the brutal prison system of the Somozas is an expensive proposition, but the government has made significant progress with the scant resources available. A 1986 Americas Watch report on improvements at the largest prison states that “the authorities have made many physical changes, strengthening security, building more cells, and providing more facilities for inmates to work.

“Overcrowding, which was a serious problem in 1982, has been solved. The prison now operates at about 80 percent capacity. The opportunities for work continue to grow, and

they are now diverse. Facilities for family visits and for recreation have also been improved.”

There are now three categories of prison: closed, semi-open, and open. Educational and job training programs are offered at all levels, and with good conduct prisoners can work through the system to gain early release.

About one fourth of the prison population consists of former *guardias*, and others convicted of supporting the CIA-*contras*. Although human rights organizations have certified that torture and other abuses are not condoned as a matter of government policy, there have been accusations made in numerous individual cases, especially by relatives of the more recalcitrant former *guardias*. It is likely, as with prisoners and their custodians everywhere, that many such charges of abuse are valid.

Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that the prison system evolving under the Sandinistas marks a significant improvement over past practice, and compares very favorably with its counterparts in other Central American countries.

A prominent businessman, who has studied prisons throughout the region in his capacity as president of the National Committee on Human Rights, told a U.S. visitor: “The

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*There have been significant improvements in the national penitentiary service in the past four years..... In a continent notorious for appalling prison conditions, where brutality and corruption are the norm, Nicaragua's penal system stands out as a genuine effort to find a more humane yet affordable alternative. Such criticism as there is concentrates on lack of resources, which is a feature of the Nicaraguan economy as a whole, and is not limited to the prison system...*

*The record we have described is not the record of a government bent on totalitarian rule. Few gross abuses can be attributed to the armed forces and the state security service.... On the contrary, there has been increasing willingness to put on trial and punish members of the armed forces accused of abuses of power.*

— Right to Survive: Human Rights in Nicaragua  
Catholic Institute for International Relations; London, 1987

Sandinista prisons are not where I want to spend the weekend, but neither are the prisons in the USA. In comparison with prisons in Honduras and El Salvador, the prisons in Nicaragua are picnic grounds. The human rights group here [i.e. the pro-*contra* Permanent Human Rights Commission] that criticizes the Sandinistas are great inventors. They are fed their 'information', if you want to call it that, by the U.S. embassy. Your allies in Central America still maintain dungeons. We have nothing like that here."<sup>60</sup>

The government has adopted a similar attitude of leniency toward CIA-*contra* defectors, several thousand of whom have taken advantage of a general amnesty program that has been evolving since 1981.

Arguing that the destructive behavior of most prisoners and *contras* has its origins in the poisonous crucible of the Somoza era, the new government has based its response on the principles of rehabilitation, reconciliation and — quite literally — Christian charity, since the revolution is suffused with the healing ethos of liberation theology.

## PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

The revolution touched off an explosion of personal involvement in every aspect of national life, at all levels of society — especially the lowest. The hopeless resignation of the Somoza era gave way to an appreciation of human potential which the Sandinistas have encouraged by every available means.

A U.S. observer has described the process: "One of the greatest changes I've witnessed here is tremendous uncorking of the people. There's no other word for it. You had, in 1979, a society that was largely peasant, illiterate, and living on the edge of survival. Among many of these people, there was an incredibly reduced sense of self. They would say outright, 'We are just animals. Our opinion doesn't matter.' Their oppression ran so deep that it had become a self-definition."<sup>61</sup>



*Al Burke*

*The revolution has stimulated a renaissance of folk arts. Here, members of the dance troupe, La Flor de Sacanjoche, entertain a Seattle audience. The dancers are all teenagers, whose brief careers as “cultural ambassadors” are usually followed by service in the nation’s defense against the CIA-contras. This was the final performance for several of the child-adults, and it was heightened by awareness that some of them might soon be dead.*

The first and most powerful government effort to counteract that stultifying self-image has been noted above — the national literacy crusade. It inoculated the illiterate with a hint of their suppressed capabilities, and revitalized the rich national culture which had been largely supplanted by that of the United States.

Promoting this revival of things Nicaraguan is the task of the Ministry of Culture. Led by Ernesto Cardenal, a priest and internationally-acclaimed poet, the new ministry has employed a variety of methods to support folk arts and crafts:

- Popular Culture Centers have been established throughout the country, offering space for local artists to practice and display their crafts.
- Poetry and theater workshops are conducted throughout the country on a regular basis.

- “Mobile cinemas” bring films and a glimpse of the outside world to remote settlements.
- Artisans are supported with tools, materials, and financial assistance.
- Books of every description are made available at very low cost; a standard text of the literacy crusade and its successors is the Bible.
- Indigenous cultures are protected and encouraged, especially in the Atlantic Coast region, where native peoples are being educated in their own languages.
- New libraries and museums have been constructed, including the country’s first children’s library.<sup>62</sup>

The result has been a flowering of popular culture, especially painting and the national pastime, poetry.

### **Action at the grassroots**

As the FSLN has repeatedly emphasized, the revolution is not something to be done to the people, but rather a process to be carried out by them. The primary vehicles of that process are the various “mass organizations” — expressions of participatory democracy with no direct parallel in North America.

Well over half of the adult population belongs to one or more of these organizations, which provide a pool of free labor for essential services that the impoverished nation could not otherwise afford. They have been instrumental in the success of the literacy campaign, public health projects, coffee and cotton harvests, disaster relief, civil defense, and other essential chores of the revolution.

The Sandinista Defense Committees (CDS) comprise the largest category of mass organization. Emerging from the wreckage of the 1972 earthquake disaster, they rapidly expanded into a network of informal social service agencies with close ties to the FSLN. To fill the administrative void left in the wake of Somoza, the new government called upon the CDSs to maintain order and perform essential services.

CDS volunteers did just that during the transitional period, and continue to perform many necessary tasks at no cost. For example, they vaccinate all dogs against rabies every year, and help to control malaria by cleaning mosquito-breeding areas. They provide daily janitorial services for the schools, and recruit teachers for adult education programs. They organize weed and garbage cleanups. Prior to every rainy season, they remove debris from sewer systems to prevent flooding. Etc., etc.

For the lack of an alternative, CDSs have been assigned the task of distributing rationed foods such as rice and beans; by most accounts, they do this fairly and efficiently. They also mount unarmed civil defense patrols, in much the same fashion as the U.S. "neighborhood watch" program; as a result of their vigilance, crime rates have fallen sharply and the city streets are safer than many in North America. The U.S. ambassador has the CDSs to thank for the fact that he can move around Managua with considerably less anxiety than his colleagues in San Salvador and Tegucigalpa.

Precisely because they play such an important, yet vaguely-defined role in the running of the country, the CDSs have been the object of frequent criticism. One accusation, repeated by the government's most implacable enemies, is that they display favoritism toward supporters of the FSLN in the allocation of ration cards. It is a charge that has been refuted by many neutral observers.<sup>63</sup>

Better substantiated are complaints that some CDS members have falsely branded innocent people as counter-revolutionaries, or have harassed supporters of opposition parties by tearing down posters, disrupting rallies, etc.

The government acknowledges that such abuses have occurred, but points out that CDSs are completely autonomous and that the majority of their members do not belong to the FSLN. The occasional abuses which do occur are, fact, deviations from clearly stated government policy.

The abuse of power, especially under conditions of great stress and hardship, is hardly a phenomenon that is peculiar to Nicaragua. It may be assumed that sporadic abuses will continue to occur until such time as the country is granted a

moment's peace, and can afford an administrative apparatus that is capable of delivering the full range of services introduced by the revolution.

Meanwhile, the government constantly admonishes CDS members to treat everyone equally, regardless of political inclination. For the most part, though, criticisms of the CDS "seem to be based more on the potential for abuse than on upon actual patterns of coercion".<sup>64</sup> Certainly there is nothing that even remotely resembles the widespread pillage and rape of the "Committees of Safety" which disfigured the U.S. American Revolution.

A U.S. priest with extensive experience in the region has placed the Sandinista Defense Committees in context: "We should recognize that in Latin America real political power has traditionally been held by small elites of oligarchies and armies, even where formal democracy seems to function, as in Costa Rica or Venezuela. Elections may be honest and political parties may enter and leave office in an orderly fashion, but elites still hold the decisive power. In Nicaragua, many people believe that their revolutionary organizations, unions, and block committees give them a role in politics that is ongoing and is not merely activated for elections. They view the revolution itself as a form of democracy."<sup>65</sup>

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*"Intellectuals, idealistic students and social activists formed the core of the 'Cory crusaders' who took to the streets to protest Marcos' authoritarian rule.... But many observers believe 'people power' has been squandered, never properly organized into a coherent political party or a mass movement that could join the president in campaigning for national goals. Many of those same idealists who marched against Marcos now join demonstrations criticizing the government for lack of progress on land reform, for sponsoring anti-communist vigilantes and for failing to prosecute soldiers and vigilantes accused of human rights abuses."*

— Robert H. Reid, *Associated Press*, regarding the government of Philippines President Corazon Aquino; September 1987



## The voices of women

Two thirds of CDS members are female activists who also form the core of AMNLAE, the Amanda Luisa Espinoza Women's Association. As noted previously, AMNLAE has been crucial to the success of national education and health programs. Among its other achievements to date are laws requiring fathers to support all of their children ("legitimate" or otherwise), giving single women the right to adopt, and declaring domestic chores to be the joint responsibility of husband and wife. It has also founded a Women's Legal Office that assists primarily low-income women with such problems as physical abuse, custody, child support, and sexual discrimination.

The Sandinista Youth Organization includes some 35,000 members, or just under 20 percent of those between 14-28 years old. They formed the backbone of the literacy campaign in rural areas, and have donated large quantities of free labor to coffee and cotton harvests. They are also active in civil defense and in army reserve units.

There is hardly an economic or political interest in the country that is not represented by one or another of the organizations that have sprouted up since the revolution. Farmers and farm workers, professionals, indigenous groups, children, artisans, students — all have been encouraged by the government to organize for the pursuit of common goals.

None of the mass organizations is formally affiliated with the FSLN. Each elects its own leaders and sets its own priorities, which do not always coincide with those of the government. AMNLAE, for instance, successfully argued against a government proposal to make military service obligatory only for men.

According to one U.S. observer, organizations such as AMNLAE and the CDSs are vital catalysts of democracy: "Their rapid growth is all the more remarkable in the face of objective difficulties.... The mass organizations are working with very meager resources of capital, technology, skilled personnel, and means of transportation and communication.

The tremendous growth in membership and the influence of these organizations is one of the most important aspects (if not the most important aspect) of the quality, nature and depth of democracy in Nicaragua.”<sup>66</sup>

### **The right to organize**

Since 1979, union membership has grown from 6 to 55 percent of the labor force, as compared with 17 percent in the United States. Over 1000 collective bargaining agreements have been negotiated — something of an improvement on the 160 of the 43-year Somoza period, during which strikes were routinely answered with beatings, mass firings and imprisonment.

The new contracts include some remarkable elements, according to a delegation of U.S. labor leaders: “We were frankly surprised by some of the provisions that are normal in Nicaraguan collective bargaining agreements. They are ahead of contracts in the U.S. in several respects. Typical contract provisions include full health and maternity coverage; subsidies for lunch, transportation, and consumer goods; and educational leaves and subsidies. In almost all instances, unions have access to the company’s books.... Imagine the thought of contract rights to the complete financial records of General Motors, J.P. Stevens, AT&T or Continental Airlines!”<sup>67</sup>

In addition, the new constitution enshrines social security pensions, occupational safety regulations, technical training, stable employment, and equal pay for equal work.

Comfortable wages and the right to strike, on the other hand, have been sacrificed to the United States’ onslaught. In recent years, wage ceilings have been imposed and strikes forbidden in key industries as part of the official state of emergency triggered by the war. The vast majority of workers support these restrictions; for, as a leader of the largest labor federation put it, “A revolution which doesn’t defend itself doesn’t deserve to be called a revolution.”<sup>68</sup>

Some illegal strikes have occurred, nonetheless. Most have been called by the small unions, representing twelve percent of organized labor, which are opposed to the government —

two percent on the grounds that it is slouching toward communism, and ten percent because it is said to have sold out to the *bourgeoisie*.

The government has in every instance responded with moderation: no workers have been fired, pickets have not been molested, and strike leaders have been permitted to continue their vehement attacks on Sandinista "tyranny". The strikes have been resolved through peaceful negotiations, without recourse to the penalties justified by the state of emergency.

Of course, the Reagan administration would have it otherwise. According to its horrifying accounts of Sandinista persecution, the 88 percent of the workforce that supports the government does so only in submission to intimidation and manipulation. The AFL-CIO has echoed these charges, as per its reflexive animus toward anything labeled "communist" by the White House; it has endorsed the tiny unions, representing only two percent of organized workers, that are affiliated with Nicaragua's pro-*contra* opposition.

A large segment of the U.S. labor movement isn't buying any of that, however. Many union members are aware that decades of red-baiting by the federal government has instilled in labor leaders a dread of seeming "soft on communism", and a nervous predisposition to demonstrate their loyalty by joining every anti-communist crusade of the White House.

The AFL-CIO has been demonstrating its loyalty in Latin America by shilling for the government-funded American Institute for Free Labor Development, conjured up in 1962 as an antidote to the Cuban Revolution. Through its influence over the Latin American unions that it bankrolls, the AIFLD has established a dubious record of opposing popular revolts and promoting reactionary U.S. foreign policy.

According to *Business Week*, it all adds up to "labor's own version of the CIA". A former CIA agent confirms that assessment, describing AIFLD's executive director as "a CIA agent in labor operations".<sup>69</sup>

(continued on page 77)

## Facing the People

Visitors to Nicaragua are often struck by the extraordinary accessibility of government leaders, who travel everywhere with little or no wall of security between them and the people. Several facilities for registering complaints of every type and dimension have been established. One of the most popular is a daily radio program, "Direct Line", which listeners can telephone with a question or complaint and receive an immediate response....

*Cara el Pueblo* (Face the People) has become a national institution. This is a weekly live television broadcast from a *barrio* or town to which President Ortega and other government leaders have traveled for a freewheeling encounter with residents of the community. The broadcasts attract a large audience throughout the country, serving to reaffirm the Sandinistas' commitment to all segments of the population, and to underline the revolution's promise of an equal voice for all Nicaraguans. A visitor from the United States has captured something of the flavor of one *Cara el Pueblo*:

"Daniel Ortega did no talking at all for well over an hour after arriving on the platform. He only listened....

"A *campesino* complained about the big landowners that remained in Chontales province. 'Why should one family own so much when hundreds of us can barely exist on our tiny farms?' More farmers asked for machines, boots, machetes, rifles.

"A woman in a Boston Celtics T-shirt rose to agree with the farmer. 'If a Yankee crosses the line in our village,' she said, 'he'll lose his private parts.' Another woman grabbed a microphone to say, 'That's the spirit. When a woman gets going, there's no man who can hold her back.' The crowd, ready for a break, laughed and clapped for her."

— Peter Davis, *Where Is Nicaragua?*

Consequently, the AFL-CIO is often referred to by students of labor and Latin America as the "AFL-CIA".

With that history in mind, several delegations of dissident U.S. labor leaders have visited Nicaragua to make their own evaluations and have come away with no evidence of government oppression. On the contrary, they have reported widespread support for the government and its policies, and near-universal hatred of the CIA-*contras*.

Concludes the report of one such delegation: "The Nicaraguan government has imposed restrictions on the democratic process, but it is not the oppressive, totalitarian regime of President Reagan's pronouncements.... Opposition unions

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*The AFL-CIO's favorite Nicaraguan union is "an anti-Sandinista propaganda organization, with a vanishing trade union base, plenty of money, and close political ties to all the traditional enemies of Nicaragua's workers."*

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have faced periodic harassment, primarily in the form of offices being ransacked and leaders being detained. At the same time, these unions have been free to maintain offices, meet with their members, distribute their publications, conduct workshops and solicit funds. Most significantly, these unions have been allowed to voice their opposition to the Sandinista government without fear of extinction."

As for those ransacked offices and detained leaders, that probably has something to do with the war. As one of the offended parties conceded, "We are not going to deny that in some cases some of our members have been engaging in counter-revolutionary activities."

Another U.S. delegation concludes its report by describing the AFL-CIO's favorite Nicaraguan union as "an anti-Sandinista propaganda organization, with a vanishing trade union base, plenty of money, and close political ties to all the traditional enemies of Nicaragua's workers."<sup>70</sup>

## CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT

Had they chosen to call a national election immediately after Somoza's downfall, there is no doubt that the Sandinistas would have completely dominated it. They were at the height of their glory, the potential opposition was in near-total disarray, and the euphoric expectations which tend to accompany all revolutions had not yet run up against sober reality.

Even their opponents acknowledged the overwhelming popularity of the FSLN and the certainty that it would win an honest election by a very large margin. Accordingly, they contented themselves with publicly accusing the Sandinistas of despotic procrastination, while working behind the scenes to delay elections as long as possible, in hopes that their positions would improve over time.

For quite different reasons, the FSLN was likewise in no rush to the voting booth. For one thing, there were major internal disputes to resolve. Ultimately, the general perspective of the *terceristas* was adopted as an initial point of departure. Of the three FSLN factions, the one led by Daniel Ortega was the least enthralled by Marxist dogma, and the most inclined to compromise and negotiation. That approach appears to have served the country well, but it is evident that the strains within the party have not yet resolved into perfect harmony.

Another reason for postponing elections was the nation's pitiful lack of preparation for them. The bulk of the population was illiterate, no one could remember an honest election, and it is impossible to offer a political choice if there is only one effective party. In view of all that, it was announced in 1980 that the first national election would be called at some indeterminate date prior to 1986.

That gave the political opposition essential breathing space, which the more reactionary elements filled with money and direction from the United States. On the other hand, the literacy campaign nurtured in the majority the basic skills necessary for participation in national life.

Equally important was the promotion of grassroots involvement in cultural activities, mass organizations, health

programs, etc. The people needed time to get used to the idea that they now had responsibility for their own lives and the future of the nation.

In preparing for the election, delegations were dispatched to study procedures all over the world — except the United States, which denied entry for that purpose. The Sandinistas also conducted ongoing negotiations with the opposition on the structure of government and the electoral process. By most accounts, the Sandinistas demonstrated great flexibility and restraint in these proceedings.<sup>71</sup>

What emerged was a plan for a U.S.-style executive branch with a president and vice-president, a 96-seat National Assembly after the western European model, a Supreme Court, and a Supreme Electoral Council. The task of the independent electoral council, which consisted of three Sandinistas and two others, was to supervise all aspects of the election such as allocating campaign funds, maintaining ballot secrecy, counting and reporting the vote, etc.

### **The majority rules**

The national election was called for 4 November 1984, despite mounting threats to the FSLN and the nation. As in all of Latin America, the economy was in desperate shape due to global economic trends; the assault of the Reagan administration was beginning to hurt; and some of the provisional government's defensive measures — most notably the military draft — were bitterly opposed by an influential minority of the population. More and more people began to complain that the Sandinistas weren't trying hard enough to "get along with the Yankees".

As a former editor of the *New York Times* observed, Nicaragua in 1984 was "at war, above all, with the United States, whose planes fly out from Honduran airfields and daily menace Managua with their sonic booms, whose ships invade Nicaraguan waters, and whose money, arms and advice sustain the rebels. Under such circumstances, most revolutionary governments wouldn't hold an election at all."<sup>72</sup>

Nevertheless, to the rhythm of the sonic booms, the election proceeded on schedule. It was witnessed by some 1000 journalists and 400 international observers who, with very few exceptions, proclaimed it to be one of the most open and honest elections ever to take place in Latin America.

Political parties of all persuasions were completely free to participate, and enjoyed unprecedented levels of support which included public funding and free media coverage. Voting, not compulsory, was secret and meticulously protected against fraud (in contradistinction, for example, to that year's election in the U.S. client-state of El Salvador).

As expected, Daniel Ortega was elected president and his FSLN colleague, writer Sergio Ramirez, vice-president. The Sandinistas ended up with 61 of the 96 seats in the National Assembly. This is somewhat less than their percentage of the total vote, since the election rules were weighted in favor of minority parties.

Parties to the ideological left of the FSLN won six seats, and those to the right took the remaining 29. A special category consisted of those 12 members who won under the banner of the FSLN but were not party members; the Sandinistas invited their participation in order to further diversify representation in the Assembly.

Desperate to deprive the FSLN of democratic legitimacy, the Reagan administration tried its worst to sabotage the election. In addition to the sonic booming, intended to frighten peasants away from the polls, it prodded the CIA-*contras* into one of their sporadic frenzies. The number of terrorist attacks increased sharply during the campaign, and radio broadcasts from Honduras and Costa Rica warned of reprisals against anyone who dared to vote. There were the usual kidnappings, rapes, tortures and murders. Nine election officials were assassinated.

A coalition of the most reactionary opposition parties was instructed by the U.S. embassy to sit out the election, claiming fraud and harassment. Its pre-fabricated laments were duly amplified and reported, to the exclusion of nearly all else, by the mainstream U.S. press. The conservative hierarchy of the



Catholic Church joined in the fraudulent chorus, as did the AFL-CIA's adopted union, representing two percent of organized labor. (The coalition's hastily-recruited nominal leader, Arturo Cruz, was soon to be tacked on to the CIA-*contras'* political window-dressing.)

The leader of an opposition party not included in the pro-*contra* coalition was paid a large sum by the U.S. to withdraw. Another was persuaded to do likewise in exchange for promises of future favors. But the other members of that party refused to follow his example, and won nine seats in the National Assembly — one of which the reluctant leader then occupied as his right.

### **International acclaim**

Such shenanigans, and the uncritical reporting they enjoyed in U.S. news media, played well in Peoria and admirably served the domestic political purposes of the Reagan administration. But to most of those who actually witnessed the election campaign of 1984, there was no doubt that it was open and honest, and had indisputably certified the Sandinistas as the legitimate leaders of Nicaragua.

A few representative excerpts from the reports of international observer teams, including several from NATO allies of the United States:

Irish Inter-Parliamentary Delegation: "The electoral process was carried out with total integrity.... We have no doubt regarding the validity of the election results.... The seven parties participating represent a broad spectrum of political ideologies, and are an indication of the pluralism of political life."

U.S. Latin America Studies Association: "The electoral process was marked by a high degree of 'open-endedness', taking the form of continuous bargaining between the FSLN and the opposition groups over electoral rules and structures, as well as more general aspects of the political system and public policies. The record shows that both before and during the campaign, the Sandinistas made major concessions to opposition forces on nearly all points of contention."

Canadian Church and Human Rights Delegation: “The electoral law of Nicaragua is excellent. The elections were well-administered under exceedingly difficult conditions.... The non-participation of a coalition of three parties is regrettable, and the U.S. role in their abstention highly questionable.... Fair recourse was available for dealing with complaints.”

Great Britain Parliamentary Delegation: “There were no irregularities or corrections in the conduct of the electoral process or the counting.... The elections were technically correct, and the voting system extremely well thought out and a little bit superior to what we do in Britain.”

Despite threats of reprisals, and terrorist attacks along the Honduras border which kept thousands from voting, 92 percent of eligible voters had registered and 75 percent of those had voted. That meant that 69 percent of all eligible voters had taken part in the election — a level that compares favorably with the 53 percent who participated in the 1984 U.S. national election.

## National dialogue

The most urgent task of the National Assembly was to devise a constitution appropriate to the principles of the revolution. For that purpose, a 22-member Constitutional Commission was appointed to prepare a first draft. All but one of the seven political parties were represented on the commission in proportions slightly greater than their membership in the National Assembly; the exception was the FSLN, which was under-represented.

Delegations were again dispatched all over the world to learn from other nations. At the same time, there began a “national dialogue” in three parts:

- All political parties submitted drafts for debate by the National Assembly.
- The commission met with interest groups not specifically represented in the Assembly, e.g. labor unions, churches and business organizations.

- Members of the National Assembly presided over 73 town meetings in which 100,000 citizens participated.

As in the 1984 election campaign, the U.S. embassy directed the pro-*contra* opposition to boycott these proceedings. But a sizable majority of interest groups did participate and, after nearly two years, a first draft was presented to the National Assembly for debate. With a few minor alterations, the final draft was approved by nearly unanimous vote and became law on 10 January 1987.

In keeping with established practice, the new constitution formally adopts the fundamental principles of mixed economy, political pluralism and international non-alignment.

It contains the basic rights that apply in all democratic countries, including: freedom of speech, religion, and assembly; proscriptions against discrimination; due process under the law; and the right of workers to organize and strike.

Also included are some uncommon provisions, including: the unequivocal equality of women; a commitment to land reform; free health care and education; and protection against hunger.



Ramon/Nueva Imagen

*A woman offers her suggestions for improving a draft of the new constitution at one of 73 special forums held all over the country for that purpose.*

*“Most of the delegates were indeed conservative. At a quick glance, they all appeared to be almost identical: they were all men, all white, all members in good standing of the American political establishment — businessmen, lawyers, aristocrats, bankers.”*

— *Historian Charles L. Mee, Jr., on origins of U.S. constitution*

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A unique feature is the requirement that the National Assembly hold regular town meetings in order to personally inform the populace about proposed legislation. This article “responds to concern that the parliament not become a group of professional politicians in the capital cut off from the people who elected them”.<sup>73</sup>

Indigenous peoples of the Atlantic Coast region are guaranteed a general autonomy which includes bilingual education, respect for cultural traditions, and a degree of control over natural resources. The precise details are still being negotiated by native groups and the National Assembly, but Nicaragua is the only country in the hemisphere that has made autonomy a matter of constitutional right.

The provisions regarding national emergencies are of special interest, since the new constitution was born in the midst of an assault by the United States. Rules governing the circumstances under which an emergency can be declared are strictly defined; obviously, an attack by another country is the paramount instance. There are, as well, clear guidelines as to the types of restrictions that may be applied; some rights, e.g. freedom of religion, are protected absolutely. Finally, the president may not unilaterally declare a state of emergency; it requires approval by the National Assembly.

## HARD TIMES

For a country so poor in material wealth and so rich in powerful enemies, revolutionary Nicaragua has accomplished a great deal in a short time. According to one U.S. expert on Latin America, "Even in peace, the revolution's task of restructuring society would be a great challenge. Given Nicaragua's scarce resources, the embargo and a vicious war, the revolutionary government has worked a miracle. Enormous advances have been made in meeting the health, housing, and educational needs of the Nicaraguan people."<sup>74</sup>

This does not mean, however, that the people have been frolicking in the glow of a golden age. Most still subsist in conditions that make U.S. poverty seem luxurious by comparison.

Living standards did rise significantly while the economy was permitted to grow, i.e. from 1979 until approximately 1983. Since then, the situation has deteriorated rapidly.

Critics of the Sandinistas attribute the decline to government bungling and the destabilizing effect of what they term "communist" experiments. There is undoubtedly much truth in this: Bungling appears to be an attainment of all governments, and socialist experiments tend to disconcert economic elites everywhere.

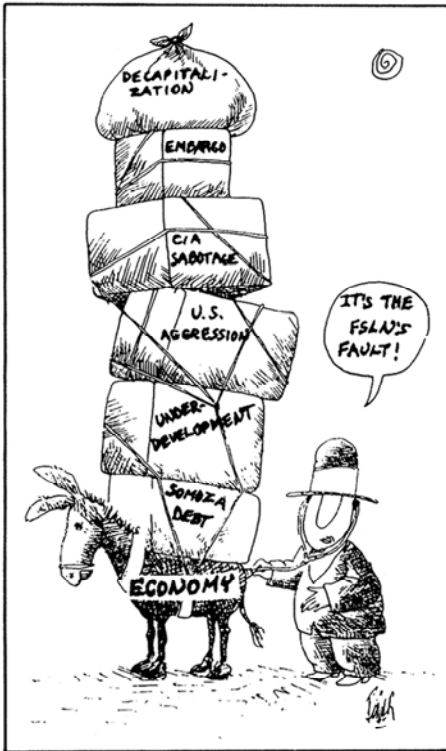
But it is an analysis that omits a great deal. It does not explain, for instance, why it took four years for Sandinista "mismanagement" to stifle progress. In 1979 the economy was in a severe state of shock, but the FSLN managed to get it on its feet again with very little help. For revolutionary Nicaragua there has been nothing like the Marshall Plan that resuscitated Europe after World War II — only the Reagan Doctrine, with its attendant hardship and suffering.

A more likely explanation of Nicaragua's predicament resides in the credit and trade crises that have devastated most Third World economies in the 1980s. Central America has been especially hard hit by a sharp decline in the market value of crucial exports and a corresponding rise in the cost of imports. El Salvador, which has received billions of dollars in

direct U.S. aid since 1980, is worse off than Nicaragua. Even Costa Rica, the wealthiest country in the region, has been so badly wounded that questions about its stability are beginning to arise for the first time in memory.

Another key factor is the cumulative effect of the economic sabotage carried out by reactionary businessmen and ranchers. As one example, several hundred thousand cattle have vanished across the border into Honduras, which has enjoyed a correspondingly sharp rise in its beef exports.

Two agricultural experts from the U.S. conclude: "The whole process adds up to 'death by a million cuts'.... Production failures that the big landowners themselves help to generate can later be cited as proof that the Sandinista-led government is a failure.... At least some big landowners actually use decapitalization as deliberate provocation, many believe. If the big landowners can force the government to feel it must take over farms or businesses to keep the economy from collapsing, these confiscations can then be cited as proof that the government is 'repressive' and 'communist'. Such 'proof' can weaken international support, making it harder for the government to get foreign financial aid."<sup>75</sup>



Barricada's Roger

All of these factors have certainly created enormous difficulties for Nicaragua.

But beyond a doubt, the gravest threat it confronts is the multifarious aggression of the United States, which has been steadily intensifying since the start of the Sandinista process. The familiar provocation and support of internal discord, the various forms of economic aggression, the terrorism of the CIA-*contras* — all have exacted a terrible price.

### **Desecrated principles**

One of the poorest little countries on earth is being systematically brutalized by the richest and most powerful nation in the history of the world, a repellent spectacle that has evoked the sort of heartsick bewilderment expressed in these 1985 remarks by the director of the United Nations Development Program in Nicaragua:

“In all my 25 years with the UN, I have never worked in a country where the government was really doing something effective about poverty and development, until now. The government officials are dedicated to eliminating inequalities. In the first several years of their administration, they have made extraordinary advances in health, education, and agriculture.

“It’s given me enormous satisfaction to serve in such a country where your efforts really benefit the needy. The tragedy, of course, is the U.S. war against Nicaragua. Much of the excellent groundwork in social and economic programs is now suffering. Nicaragua was providing an alternative development model for the Third World, a pluralistic model that offered concrete lessons to others — invaluable lessons — with its mistakes, successes, failures, and hopes.

“Now that experiment is being undermined by the United States. Innocent people are being killed, development projects destroyed, and we are all the losers because of it. Why do the American people stand for such a desecration of their principles?”<sup>76</sup>

## ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE SANDINISTA PROCESS

### Land reform

- Most extensive redistribution in history of Latin America
- 35% of farmland granted free of charge to 105,000 of Nicaragua's poorest families
- Most private holdings left intact, as long as they are used productively
- Government financial and technical support
- Guaranteed wages and improved working conditions for farm workers

### Education

- Reduction of illiteracy from 52% to 23%
- 17,000 new educational units for over 200,000 workers
- 1400 new elementary schools, 50 high schools
- Teacher increase from 12,700 to 53,000
- Cultural exchanges between peasants and urban teenagers
- Collection of scientific, demographic and cultural data for future reference
- Winner of UNESCO highest achievement award

### Health care

- Universal free medical care
- Eradication of polio
- Sharp reductions of infant mortality, malaria, measles and other communicable diseases
- Life-expectancy increase from 53 to 60 years
- 330% increase in medical students
- 1000% increase in student nurses



- Over 200 rehydration centers for treatment of chronic diarrhea, leading cause of infant mortality
- Introduction of paramedicals
- 153 new health clinics, 17 new hospitals
- Nationwide inoculation and education campaigns led by 25,000 trained volunteers
- Allocation of basic foods to benefit poorest segments of population
- Cited as model by World Health Organization

### **Women's rights**

- Constitutional guarantee of sexual equality
- Laws requiring equal pay for equal work and equality of opportunity in the job market
- Rights to own land and participate equally in farm co-operatives
- Direct payment of wages (not to husbands)
- Women comprise 21% of FSLN members in National Assembly, 35% of FSLN leadership

### **Environmental protection**

- 50% reduction in pesticide use, replaced with biological controls
- Occupational safety regulations
- Soil conservation and lake restoration
- National reforestation program
- Appropriate technology projects to reduce imports and minimize resource depletion
- Protection of tropical rainforests; national park plan for 18% of territory
- Endangered species protections
- Water pollution controls; protection of valuable watersheds

## **Civil rights**

- Abolition of torture, capital punishment, death squads, etc.
- Prosecution and conviction of abusive officials
- Prevention of reprisals against *La Guardia*
- Prison rehabilitation
- Amnesty for CIA-*contras*

## **Labor unions**

- Increase in union membership from 6% to 55% of labor force
- Over 1000 new collective bargaining agreements
- Full health and maternity benefits; educational leaves; subsidies for food, transportation, etc.
- Access to company records
- Policy of peaceful negotiations with illegal strikers

## **Participatory democracy**

- Encouragement of poetry and theater workshops, native culture, folk arts, etc.
- Constitutional protection of indigenous cultures
- Central role of mass organizations in literacy and health programs, public safety, etc.
- 1984 national election, adjudged fair and honest by numerous international observers, despite U.S. sabotage
- Institutionalization of political pluralism, incorporating a process of national dialogue
- Modern constitution with unique provisions for civil and economic rights
- Hemisphere's first constitutional autonomy for indigenous peoples

## ATTACK OF THE REAGANITES

OF ALL THE CALAMITIES to befall Nicaragua in recent years, perhaps the worst is that its revolution happened to coincide with the ascendancy of the Republican Party's right wing in U.S. national politics. Even as Nicaraguans were celebrating the downfall of Somoza and his *Guardia* in July of 1979, the 1980 U.S. presidential election campaign was well under way; the Sandinista revolution would play an important role in that political spectacle.

It had become an article of right-wing faith that, since its graceless 1972 retreat from Vietnam, the United States had been steadily losing ground in the holy war against Soviet communism. Fallout from Nixon's Watergate follies, it was argued, had likewise induced an unseemly timidity in foreign affairs. These debilitating tendencies had culminated in the presidency of Jimmy Carter, with its "wimpish" concern for human rights and other liberal diversions.

Ominous symptoms of this "post-Vietnam syndrome" included the intrusion of the Soviet Union into neighboring Afghanistan, and the displacement of our shah in Teheran. To be sure, it required a fervid imagination to conceive a connection between The International Communist Conspiracy and Iran's Moslem fundamentalists. But, in a bizarre conspiracy of people and events, a circuit would eventually be completed between Iran and the most proximate threat to the right wing's sense of world order, i.e. Nicaragua.

Central America was, after all, still regarded as inescapably rooted in the United States' backyard, and it seemed to lots of right-thinking folks that it was beginning to sprout some poisonous weeds. The Carter administration's vacillation toward Somoza had infuriated powerful members of Congress. In that institution, boasted the fallen dictator with some accuracy, he

could count more friends than could Jimmy Carter. Since the Sandinistas had early on been painted as Marxist-Leninist pawns of Cuba and the Soviet Union, the oddities of U.S. political life decreed that Carter would be furiously denounced for “losing Nicaragua to the communists”.

### **Inevitable aggression**

It was thus inevitable that the Republican Party would include in its 1980 platform the warning that, “We deplore the Marxist Sandinist takeover of Nicaragua and the Marxist attempts to destabilize El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.... We will support the efforts of the Nicaraguan people to establish a free and independent government.”

After the “New Right” anointed Ronald Reagan as its principal spokesman and orchestrated his approval by U.S. voters in the 1980 election, Nicaragua braced for the worst. “Before Reagan came to power, we’d heard his political positions,” recalls President Daniel Ortega, “and we knew that the new government would be a threat to Nicaragua... that we would be faced with aggressive policies bent on destroying the revolution.”<sup>77</sup>

The destruction would be supervised by the military officers stiffening the White House staff. Some were old soldiers whose views had crystallized in the Cold War. Others were bitter losers of the war against Vietnam, itching to get even with the commies and, perhaps even more so, with the spineless weasels in Congress — who had, so the story goes, panicked and “lost Vietnam” in full view of the light at the end of the tunnel.

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*“I think back to the first week after the triumph in 1979. I met Luis Carrion, who is now Vice Minister of the Interior. I had been with him back in 1972.... I hadn’t seen him for all those years — he had been underground. I said to him, ‘Luis, you look so good’. And he said, ‘Maybe, but inside we are all old men, and the worst is yet to come. They’re going to blockade us. They’re going to sabotage. It’s going to be a contest of endurance in the end.’”*

— Sister Mary Hartmann<sup>78</sup>

“In the new Reagan administration, its bright young men liked to say, there were in fact no moderates and no liberals. ‘The only division,’ as one of them put it, ‘is between the hard-liners and the ideologues’.” Said another, “There was a kind of tendency to want to prove your manhood.”<sup>79</sup>

## The way of the CIA

Just six weeks after their inauguration in January of 1981, the angry warriors were authorized by the new Leader of the Free World to test their manhoods on Nicaragua. The CIA was set in motion to commit one of its destabilization campaigns according to standard practice. Among other things, that meant: organizing an armed force to attack civilians and the economic infrastructure; tightening a noose around the target nation’s economy; and paying the internal opposition to stir up as much trouble as possible.

A former high-ranking official of the CIA has outlined the procedure: “The way you put pressure on a government using CIA techniques is to go in and systematically rip apart both the social and economic fabric of the country. You try to create conditions where the farmer can’t get his produce to market, where children can’t get to school, where women are terrified inside their homes of being gang-raped and mutilated, where the hospitals are treating wounded people instead of sick people, where government administration throughout the country simply breaks down. As a result, international capital is spirited away and the country simply collapses onto itself, at which point you should have an easy way of stepping in and forcibly installing your own choice of government.”<sup>80</sup>

With that in mind, the administration initiated its secret war on the people of Nicaragua through the medium of Somoza’s exiled *Guardia Nacional*. As provided by an act of Congress, only a handful of Congressman were notified; their vestigial sensitivities to international and U.S. law were indulged in the customary fashion by labeling the undertaking as something else — i.e. an effort to “interdict” a presumptive flow of arms from the Sandinistas to communist revolutionaries

in El Salvador. Later, after that fiction was refuted by voluminous contrary evidence, the administration would change its tune to "Promoting Democracy".

But it was obvious that the deposed *guardias* from Nicaragua were not going to expend much of their useful fury in the service of El Salvador, and members of the foreign policy club were in on the joke from the beginning. "There were always two tracks," confirms a CIA official, "the publicly-stated objective of interdicting weapons to Salvadoran guerillas, and the overthrow of the Sandinista government."<sup>81</sup>

### Provoking repression

The operative fantasy was that an escalating attack on Nicaragua would divert pitifully scarce resources to defense, and provoke the government to repression against potentially dangerous opponents — who would of course be afforded every possible inducement by the CIA to *become* dangerous. Intensified by a program of economic strangulation, the suffering and deprivation of the people would drive them to rise up against the Sandinistas. So would the desired repression, which would also cost the government dearly in terms of sympathy and support from other nations, especially the western democracies.

Administration theorists postulated that the end would come with mass mutinies in the Sandinista army, as the troops rushed to embrace the CIA-*guardias* ("*contras*") in grateful welcome. "The Sandinistas will fall like a house of cards in the wind," predicted a U.S. official. After that, there would be some unfinished business to take care of: "Come the counter-revolution, there will be a massacre in Nicaragua," promised one CIA-*contra* officer. "We have a lot of scores to settle. There will be bodies from the border [of Honduras] to Managua."<sup>82</sup>

(Continued on page 101)

## Death by Destabilization

CITIZENS OF THE UNITED STATES would think it very odd, indeed, if their national politics were dominated by an agency of a foreign power. But residents of the Third World grow up with the knowledge that their governments are not their own. Nowhere is that more the case than in Latin America, with its lengthy history of U.S. meddling in economic, political and military affairs.

Latin American governments have learned to think more than twice about any action that might attract the displeasure of the White House; and aspiring coup leaders know that it is unwise to proceed without first obtaining permission from the local U.S. authorities.

Since World War II, the United States' principal instrument for disposing of disagreeable governments has been the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In the past 20 years it has committed thousands of "covert actions", and is at present attempting to undermine some fifty governments — just under one third of the world total. By the estimate of a former CIA official, its activities have resulted in the deaths of approximately six million people and in countless millions of related casualties — a level of destruction "to approach Hitler's genocide in both numbers and cynicism".<sup>83</sup>

In most cases, the CIA has rigidly enforced the United States' preference for military dictatorships. Few attempts to improve the lot of oppressed masses have gone unpunished, and always the pretext is the same: the communists are on the march.

Thus was the progressive Guatemalan government of Jacobo Arbenz overthrown in 1954, initiating that country's descent into the genocidal nightmare by which it is still gripped today. At one time or another, democratic governments have been similarly expunged in Brazil, Peru, Argentina, Panama, Ecuador, Bolivia and Uruguay.

*Death by Destabilization (cont.)*

In recent years, the preferred solution has been to legitimate military rule by conducting sham elections for an irrelevant executive, as in Honduras and El Salvador. President Cerezo of Guatemala has stated quite openly that he is powerless to impede "his" army's slaughter of indigenous people, currently estimated to have claimed between 100,000 – 200,000 lives in the past ten years.

The results desired by the United States are obtained through lavish expenditures of money, arms, and declarations of undying support. Until its current attack on Nicaragua, the most infamous CIA operation in Latin America was the subversion of Salvador Allende's government in Chile. It is also the best-documented; for, in 1975-76 it became the focus of a rare public inquiry into CIA operations by the U.S. Congress.

The CIA's target in Chile was President Allende's socialist agenda. He had been elected in 1970, after more than a decade of struggle against a political establishment that enjoyed formidable support from the government of the United States and some of its leading corporations.

The CIA first tried to prevent Allende's installation by resort to a technicality in Chile's constitution which required that the popular vote for president be ratified by the legislature. Historically a mere formality akin to votes of the U.S. Electoral College, that provision had never been activated by the Chilean Congress to nullify an election. But this time, legislators received \$350,000 from the Nixon/Kissinger administration to think about changing their habits. The investment did not pay off, however; not enough congressmen sold out. It was destabilization time.

The U.S. set in motion a sequence of events that would become familiar to Nicaraguans less than ten years later. The first step was to sow widespread dissatis-



faction with an array of economic pressures. This would be followed with armed intervention by CIA mercenaries and, finally, with a military takeover. As U.S. Ambassador Nathaniel Davis explained, it was simply a matter of creating a climate of "discontent so profound that a military intervention would be warmly received".

Allende's vulnerability to such connivings was in two crucial respects greater than that of the Sandinistas: Chile's middle class was broader than that of Nicaragua; and he did not control the army. He thus had to contend with a comparatively large segment of the population threatened by his socialist inclinations, while at the same time trusting the military to maintain its 50-year abstention from interference in politics.

The CIA understood these conditions quite well, and attacked on both fronts. An attempt was made to persuade the commander of the armed forces to launch a coup. He declined; he was killed. It was hoped that the assassination would provoke a military uprising. When that did not materialize, the CIA regrouped by sharply increasing military assistance, and accelerating a program that brought Chilean officers to the U.S. for indoctrination. From the ranks of the anxious well-to-do, the CIA recruited a gang of terrorists who adopted the sobriquet, "Freedom and Liberty". They were set the tasks of sabotaging the economic infrastructure and of murdering peasants and workers suspected of loyalty to the government.

While the military was being ripened for mutiny, economic pressures were energetically applied. International credit was almost entirely cut off. Anaconda and Kennecott, the U.S. mining giants whose lucrative Chilean holdings were threatened with expropriation, cut the price of copper by nearly one third. They also arranged embargoes on Chilean copper in its vital markets of the U.S. and Western Europe. The mining industry was Chile's principal source of foreign exchange.

*Death by Destabilization (cont.)*

Another aggressive corporate player was International Telephone & Telegraph (ITT), which ponied up several million dollars for the downfall of Allende's government.

Supplies of essential machinery and spare parts were cut off. CIA representatives in Chile's legislature were instructed to cripple the government by refusing to appropriate operational funds. The American Institute for Free Labor and Development (AIFLD) conducted seminars on how to divert large quantities of goods from the open market to the black market in order to generate critical shortages and runaway inflation. Plantation owners dismantled agricultural equipment and smuggled cattle to Argentina. Manufacturers destroyed vast quantities of consumer goods by such subtle methods as dumping 25,000 baby-bottle nipples into a river.

Battalions of upper-class matrons marched through the streets of Santiago, banging empty pots and pans to protest the suffering they were being forced to endure in consequence of Allende's "economic mismanagement". Boycotts and commercial shutdowns were organized, enforced by roaming gangs of right-wing toughs. Taxi drivers, trucking firms and bus lines were bribed to shut down for lengthy periods; one trucking lockout dragged on for 50 days.

It was almost entirely an enterprise of the elite: "Virtually the entire organized working class rejected calls for support of the stoppages."<sup>84</sup>

Throughout its campaign, the CIA had ample opportunity to practice the advanced propaganda techniques in which it had invested millions of research dollars. It had long been established that some of the more unsavory aspects of human behavior can be stimulated via mass media. In the relatively sophisticated United States, for example, a casual remark by Johnny Carson on his

popular television show had once precipitated a run on the nation's toilet paper supply. Orson Welles' notoriously convincing radio dramatization of "War of the Worlds" on the eve of World War II had induced a mass psychosis in much of its audience.

With virtually the entire communications apparatus of Chile at its disposal, the CIA set out to conjure up an atmosphere of dread and foreboding. For that purpose, it appropriated the nation's leading newspaper, *El Mercurio*. A U.S. psychologist documented the editorial changes that ensued: "The front page looks more like a political poster than a newspaper. The 'news' is a carefully selected collage pushing a few simple themes, aimed at discrediting the government and creating divisions among the population. The first theme is economic chaos, because this is the easiest for the U.S. to create.... The next theme is social chaos. Suddenly, *National Enquirer*-type material fills the front page: violence, chaos, permanent crisis, unnatural events, omens from heaven, death, gruesome food stories, household pets who eat their masters, children who inform on their parents.... This situation is blamed on the government.... For three years, Allende's picture appeared rarely in *El Mercurio*; but whenever it did, it was always next to headlines which included the words, Soviet, communist, Marxist, violence or death.... One month before the coup, [*El Mercurio* ran a photo in which] a sepulchral hag done up in a hooded monk's robe shuffles in front of the Presidential Palace clanging cymbals.... *El Mercurio* placed a full-color photo of open-heart surgery next to a photo of Allende. This is not the sort of thing that Chileans had come to expect with their morning coffee."<sup>85</sup>

Nicaragua's *La Prensa* was to undergo the same sort of transformation ten years later.

The death of democracy in Chile came in September 1983, with the long-awaited military coup. Allende was

*Death by Destabilization (cont.)*

shot to death in the Presidential Palace, a state of siege was declared, and a bloodbath began that is still underway. Up to 50,000 have been killed; hundreds of thousands more have been horribly abused with methods taught by CIA trainers. A favorite technique is to force parents to watch their children being raped and tortured.

Chile has become a synonym for unspeakable cruelty, singled out in 1986 for a special campaign by Amnesty International: "Mass arrests, torture by government agents, and political killings mark a pattern of escalating human rights abuses there. Police and security forces, as well as clandestine 'terror squads' linked to government security services, commit the abuses against a broad cross section of the Chilean population."<sup>86</sup>

Asked to justify these horrors, President Gerald Ford proclaimed that it was all "in the best interests of the Chilean people, and certainly of the United States." Added his chief henchman, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, "The issues in Chile are too important to be left to the voters."

None of which has been lost on observers from around the world, especially in Latin America. For Nicaraguans, the implications of Chile's tragic fate are painfully clear. One lesson of particular significance has been suggested by two U.S. students of the CIA's destabilization campaign:

"Despite all these provocations, the [Allende] government never stepped outside the law or repressed democratic rights. To the very end, the right-wing press was able to print and broadcast totally inflammatory and seditious material. One of the ironies of this situation — given the U.S. justification for the coup — was that the success of the political warfare campaign largely depended on the government's respect for democratic forms."<sup>87</sup>

(Continued from page 94)

The CIA's first order of business was to round up the remnants of *La Guardia* that had staggered out of Nicaragua, and try to shape them into a suitable instrument of destruction.

Since the planned assault was clearly illegal, the White House tried at first to insulate itself from potential repercussions by arranging for Argentina to provide much of the early training and supervision. The military junta of that nation, eager to ingratiate itself with its demonstrated flair for violent anti-communism, was delighted to comply. But this marriage of convenience soon foundered on irreconcilable differences related to the U.S. tilt toward Great Britain in the Malvinas/Falklands War, and by mid-1982 the CIA had to assume full control of the operation.

A different sort of *quid pro quo* motivated Israel, which supplied a goodly portion of the arms used by the CIA-*contras* in exchange for those expensive considerations to which it has become accustomed. The security forces of Chile, Venezuela and Colombia were also put to various uses.

## TERROR TO THE PEOPLE

By late 1981, the CIA was ready to commence operations from enclaves along Nicaragua's northern border with Honduras. The highest priority was to occupy a sliver of Nicaraguan territory and declare a provisional government on it, so that the U.S. would have a sort of excuse to provide open support and coerce its allies to do likewise.

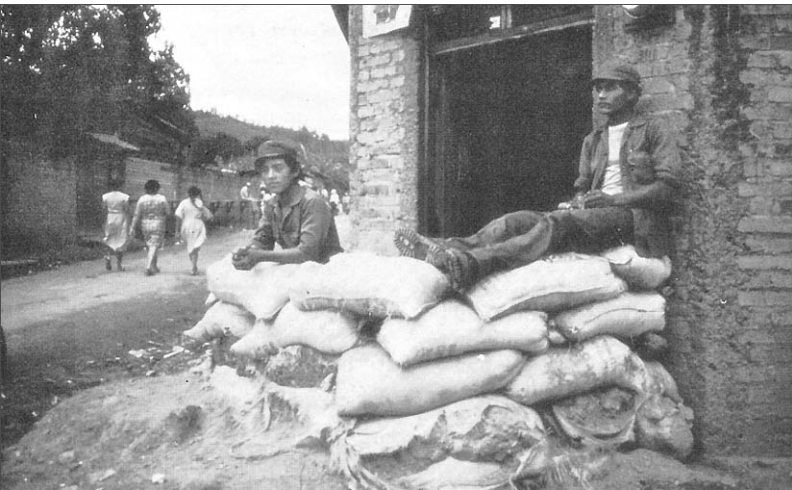
The first target was the remote and poorly defended north-east region on the Atlantic Coast, populated by indigenous peoples with historic animosity toward the majority "Spaniards" of the Pacific region. But that effort failed to do much more than deepen the distrust between natives and Sandinistas. No territory was taken.

The CIA-*contras* next turned their attention to the peasant farms and villages of the northwestern sector. Throughout

1982 they conducted a series of murderous raids, always ending in prudent retreat to the safety of Honduras.

A former leader of the *contras'* civilian directorate, established by the CIA as a respectable front for the mayhem, has explained why he resigned: "During my four years as a *contra* director, it was premeditated policy to terrorize civilian non-combatants to prevent them from co-operating with the government. Hundreds of civilian murders, mutilations, tortures and rapes were committed in pursuit of this policy, of which the *contra* leaders and their CIA superiors were well aware."<sup>88</sup> The *contras* also demonstrated an aptitude for fighting and killing each other.

Toward the end of 1982 and into 1983, several attempts were made to capture the town of Jalapa, but those attacks were easily repelled. It was becoming apparent that the *contras* were better suited to brutalizing unarmed peasants and each other than to mounting a concerted military offensive.



Doug Milbolland

*The CIA-contras have tried several times to establish a base for a "provisional government" at Jalapa in the northwest region of Nicaragua. Their attacks have been easily repelled, but the need for vigilance remains. These soldiers keep watch at a makeshift bunker near the center of the little town.*

*“Terrorism is premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine state agents. International terrorism is terrorism involving citizens or territory of more than one country.”*

— U.S. State Department’s definition of international terrorism

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Anxious to produce some visible evidence of its destructive capabilities, the CIA entered the fray directly through the use of its “Unilaterally Controlled Latino Assets” — mercenaries of Latin American extraction. They were assigned the task of blowing up economic targets inside Nicaragua, and they carried it out with some success.

Bridges and power lines were knocked out, along with most of Nicaragua’s oil storage facilities at Corinto. Planes bombed the control tower at Managua’s international airport, and the country’s harbors were mined effectively enough to damage commercial ships of several nations, including Great Britain, Japan, the Netherlands and the Soviet Union.

The *contras* were instructed to take public credit for these deeds. But “the operation was so controlled by the CIA that it did not even include any Nicaraguan rebels”.<sup>89</sup>

As one of the participants later recalled: “I was a member of a special squadron of the Honduran army. We were trained in Panama, the United States and other places that we didn’t know because we entered and left by night. The training was carried out by North American instructors but always directed by the CIA. They are the ones who manage all this.”<sup>90</sup>

## Open secret

By this time, the war was hardly a secret. The true nature of the CIA operation had begun to leak out almost as soon as it began. Articles published in *Newsweek* and elsewhere in November 1982, had so thoroughly documented the war that its supporters in Congress needed all their powers of indignant denial to avoid acknowledging the obvious.

By unanimous vote in December of 1982, Congress specifically prohibited the CIA and the Defense Department from undertaking or supporting any effort to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. The Reagan administration's reaction to this proscription was to simply ignore it, and managed to do so until April 1984, when the CIA's involvement in the harbor mining and other illegal activities came to light.

That news provoked sufficient outrage in the United States and elsewhere that Congress was finally moved to cut off all explicit funding of the CIA-*contras*, for at least one year. The CIA and Defense Department were once again explicitly forbidden to attack Nicaragua.

But the administration pirouetted around that trivial obstacle by appropriating formal responsibility for the war to its National Security Council, shielded from scrutiny by the mere snap of an executive privilege. From mid-1984, a zealous lieutenant colonel of the Marines pulled the strings in the White House under the very private tutelage of the CIA director, whose agents continued to run the show in the field.

The field agents were supported by a convoluted network of drugstore cowboys, fundamentalist churches, retired military officers, and others (see "The President's Private Army" on page 108). For some, the opportunity to do battle against Godless Communism was reward enough for their contributions. For others, the pay wasn't bad; a former Green Beret reported that he was offered \$50,000 for six months of his time.<sup>91</sup> Of course, there were risks involved, as the world discovered when a CIA-*contra* supply plane was shot out of the Nicaraguan sky in late 1986.

Money was no problem. Traditional creative accounting techniques were employed to milk accessible teats of the national udder, particularly that ocean of dollars enfolded by the Department of Defense. Rabid anti-communists at home and congenial allies abroad were also prevailed upon to contribute large sums.

Saudi Arabia, in return for access to sophisticated military aircraft which Israel did not want it to have, kicked in more than \$30 million. The sultan of Brunei bought \$10 million



worth of international security from a particularly sleazy State Department salesman. Even the pariah *apartheid* government of South Africa was briefly on the list of potential donors; but the administration removed it after calculating that too much political capital had already been blown on the Corinto sabotage caper.

White House salesmen also solicited donations from private individuals. Beer baron Joseph Coors would later tell Congress how liquid assets from his Rocky Mountain brew were diverted to the CIA-*contras*. Nor were the administration's soulmates overseas neglected; one group of Taiwan businessmen chipped in \$2 million to kill communists.

That same motive inflamed the charitable sentiments of "a veritable alphabet soup of right-wing lobbies and propaganda groups" in the USA. Loosely co-ordinated by John K. Singlaub, a retired Army general and president of the World Anti-Communist League, these private sources are not disposed to precise accounting procedures; but it is estimated that they have raised \$10-20 million dollars for the cause.<sup>92</sup>

## God and cocaine

Especially large donations were rewarded with a semi-private audience with the Leader of the Free World. But for most, virtue had to be its own reward, a consolation emphasized in the following tribute to General Singlaub by Ellen Garwood, a little old Texas millionairess who buys helicopters and such-like for the president's terrorists: "I believe he was undoubtedly sent by the Lord Almighty to help save freedom and the United States from Russian totalitarianism. Our government's not doing it yet, but with General Singlaub given the go-ahead by God and President Reagan, freedom in our country may possibly survive.... General Singlaub gets no salary. His only salary is God's blessing. All of us must help him keep liberty alive in Central America."<sup>93</sup>

Another source of money is drug smuggling to the U.S., a proven source of revenue for CIA operations. Both the famous French Connection via Marseilles and the Golden Triangle in

Southeast Asia were developed to their current prominence in furtherance of previous covert actions.

In the current instance, cocaine from Colombia, Bolivia and Peru is smuggled into the U.S., and the profits are then used to buy weapons for the CIA-*contras*. In other words: The United States government has been dealing dope to its own citizens, in order to pay for its illegal assault on Nicaragua. Total revenues generated by this official drug trade are known to exceed \$40 million, and could well be much greater.<sup>94</sup>

It was in late 1986 that the lid popped off the can of worms that came to be known as “Contragate” or “Irangate”. The interchangeable terms refer to the scandal surrounding the triangle trade set up by the clever men in the White House in order to raise cash for the CIA-*contras*.

In the first leg of the transaction, the White House sold anti-aircraft missiles and other arms to an “independent” company operated by a retired Air Force general and his Mideast associates. The middlemen then sold the weapons at ridiculously inflated prices to the government of Iran for its war against Iraq (which was also being encouraged and supported by the U.S.). Most of the resulting profit was supposed to have been diverted to the CIA-*contras*, but it didn’t work out that way. A bit of the cash reached its intended destination, some is still languishing in Swiss bank accounts, and a great deal of it seems to have disappeared.

Of the more than \$100 million that the White House has collected from individual and foreign government sources, over \$20 million remains unaccounted for. That has come as no surprise to those familiar with *contra* finance. Of the \$27 million allocated by Congress for “humanitarian assistance” in 1985, at least \$11 million somehow lost its way.

The solution to this puzzle appears to reside with the CIA-*contra* leadership. Drawing on direct observations, a *contra* drug runner has expressed his certainty that much of the missing cash has found its way into private bank accounts, against the day when “Congress cuts off funding for the *contras* and it’s no longer a good business proposition.”

That suspicion has been confirmed by a field agent of the National Security Council, who warned his superiors in a 1986 memorandum that *contra* leaders “are not first-rate people; in fact, they are liars, and greed- and power-motivated. They are not the people to build a new Nicaragua... This has become a business to many of them; there is still a belief that the Marines are going to have to invade, so let’s get set so we will automatically be the ones put in power”.<sup>95</sup>

### Corrupting Costa Rica

Given the number and diversity of unrelated fund-raising methods employed, the impenetrable complexity of the national budget, the intricate web of dummy corporations which the government has spun across the globe, and the casual fashion in which planeloads of dollars have been shuffled around, it is impossible to set a precise figure on direct financing of the CIA-*contras*. The total through 1987 probably amounts to somewhere between one and two billion dollars.

Even more difficult to calculate, but undoubtedly much greater, is the total value of military expenditures poured into the entire Central America region for the purpose of wounding and intimidating Nicaragua.

Much of the region surrounding Nicaragua has been converted into a staging area for its suppression. El Salvador serves, among other things, as a major depot for the CIA-*contras*. Flights carrying fresh arms and supplies for *contra* bands in Nicaragua originate from the U.S. airbase at Ilopango.

Costa Rica’s 30-year-old policy of strict neutrality was stretched well beyond its limits when the administration of Alberto Monge closed its eyes to a “second front” of the CIA-*contra* assault leaking across its border with Nicaragua. An attempt by a Costa Rican security official to shut that operation down in 1984 resulted in his firing, at the insistence of the United States.

(Continued on page 115)

## The President's Private Army

ACCORDING TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION, the President may not attack another nation without the consent of Congress. It is a restriction that was occasionally dishonored during the first 150 years of U.S. history. Since the end of World War II, it has been almost completely ignored.

The signal event in the rise of the imperious presidency was passage of the 1947 National Security Act, which established the CIA just as the Cold War was being unleashed. The new agency was instructed to gather and analyze intelligence, and to make recommendations to the president's National Security Council. It was also to perform "such other functions and duties" as the NSC might deem appropriate.

That seemingly innocuous phrase has since been exploited by successive administrations to tear a hole in the Constitution big enough to drive a tank through. The "other functions and duties" deemed appropriate have consisted mainly of the covert operations that have caused so much suffering, and earned so much fear and hatred in return.

The CIA has been the chief instigator of these big and little operations. But, increasingly, they are being farmed out to private contractors and to other government agencies. This is due partly to the 1976 Intelligence Oversight Act, which requires the CIA to notify two very small and very discreet congressional committees about all covert actions. In practice, the Agency tends to tell committee members only what it wants them to know, and frequently lies outright. But the law loiters on like a worrisome apparition, and the possibility remains that Congress may one day decide to enforce it with a perjury trial or impeachment proceeding. It has

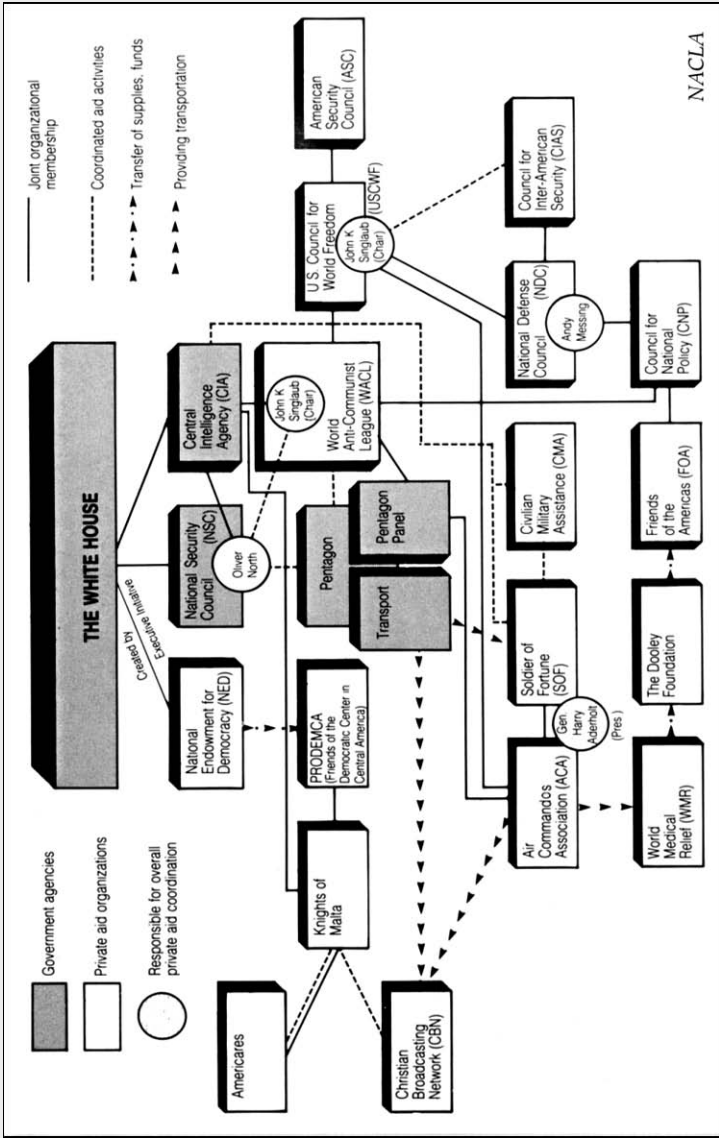
therefore become prudent — and considerate toward Congress — for the CIA to conduct its destructive activities “off the books”.

It is a policy well-suited to the Reaganites, who have “privatized” foreign policy operations to a far greater extent than heretofore. Key elements of foreign policy have been assigned to a “secret government... an interlocking network of official functionaries, spies, mercenaries, ex-generals and super-patriots who, for a variety of motives, operate outside the legitimate institutions of government.”<sup>96</sup> In a more pungent description, it is “an old-boy network of far-rightists, gonzo adventurers, profiteers, drug- and gun-runners, religious fanatics and intelligence freelancers who intersect regularly with the various government agencies they once served.”<sup>97</sup>

As the latter description suggests, the CIA and other official agencies remain very much in the game. Under the new rules, however, they are afforded a significant measure of “deniability” through the use of contractors, many of whom are ex-agents or retired military officers. Another valuable source of talent is the roiling pool of Cuban exiles, whose demonic anti-communism once served the Nixon administration so devotedly in Southeast Asia, Watergate and elsewhere. It is not unlikely that, in decades to come, they will be joined by remnants of the CIA-*contras*.

In terms of basic outlook and experience, there is little to differentiate CIA agents from the “independent” contractors they employ. In many cases, the two are merely at different points along the same general career path. This was illustrated in 1984, for example, after Congress tightened restrictions on direct supervision of the CIA-*contras*. A former CIA official has described how “all the Pentagon’s covert operators were taking off their uniforms and remaining in place — and each perceived himself as acting as an unofficial covert officer of the government.”<sup>98</sup>

# THE CONTRA AID NETWORK



NACLA

About the only thing that changes is the method by which wages are paid; instead of issuing from a Defense Department or CIA computer, they are now ladled out in envelopes stuffed with cash or laundered through one of many dummy corporations.

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*"They think back to the good old days in Saigon, where they could get drunk and laid every night for nothing. They can do that in Central America, too."*

— CIA official on motivation of mercenaries<sup>99</sup>

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The trend to privatization is not limited to former CIA agents and military men. The agency has a long history of close co-operation with U.S. companies, as the experience of Allende's Chile indicates. A former analyst for the National Security Agency notes that the CIA "has from the beginning of its existence supplied strategic information to the multinationals, assisted in their internal security and acted as their agents enforcing their foreign policy objectives, especially those targeted against international labor. The CIA and the multinationals have also served each other as recruiting pools for executives and operatives.... In the arena of foreign labor policy, it is virtually impossible to distinguish between the objectives of the CIA and those of the multinational corporations."<sup>100</sup>

Under the Reagan administration, the embrace of private enterprise and foreign policy has reached a sort of climax. The Reaganites have gone so far as to hire a company, operated by "a pair of tobacco-chewing west Texas lawmen", to take complete responsibility for such activities as an attempt to assassinate Iran's Ayatollah Khoumeni, hunt and kill suspected communists in Honduras, and train entire units of the CIA-contras. "Our job was to do the things that the government could

### *The President's Private Army (cont.)*

not be seen to be doing. Our deal was that the private sector could handle lots of security missions abroad and American boys wouldn't get killed — or if they did, there'd be no fuss."<sup>101</sup>

Similarly, a trio of businessmen from New York was recruited to act as a citizen's CIA in the Caribbean. "The group was called upon by Reagan administration intelligence officials to monitor the Caribbean and assist in the 1983 invasion of Grenada." Apparently, it was entirely through their initiative that the invasion was first conceived. A Senate investigator would later remark, "I think the Grenada program started with these guys."<sup>102</sup>

### **Public-private confusion**

As a result of all this, it is difficult or impossible to determine where government agencies such as the CIA and the Defense Department leave off, and "private" foreign policy begins. That, of course, is precisely the object of the exercise.

Adding to the confusion are the fundamentalist churches and non-profit organizations drawn together in the worldwide fellowship of anti-communism. The diagram on page 110, prepared by the North American Congress on Latin America, represents some of the major players in the "neat" game contrived by the White House to circumvent congressional restrictions.

One of the most influential groups is the World Anti-Communist League. It is heavily financed by the governments of Taiwan and South Korea, and has left a trail of assassination and other mayhem across the globe. It is deeply involved in Central America's infamous death squads; the membership is laden with former Nazis and other human monsters.



The current head of the all-important U.S. branch is John K. Singlaub — the selfsame former Army general who has been co-ordinating the White House sales pitch to prospective benefactors of the CIA-*contras*.<sup>103</sup>

Hand-in-glove with the WACL and the Reagan White House is “Father” Sun Myung Moon and his Unification Church, which relies heavily on financial and other support from the Korean CIA and the *yakuza*, Japan’s mafia. Moon claims that he is the anointed heir of Jesus Christ, and has pledged to defeat the (literally) satanic doctrine of communism with the might of the United States, God’s last hope on earth. But this holy mission requires the purification of the U.S., and he has told his followers that the necessary first step is “the natural subjugation of the American government and population”.

It is a devout consummation for which he is quite willing to pay, out of the plagues of cash that are funneled through the Moonie church from God knows where. “Anybody influential can get money from them at any time in virtually any amount,” states a leading U.S. conservative. Another adds that, “It was hard for me to find any conservative leader, New Right or mainstream, the Moonies hadn’t approached.”

### **Presidential reading**

The Moonies have invested heavily in the cause of the CIA-*contras*. Among other projects, they financed an anti-Sandinista propaganda film shown around the world by the U.S. Information Agency; the thing even got distributed through the U.S. Public Broadcasting System as a result of White House pressure.

The principle vehicle for Moonie propaganda in the U.S. is the *Washington Times*, the daily newspaper read by Ronald Reagan in preference to all others, to hear him tell it. The rag has lost \$200 million in its first years of

### *The President's Private Army (cont.)*

existence, and has a circulation of only 104,000. But no matter: "We now have direct influence on Ronald Reagan through the *Washington Times*," boasts Moon. "Without knowing it, even President Reagan is being guided by Father." Among its other benevolences, the president's favorite newspaper established the Nicaraguan Freedom Foundation to raise private donations for the CIA-*contras*.<sup>104</sup>

These are just a few components of the ever-expanding private network of crusaders available to the president. Clearly, it represents a grave threat to the institutional balance of powers contemplated by the U.S. Constitution. And what has been the reaction of Congress? The president's supporters have applauded the private army and its many neat tricks. His opponents have said they don't like it. As for the remaining one third to one half, well....

In 1987 Congress took note of the refusal by some governors, and the reluctance of others, to permit their states' National Guard units to be assigned to duty in Central America. The governors objected to the use of the state militia — intended to quell internal disturbances and help beat off invasions — as the instrument of an aggressive foreign policy.

Congress responded by arbitrarily removing the Guard from the governors' jurisdiction and broadening the president's authority. The number of guardsman that can be called up for active duty was doubled to 200,000, and the length of service was also doubled to 180 days. The president was empowered to act without the consent of Congress or the declaration of a national emergency. He can put those troops to work any time he wants to, for any purpose he deems fit.

(Continued from page 107)

It is generally understood that this accommodation with U.S. interests stems mainly from Costa Rica's severe economic crisis. Once the exception to the impoverished rule of Central America, it is now staggering under a per capita debt second in the world only to that of Israel.

For the Reaganites, Costa Rica's economic distress could not have been more conveniently timed, and they proceeded to purchase some influence on Nicaragua's southern flank. The Monge government was willing to deal, for credits and grants that reached a total of about \$350 million in 1985 — nearly half of the national budget, and up from \$16 million in 1980.<sup>105</sup>

In exchange, Monge permitted several contingents of CIA-*contras* to launch raids on Nicaragua from a zone along the border. Costa Rican security forces provided limited assistance, and the *contras* were permitted to build a few small airstrips. In addition, U.S. Green Berets were allowed into the country to begin training the apolitical civil guard into an avatar of the professional army that had been abolished in 1949.

Several attempts were made to accelerate the militarization of Costa Rica by staging phony border incidents. On one occasion, a gang of CIA-*contras* outfitted as Sandinista soldiers "invaded" Costa Rica. Another time, Costa Rican security forces were deliberately ensnared in a crossfire provoked by the *contras*.<sup>106</sup>

Most of these maneuvers came to an abrupt halt in 1986, with the election of Oscar Arias as president. Although he made a show of breathing fire at the Sandinistas, Arias sent the Green Berets back home, shut down the *contras'* airstrips, and even began to have interlopers arrested for violations of Costa Rican neutrality.

The White House was quick to display its displeasure, siccing Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams on Arias with threats of suspended U.S. aid and other sanctions. But the new president refused to be bullied, and further infuriated the

Reaganites by revitalizing a regional peace initiative which they had several times tried to strangle to death in its crib.

Costa Rica paid dearly for its president's unusual display of independence. Abrams & Co. cut the vulnerable country's exports to the critical U.S. market, impeded its access to international credit, and tried to weaken Arias at home by instigating attacks on his political allies.

They also cut off all economic aid. "Costa Rica has not received a penny [of U.S. aid] since almost the beginning of the peace plan effort," noted an Arias aide. "The Reagan administration is blind, obsessed with Nicaragua. But they are not going to succeed in overthrowing the Sandinistas. In the end they are going to destroy Costa Rican democracy, instead."<sup>107</sup>

### **Country for rent**

Democracy is not a problem in Honduras, where the wishes of the Reaganites have been treated with enormous respect by the military establishment that runs the country.

Referred to by jolly White House staffers as "the country for rent", and by its mortified citizens as "the whore of Central America", Honduras is the poorest nation in the hemisphere after Haiti. The prototypical Banana Republic, it has often served as a platform for U.S. military adventures in the region — the annihilation of democracy in Guatemala and the Cuban Bay of Pigs fiasco, for example.

From 1982-86, Honduras received nearly \$500 million in overt military assistance, and about \$290 million in economic aid (much of which has also been siphoned off by military leaders for personal use). Projected military assistance for 1987 is \$230 million, up a bit from the \$4 million of 1980.<sup>108</sup>

Critics have noted that the country now resembles a giant U.S. aircraft carrier and have dubbed it the "USS Honduras".

Increasingly, the military functions as a subsidiary of the CIA. In addition to assisting the contras with logistics and occasional artillery cover, its duties include intimidating Nicaragua and preparing for an invasion by co-hosting a series of extensive war games with the U.S. Southern Command.



*Jimi Lott/Seattle Times*

*National Guardsmen from Texas assemble beneath a Honduran sky, near the border with Nicaragua. Over 60,000 troops have been cycled through the U. S. client-state since 1981, in an ongoing sequence of more than 50 war games. Their purpose is to intimidate Nicaragua, practice for an invasion, and illegally supply the CIA terrorists with sophisticated weapons.*

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Actually, it has been more like one continuous war game with occasional pauses. Since 1981, more than 60,000 U.S. troops and National Guardsmen have been cycled through the region in over 50 "exercises".

Much of the activity takes place within 25 miles of the Nicaraguan border, providing an excuse for the installation of airfields, an extensive network of roads suitable for invasion, and the surreptitious delivery of unauthorized arms to the CIA-*contras*. To send further shivers through isolated Nicaragua, the Honduran exercises are frequently co-ordinated with other maneuvers in the Caribbean basin; 50,000 U.S. troops took part in the spring 1987 festivities.

Since what it is doing is illegal on a monumental scale, the Defense Department pretends that these are only temporary

exercises. But the General Accounting Office has documented the permanency of the massive installation, and the devices employed to misrepresent it.

For instance, the statutory requirement that Congress must approve any military construction project over \$200,000 is circumvented by simply dissecting larger projects into smaller pieces when they are grafted into the books. "The GAO also found problems with the large amount of counter-insurgency training provided as part of the military maneuvers, and with the implementation of a vast civic action program. Both might have been interpreted as the Pentagon's offer of recompense for its occupation of Honduras as a military outpost."<sup>109</sup>

It has long since become obvious that the U.S. means to stay for the foreseeable future. Pentagon documents reveal

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*"The quest for food outweighed any hunger for combat. Every campesino hut became a target. Often other contra units had cleaned out houses before we got to them.... Hard pressed by Sandinistas on the hunt, the contras also forced campesinos to scout for them and, worse, to walk on their point (the first man in the column) to make sure we weren't falling into a trap. They bragged that these men were their collaborators, but when we talked to them privately it was clear they felt more like human mine detectors.... The contras were great at retreating; attacks, they never quite managed. One after another, we abandoned targets assigned to us by the high command....*

*"The conduct of the Sandinistas made a striking contrast with the contras. Their discipline held firm after many months.... Where it had taken a mere three weeks for the contras we accompanied in the same mountains to turn into an unruly scourge, Sandinista troops on the march never even stopped at a peasants house, except with permission from an officer — and then only to wait outside for drinking water.... We never saw the Sandinistas impress campesinos as guides or make them walk in front of troops. Peasants we talked to from both sides all agreed that only contras do that."*

— Rod Nordland, *Newsweek*; 1 June 1987. Nordland and a photographer had been invited by the CIA-contras' high command to observe their "new, improved" troops in action.

plans to continue the war games at least through 1990, and the administration has already announced construction activities worth \$50 million through 1991.

Thus does the U.S. executive branch conduct and prepare for war without troubling Congress for its consent. To judge from the deafening silence on Capitol Hill, it is an arrangement that suits all parties involved.

If and when the invasion of Nicaragua comes, it will likely be an extension of a war game like the one in 1984 which involved 33,000 U.S. sailors and soldiers. That's how it was done to Grenada in 1983, and the Reaganites took pains to ensure that the Sandinistas got the message.

In the meantime, the USS Honduras is playing its part by serving as a base for the electronic and aerial surveillance that enables the CIA-*contras* to avoid Sandinista army patrols, which they are demonstrably not eager to encounter. And the war games are always rewarding: When the players leave the field, they tend to leave behind large quantities of military supplies for pre-arranged discovery by the *contras*.

### **“Reagan City”**

The chief service provided by the whore of Central America is, of course, as a prophylactic refuge along the border with Nicaragua. One large area in the eastern province of El Paraiso is now known as “New Nicaragua”, boasting a terrorist “Reagan City”.

It is, in fact, an occupied territory and the local *campesinos* are treated by the *contras* with about as much consideration as their Nicaraguan counterparts across the border. Theft, rape and murder are commonplace: “The *contras* now occupy 21 villages in the eastern part of the country, and have made 16,000 Hondurans refugees in their own country”.<sup>110</sup>

The conduct of the resident terrorists is so ferocious, and the unprecedented expansion of the Honduran military so threatening, that more and more citizens are beginning to risk public doubts and criticism. On May Day, 1986, some 100,000

*“There’s really no difference between the contras and the Honduran Army. They work very closely together, their work is completely coordinated, as if they were one army.... There are relations with Honduran military intelligence, with the immigration office, direct contact with the Honduran Special Forces.... A number of Honduran officials are unhappy because the contras have more power and privileges than they do.”*

— Former CIA-*contra* intelligence officer<sup>111</sup>

people marched through Tegucigalpa in protest against the presence of the U.S. military and their *contra* creatures.

There are indications that someone has been paying attention: As the debate intensifies, death squads have begun to ply their craft for the first time in the nation’s history. Honduran soldiers and CIA-*contras* have joined forces to exterminate opponents of the new order. Victims include *campesinos*, union leaders, priests, journalists, legislators.

“The parties that control [the Honduran] Congress are pro-military. Congressmen tempted to get out of line know they will get calls from military men.”<sup>112</sup>

The advantages of all this to the average Honduran are not immediately apparent. While the U.S. indulges its obsession with Nicaragua, Honduras’ traditional enemy to the west bristles with new weaponry. “Of course, on the Honduran armed forces level,” observes a leading businessman, “it’s more prudent to publicly ‘see’ the threat from Nicaragua. It’s good to milk that threat for all the U.S. aid it’s worth. But the people are not fooled. An El Salvador whose might is growing every day has them worried.”<sup>113</sup>

In a familiar pattern, hundreds of millions of dollars have disappeared. Unemployment is at 40%, and the foreign debt keeps climbing. The only growth industry is the prostitution, which flourishes in the steadily advancing shadow of the U.S. military bases.

(Continued on page 122)



## **'Stop interfering in our internal affairs'**

*Excerpts from letter dated 13 January 1987*

To U.S. Ambassador to Honduras, Everett Briggs:

The United Federation of Honduran Workers (FUTH) is writing to you to respectfully express our conviction that the political crisis in Central America is drawing dangerously close to the false solution of a regional war....

FUTH is convinced that this conflict would not exist in Central America in its current gravity if it were not for the aggressive policies imposed on the people of the region by your government. The Reagan administration attributes the regional crisis to the East-West conflict, that is, to external factors.

Blaming the East-West conflict for the crisis is in reality nothing more than a way of drawing a curtain over the real causes of the problem, such as the social inequalities which prevail throughout the region, and the system of super-exploitation practiced by the transnationals, chiefly those of the United States. This exploitation produces hunger, exacerbates our centuries-long extreme underdevelopment, and undermines our sovereignty and self-determination as an independent nation....

The goal of the U.S. government is clear: to prevent our people from changing the current social and economic structures which are founded on backwardness, dependency, underdevelopment and oppression....

U.S. interference in Honduras' internal affairs has reached into the entire political and administrative structure of the country....

This whole pattern of behavior, of dominator and dominated, is intended to be concealed under the cloak of

*(Continued...)*

(Continued from page 120)

### **Budgetary magic**

It is difficult to estimate the total cost of the U.S. assault on Nicaragua, since so much of it has been concealed and repackaged. Expenditures for the Navy ships patrolling offshore, as for the airbases constructed just across the borders with Honduras and Costa Rica, appear under headings of the Defense Department budget that make no reference to Nicaragua.

Large sums are laundered through compliant allies such as Israel and Chile. The Honduran army is outfitted with new equipment, then quietly hands its nearly-new discards over to the CIA-*contras*. The U.S. embassy in Switzerland spends much of its energies lobbying in Europe for *contra* support, and the State Department pays a public relations firm hundreds of thousands to help the *contras* polish their diplomatic image. Etc., etc.

#### ***Letter to U.S. ambassador (cont.)***

a supposed alliance in which the United States "protects" Honduras.... However, the whole world knows of the tragic circumstances of Honduras. It is a country occupied by two foreign military forces: the U.S. army and the *contra* forces.... Your government is looking for the opportunity to light the spark that could lead to a regional conflagration...

We believe that the best solution for our true national interest is: first, that you stop interfering in our internal affairs; second, that the government you represent halt its policy of aggression and respect the right [of Nicaragua] to self-determination; and finally, that all foreign troops leave our national territory.

*FUTH represents 30,000 workers in the state sector; its leaders have been the victims of constant harassment, assassination and other violence*

It all adds up to a great deal of money, which will never be fully accounted for. A clue to the amounts involved is provided by estimates of total military expenditures in Central America and the Caribbean for 1985. The official White House figure is \$1.2 billion. Less partial observers, however, put the real total at anywhere from \$7-19 billion, depending on which assumptions are used in the calculations.<sup>114</sup>

Whatever the amount, a large portion of it has been devoted to the care and arming of the CIA-*contras*, who are dominated by former members of Somoza's *Guardia*; a 1985 congressional study disclosed that of 48 top *contra* leaders, 46 had been *guardia* officers.

The troops they mislead are young men drawn primarily from remote areas of Nicaragua, relatively untouched by either the insurrection or the advances of the Sandinista revolution. Some have been enticed with money and the opportunity to shoot modern weapons in league with the mighty United States. Others have been aroused to militance by horror stories about collectivization of farms and suppression of religious freedom. Still others have had unhappy encounters with local officials, or know someone who has.

### **Extreme motivation**

Possibly the most prevalent method of recruitment is kidnapping. According to a former high-ranking official of the *contras*, in testimony to the World Court: "Some Nicaraguans joined the force voluntarily, either because of dissatisfaction with the Nicaraguan government, family ties with leaders of the force, promises of food, clothing, boots and weapons, or a combination of these reasons.

"Many other members of the force were recruited forcibly. FDN [*contra*] units would arrive at an undefended village, assemble all the residents in the town square and then proceed to kill — in full view of the others — all persons suspected of working for the Nicaraguan government or the FSLN, including police, local militia members, party members, health workers, teachers, and farmers from government-sponsored

*"At least one of the contras we met was no volunteer. He was a 14-year-old.... He said he had been picking coffee for a neighbor three months ago in Matagalpa Province when a column of contras came through and abducted him. [Later, his family] confirmed that their son had been kidnapped with 20 other campesinos, some of whom managed to escape. 'All the trees in my backyard have died since he was taken away,' his mother said, in tears.... His family had been given a plot of land by the Sandinistas after their victory. 'How could they want to destroy the revolution,' she wondered, 'when it has helped us and so many other people?'"*

— Rod Nordland, *Newsweek*; 1 June 1987

cooperatives. In this atmosphere, it was not difficult to persuade those able-bodied men left alive to return with the *contra* units to their base camps in Honduras and enlist in the force. This was, unfortunately, a widespread practice that accounted for many recruits." This description of recruiting methods has been confirmed by other reliable accounts.<sup>115</sup>

Some of the reluctant warriors manage to slip away from their captors, but most are quickly removed so far from familiar surroundings and are so closely watched that escape becomes problematical. They are also reminded that Sandinistas are not fond of *contras* and warned that, once identified as an enemy of the revolution, there is no safe turning back. Those who retain doubts about their new career appointments are harshly disciplined: "They killed 40 men while I was there," recounts one returnee.<sup>116</sup>

For these and other reasons, morale has always been something of a problem. There has been a steady stream of former *contras* returning to Nicaragua. By 1987, nearly 5000 had been granted amnesty and reintegrated into their communities.

For all of these reasons, it is not possible to calculate the number of genuine terrorists. The figures tossed around by the White House are known to be grossly exaggerated: The ex-*contra* leader quoted above says that it is standard public relations procedure to double the actual number of troops, including those kidnapped. That claim has been confirmed by administration officials in rare moments of candor.<sup>117</sup>

In 1987, there were an estimated 7000 *contras* under arms, as opposed to the administration's stated figure of 15,000. In six years of sporadic attacks, they have managed to kill and terrorize a great many unarmed civilians. But they have not been able to hold an inch of Nicaraguan territory for the provisional government that they used to talk about, nor have they won a single battle. Most of their casualties occur while running away from Sandinista army and militia units after attacking an isolated farm or village.

But they have managed to inflict a great deal of damage on unarmed targets. A partial list of their accomplishments to the end of 1987 includes:

- 5700 murdered
- 14,800 wounded, mutilated and kidnapped
- 70 health clinics destroyed
- 50 schools damaged or destroyed
- 411 teachers killed, 66 kidnapped
- 250,000 rendered homeless
- damages exceeding \$3.6 billion, over fifteen times Nicaragua's annual export earnings.



Wendy Van Roojen

*Part of a photographic memorial to the "heroes and martyrs" of a small village near Rivas. Similar testimonies to the human consequences of the CIA-contra terror campaign are a common sight throughout the country.*

## 'Rosa had her breasts cut off'

IN LATE 1984, U.S. media stumbled onto *Psych-Operations in Guerilla War*, a sort of terrorists' primer on destabilization. It turned out to have been concocted by the CIA for the enlightenment of its *contras*, and contained helpful tips on assassination, blackmail, intimidation and other chores.

The U.S. Congress responded with outrage; many of its members could not publicly imagine how such a smelly fish could have been spawned in the home of the brave. CIA officials professed equal bewilderment, admitting no knowledge of its origins. Eventually, it was put down to an unauthorized deviation from the pristine norm by some nameless functionary. Ronald Reagan dismissed the hubbub as much ado about nothing, and several mid-level officials of the CIA were reprimanded for lax supervision of the lower orders.

It was a typical performance. In fact, the manual had been put together by an experienced CIA agent and, far from being an anomaly, faithfully recited standard theory and practice. It described something very similar to the infamous Phoenix Program, in which U.S. agents assassinated up to 40,000 Southeast Asians.

The similarity was hardly a coincidence, as the manual's author was an active participant in that slaughter.<sup>118</sup> It is a pedigree worthy of the CIA-*contras*, who have remained true to their *Guardia* traditions by raining terror on the people they have come to "liberate". A few examples are given below; it should be kept in mind that these are not aberrations from a gentler norm, but typical instances of a policy of systematic terror.

"They go into villages. They haul out families. With the children forced to watch, they castrate the father, they peel the skin off his face, they put a grenade in his mouth

and pull the pin. With the children forced to watch, they gang-rape the mother and slash her breasts off. And sometimes, for variety, they make the parents watch while they do these things to the children.”

— *Former CIA official*<sup>119</sup>

“After walking awhile, we arrived at a place where about 50 men were waiting. There I was brutally raped many times, in my rectum and my vagina. I was forced down on my knees and raped at the same time that my husband was cruelly beaten.”

— *Mother of two children from Esteli*<sup>120</sup>

“They came up to the 15-year-old *compañero* and began to slit his throat while he was still alive. Then they made him get down on his hands and knees and shoved a bayonet up his anus, which is what finally killed him.”

— *Eyewitness account of teen-age girl*<sup>121</sup>

“Rosa had her breasts cut off. Then they cut into her chest and took out her heart. The men had their arms broken, their testicles cut off, and their eyes poked out. They were killed by slitting their throats and pulling the tongue out through the slit.”

— *Manchester Guardian, 25 November 1984*

“Central Intelligence Agency officials and others presented evidence [to Congress] that the United States-backed rebels had raped, tortured, and killed unarmed civilians, including children. The CIA officials were said to have raised that problem as one explanation for the guerilla warfare manual, saying the primer was intended to moderate the rebels behavior.”

— *New York Times, 26 December 26 1984*

(Continued...)

## MAKING THE BASTARDS SWEAT

Very soon after their establishment, it became apparent that the CIA-*contras* were incapable of achieving anything like a military victory, and nothing has occurred since to alter that conclusion. So complete is their ineptitude that the Reagan administration has even tried to use it as a perverse rationale for lawlessness: Since it has no chance of succeeding, argue the Reaganites with exemplary *chutzpah*, the CIA-*contra* campaign lacks the capacity to violate any prohibition against unprovoked attacks on sovereign nations.<sup>124</sup>

The question thus arises as to what purpose, apart from terrorizing the populace, the bloody thing is supposed to serve. There are political benefits, of course: A steady accumulation of dead Nicaraguans serves to reassure the right-wing faithful that The Evil Empire is being vigorously opposed. It is of no consequence that the nation under attack is not even communist; it is enough to label it so.

### *'Rosa had her breasts cut off' (cont.)*

"An eleven-year-old girl was visiting her uncle. When they saw the little girl, they decided to have a little fun. So they used her for target practice. The first one took a shot at her from a galloping horse. He missed.... The other shot her in the back. The bullet came out her chest. Another bullet grazed her scalp, another hit her in the right hand, and another in the left hip. Then they left."

— *Told by villagers to Spanish priest*<sup>122</sup>

The Reagan administration is well aware of these barbarities, but prefers to ignore them. On those rare occasions when it responds to complaints about its mercenaries' behavior, it does so by accusing the Sandinistas of grosser atrocities — a gross untruth. Amnesty International has twice protested CIA-*contra* abuses to Secretary of State George Shultz; he has not deigned to reply.<sup>123</sup>



As for the fact that the U.S. is simultaneously shining up to “Red” China and other genuinely communist countries, for commercial and strategic reasons, it is no doubt best to leave that apparent contradiction to be sorted out by the subtle minds of the Reagan administration.

Another potential function of the CIA-*contras* is to provoke an “international incident” involving Honduras or Costa Rica, which might be used as the pretext for an invasion. Frequent efforts have been directed toward that end but, thus far, the Sandinistas have successfully avoided the many traps set out for them.

Then there is simple inertia, which explains so much of human behavior. Once

afoot, the game must be pursued to its inevitable conclusion, and the Reaganites display an evident delight in seeing just how far they can push the country toward open warfare.

Good old Yankee pride must also be served; it simply won’t do to have another motley crew of underdeveloped types deflecting the wrathful purpose of Uncle Sam, he standing so tall and all.

### Starvation warfare

However much those motives may explain the Reaganites’ persistent attachment to the CIA-*contras*, it is clear that their chief purpose has been to devastate the Nicaragua economy. In this, at least, they have succeeded.

The defense portion of the Nicaraguan national budget was seven percent in 1980. By 1987, it had swollen to just under 50 percent, in response to mounting aggression by the CIA-*contras* and the threat of a U.S. invasion. That threat

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*“Let’s make them sweat. Let’s make the bastards sweat....”*

*“What can we do about the economy to make these bastards sweat? We’ve got to do something, goddammit, we’ve got to do something.”*

— CIA Director William Casey,  
quoted by Bob Woodward in  
*VEIL: The Secret Wars of  
the CIA, 1981-1987*

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became palpable with the 1983 invasion of nearby Grenada, which was widely interpreted as a trial run for the main event. Through official and unofficial channels, the Reaganites did everything possible to reinforce that impression. Apparently they also hoped that the Grenada adventure would serve to cultivate public enthusiasm for an all-out assault on Nicaragua.

The need to divert such a large portion of the nation's scant resources to national defense has brought a halt to development projects. There have been no significant social service or economic initiatives since 1983. In addition, the CIA-*contra* campaign has concentrated on economic targets, with devastating results. Electrical substations and high-tension lines, dams, bridges, and communication installations have suffered heavy damage. The repairs consume a large chunk of Nicaragua's slender reserves of foreign exchange.

Most of the terrorism takes place in the vital food-growing provinces of the north, along the border with Honduras; other trouble spots include the remote central region, and some areas along the border with Costa Rica. Peasant farms and co-operatives are favorite targets of the terrorists, since they can offer little or no resistance. Consequently, supplies of food staples have been severely affected; likewise, coffee and beef cattle, key export crops.

Another result has been the displacement of some 250,000 people from their homes. The government has had to build 200 new villages to accommodate them and guarantee at least six months' food supply. Essentially refugee camps, they are forlorn and unfriendly places unlikely to earn the Sandinistas much support, even from those residents who comprehend the CIA origins of their misfortune.

The small but important fishing industry has been badly hurt. Boats have been stolen, set on fire and sunk by mines. Many have been of necessity diverted to military uses, such as patrolling against sabotage teams deposited in Nicaraguan waters by CIA or Navy ships. Much of the timber industry, another source of export earnings, has been shut down; ambitious reforestation plans have had to be shelved, thus ensuring the projection of damages well into the future.

Anything used to store valuable commodities, especially oil and grain, is a likely target. The 1983 sea and air attacks on Corinto destroyed 600 metric tons of foodstuffs donated by the United Nations, and most of the nation's precious oil reserves. The resulting fire forced the evacuation of the city's 25,000 residents and caused damage amounting to an estimated \$380 million.<sup>125</sup>

To place such numbers in context: Total export earnings in 1986 were \$218 million, and the gross national product is about \$2.5 billion roughly equivalent to the U.S. income of the MacDonald's hamburger chain.

### **Killing the skills**

The execution of Ben Linder, the first U.S. *internacionalista* murdered by the CIA-*contras*, illustrates a general principle of the terror campaign: Kill the skills. Linder was targeted for trying to install a small hydroelectric system in the north; his fate has been shared by hundreds with special skills, most of them Nicaraguans.

This kind of assassination program is especially costly to a country like Nicaragua, since the historical neglect of education has left it with a relatively small pool of skilled workers. Many either left with Somoza or have followed since. Those who remain are among the chief targets of the *contras*; agronomists, engineers, doctors, nurses, teachers, etc., are all at special risk. Even when they manage to survive, the nation is often deprived of their skills when they are required for military duty.

The health care system must devote an increasing portion of its meager resources to patching wounds and rehabilitating casualties. Pensions for the families of fallen soldiers eat away at the national purse. Rice and beans fail to reach markets because the roads are full of mines, or because there is no gasoline for the trucks. Etc., etc., etc....

In ways too numerous to list here, the CIA-*contra* campaign bleeds the country dry.

## Standard procedure

For most of this century, the United States has so arranged Central American economies as to make them largely dependent on U.S. credit and markets. That dependency is further elaborated via international lending agencies, which are controlled by or susceptible to pressure from the United States.

It is a state of affairs that places enormous power over other nations in the clutches of the U.S. presidency, and the Reaganites have not neglected it in their crusade against Nicaragua. The methods used are quite familiar to students of CIA destabilization campaigns.

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*"After six years of fighting and more than \$200 million [sic] in U.S. aid, many of the contras remain an aimless army.... The contras have utterly failed to convert their occasional military success into a popular movement that can challenge the Sandinistas...."*

*"They are a rebel army which often doesn't want to fight, and prefers to concentrate on what a Western diplomat in Central America called targets of opportunity' — such as power lines, trucks and lightly guarded farm cooperatives.... They are a military force that, when it does fight, often kills, shoots and kidnaps unarmed civilians, including children and pregnant women, and ransacks and burns peasant houses. This is despite a \$3 million program mandated by Congress to curb such atrocities...."*

*"They are an army whose purported successes do not stand up to examination, and whose atrocities go unmentioned in official reports...."*

*"A contra news release said the rebels attacked La Patriota, a small rural village.... But the news release didn't mention that the contras also killed two unarmed civilians, including a 20-month-old infant, wounded the baby's mother and kidnapped three men, according to eyewitnesses. In addition, after defeating the local militia, the contras looted and burned 10 houses, the village health center and a local store...."*

*"[A contra] task force avoided all contact with the Sandinistas during the six weeks that a news team accompanied it inside Nicaragua."*

— Steve Shecklow and Andrew Maykuth  
*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 13-16 December 1987

A sort of guide to destabilization has been drawn up by the man who served as Chile's Minister of the Economy in Salvador Allende's government until it was eliminated. Based on his own experience, and that of other victims of U.S. economic aggression, he has outlined a five-step procedure used by the Land of the Free to undermine disobedient governments:

1. Link the interests of international lending institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, with those of a small elite in the target country. These internal agents can then be relied upon to articulate U.S. criticisms and demands.

2. Gradually introduce demands that are fiscally or politically impossible to meet. Follow with denunciations designed to justify forthcoming aggression.

3. Accompany the impossible demands with a "campaign of deligitimization" in which the government is accused of inefficiency, corruption, etc. Paint internal agents of the U.S. as champions of private enterprise, which offers the only path to prosperity and stability.

4. Accentuate anxieties about possible shortages of consumer goods, credit and raw materials. This panics the business community into liquidating assets, spiriting capital out of the country, hoarding, neglecting maintenance, and in general undermining the economy. Follow by blocking international credit, and escalating demands for "protection of private enterprise".

5. Open economic aggression: Block access to all credit and markets, and intensify all other pressures in order to escalate inflation, shortages, and general panic. Rational economic activity becomes impossible, and all production and commerce is severely disrupted.

The general idea is "to create a perceptible worsening in the social and economic conditions of a country in order to lessen the likelihood that the ruling government would be retained in power."<sup>126</sup>

## Food for war program

One of the first acts of the Reagan administration was to cancel the final \$15 million of a \$75 million aid package that was approved by Congress during the final days of the Carter administration. Most of the aid was to be channeled through Nicaragua's private sector, and it had been awarded with the intent of gaining some kind of leverage on the Sandinistas.

Next came cancellation of a credit line to purchase \$10 million of wheat under the "Food for Peace" program. A grant of \$11.4 million for projects in rural development, health, and education was also cancelled. It was becoming apparent that leverage and peace were not what the Reaganites had in mind; they proceeded with a program of escalating economic pressure.

A sharp turn of the screw came in 1983, with a decision to block 90% of the Nicaraguan sugar imported to the U.S. Both the Third World "Group of 77" at the United Nations and the executive of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which defines the rules of international trade, condemned the arbitrary suspension.

The United States has itself applied to GATT for relief on several occasions, e.g. to protest alleged "dumping" of Japanese products. No matter. Findings that the U.S. has violated its obligations under international treaties have simply been ignored.

The White House has also contrived to dry up credit from U.S. banks and corporations. One of its first steps was to suspend guarantees of the Export-Import Bank, which underwrites sales of U.S. capital goods to developing nations. It also discontinued coverage by the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), which insures against political and environmental risks. Even though the Sandinista government was adjudged to be a good risk, many U.S. corporations chose not to extend credit without the reassurance of OPIC compensation guarantees.

On at least one occasion, the State Department "strongly advised" a major U.S. bank not to issue an important loan; the

loan was dutifully cancelled. Gradually the word went out to the U.S. banking community that it was not a good idea to do business with Nicaragua. That suggestion was reinforced when the administration ordered Nicaragua to close its six consulates in the U.S., a maneuver that erected additional barriers to trade between the two countries.

### “Extraordinary threat”

As a result of these and other machinations, sources of credit were gradually eliminated and trade between the two countries steadily declined. Thus, it came as no great surprise when a total trade embargo was imposed in 1985. The executive order declares: “I, Ronald Reagan, President of the United



*Witness for Peace*

*CIA sabotage at Corinto in 1983 destroyed most of Nicaragua's oil storage capacity and forced the city's population to evacuate. The attack was carried out by a contingent of the agency's "Unilaterally Controlled Latino Assets", but the contras were instructed to take credit for the mighty deed.*

States of America, find that the policies and actions of the government of Nicaragua constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States and hereby declare a national emergency to deal with that threat.”

Nicaragua has adapted to the removal of its traditional markets by developing new ones in Europe and elsewhere, but the transition has not been painless. Shipping costs to Europe are about 20% higher than to the U.S., and there is an inevitable “learning curve” for every item thus diverted. For example, the fact that transportation of bananas is now measured in weeks rather than days has affected every stage of production, from the timing of the harvest to the type and amount of fungicide applied.

One of the biggest problems has been finding spare parts for the nation’s deteriorating industrial base. Most buses, trucks, tractors, electric generators, pumps, etc., are of U.S. manufacture, and it has proven difficult to find alternative sources of supply. Equipment failures are increasingly frequent and prolonged.

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*“To pile futility on top of irony, [the U.S. trade embargo] is grotesquely counterproductive. It is driving Nicaragua steadily closer to dependency, on Moscow, as a similar embargo did to Cuba a quarter-century ago.”*

— John B. Oakes, *New York Times*, 20 May 1985

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Ironically, among the biggest losers are U.S. companies and their trading partners in the Nicaraguan private sector, whose interests are supposed to be the focus of the Reaganites’ concern. Their losses have amounted to hundreds of millions of dollars.

The results for Nicaragua as a whole are mixed. An economic planner sums up the

the situation this way: “The embargo will in the medium- to long-term be beneficial to Nicaragua, in that it will produce better trading relationships with Europe, Latin America, the Socialist bloc and the rest of the world. But in the short term it will be painful to readjust.”<sup>127</sup>



Of course, the short term is of no small consequence. The embargo has caused a great deal of economic disruption, and it can be absurdly petty in its application; the State Department has, for instance, blocked a shipment of agricultural tools and supplies donated by the private relief organization, OxFam America.

### **No credit where it's due**

While it is possible to develop new markets to replace those blocked or withdrawn by the U.S., it is a far different matter to find a substitute for international lending agencies. There aren't many of them, and they are very much under the influence of the United States.



*Brent Shirley*

*Nearly all of Nicaragua's banana exports were sent to the United States, before the Reaganites inflicted their trade embargo. Western Europe has begun to provide a substitute market, but the "learning curve" of the new trading relationship has been difficult and costly. Reflecting the country's narrow industrial base, oxcarts are a fairly common sight, even in cities.*

The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank were at first favorably disposed to the Sandinista government. During its first two years, it received \$175 million for a variety of projects relating to water and sewage systems, forestry development, rural health services, and agriculture.

The World Bank noted with approval in early 1982 that the new government had assumed responsibility for the \$1.6 billion Somoza debt, and had brought itself up to date on all international debt payments. It also pointed out that Nicaragua was "one of the few countries in Latin America that continues to pay its debts on time", and that the credit and aid it received was put to its intended use with exceptional efficiency (i.e. it did not end up in the pockets of an elite). In late 1982, however, that favorable assessment was reversed when the bank's director was replaced by a Reaganite. There have been no loans to Nicaragua since.

### **"Conscious policy of aggression"**

The Inter-American Development Bank has undergone a similar process. The Reagan administration has exercised its veto power to deny loans to Nicaragua, even when approved by the other 42 members. It has threatened to withdraw all contributions to the IDB if it does not get its way.

In defending its policy, the U.S. has stated that it will continue to block loans to Nicaragua until it "takes steps to revitalize the private sector and improve the efficiency of the public sector". But it has been pointed out that, "These are, of course, precisely the policies that the Nicaraguan government has been pursuing most vigorously, even amid criticism from the Left...."

"The United States regularly votes in the World Bank for loans to countries with predominantly socialist economies, such as Yugoslavia; and it supports policies in El Salvador that it criticizes in Nicaragua, such as nationalization of the banking system. There is virtually no explanation for depriving Nicaragua of its access to credit... other than a conscious policy of economic aggression."<sup>128</sup>

That policy has been effective. The total value of blocked loans since 1982 approaches \$400 million, nearly twice Nicaragua's annual export earnings.

The aggregate effect of all these pressures on the economy has been predictably unpleasant. Runaway inflation, severe shortages and the black market are now facts of daily life. So is the grumbling that grows with it, along with an increasing polarization of society.

Reading from the standard text, the Reaganites and their collaborators in Nicaragua have labored to blame

the mess on "Sandinista mismanagement". But no one has yet proposed any cure for a 40% decline in the price of crucial export commodities, a lavishly-funded terrorist campaign and invasion threat that bleeds nearly 50% of the national budget, massive disruption of international commerce, etc.

Until some of those pressures subside, the Sandinistas can do little but preside over a disaster. And, even if all these problems disappeared overnight, the damage already inflicted is more than sufficient to cause hardship for decades to come.



*Jaime Perozo*

*Four experienced soldiers of the Nicaraguan army. Their youth is neither illusory nor unusual.*

## THE ENEMY WITHIN

Except for the odd disillusioned defector, the eager minions of the CIA appear to take great pride in their work of destruction. It somehow counts as a noble achievement to enter a (preferably) tiny and impoverished country — equipped with only a few billion dollars and limitless military resources, backed by the leader of the most powerful nation on earth — and proceed to tear the place apart.

Of course, the truly difficult trick for any society is to maintain a semblance of order against an ever-present backdrop of conflict and imminent dissolution. Even the United States, with nary a single invader on the horizon (save those populating the dark imaginings of the lunatic right), finds it prudent to stamp out dissension from time to time. As recently as 1987, several handfuls of apocalyptics were indicted on charges of conspiring to overthrow the government by force.<sup>129</sup> (Legal tip from the Reagan administration: Refute the charges by arguing that the project had no chance of success; see page 128.)

One thing that Nicaragua possesses in abundance is social discord. Somoza's legacy of poverty and political impotence guaranteed plenty of that; the socialist intent of the Sandinistas added a further catalyst to the volatile stew. Inevitably, the United States would try to stir things up for its own delectation. All the necessary ingredients were there; the problem was simply one of mixing them to satisfy Reaganite tastes.

That project has been greatly assisted by the climate of open debate fostered by the Sandinista revolution. "For, among the Reagan administration's many falsehoods about Central America, none is more gratuitous than the characterization of Nicaragua as 'totalitarian'. A vast array of political, social and cultural forces are at work in the country. Professional and business associations in deep disagreement with government policy meet openly and protest loudly.... The relatively permissive political climate presents ample opportunities

*"The Yankees are the worst enemy of our people. At those moments when patriotic fervor has inspired us to seek each other out in earnest attempts at unity, they have dug deep to stir unsettled disputes so that hatred flares among us and we remain divided and weak, easy to colonize."*

— Augusto Sandino, 1928

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to those who wish to embarrass or discredit a revolution whose accomplishments inevitably fall far short of popular expectations in many areas."<sup>130</sup>

Operating more-or-less openly from the refuge of the U.S. Embassy, and drawing on contacts developed well before the downfall of Somoza, the CIA has concentrated its disruptive efforts in five principle sectors: private enterprise, news media, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, indigenous peoples, and sweetheart labor unions.

### **Angry rich men**

Having failed in its efforts to prevent the Sandinistas from tasting the victory they had earned, one of the last acts of the Carter administration had been to allocate \$1 million to the CIA for the cultivation of an internal opposition congenial to the United States. Of course, the CIA was already working on that, and a million bucks was little more than pocket change for the Agency. But it was a clear indication of the direction U.S. policy would take.

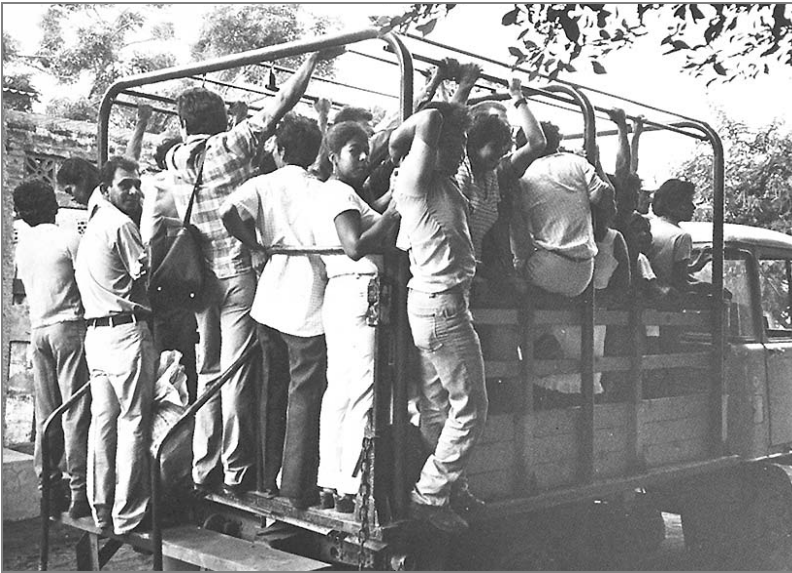
The business sector was a logical destination for many of those CIA dollars, but not everyone has been willing to play. About a third of the business community has been sympathetic and co-operative toward the revolution, another third skeptical and restrained.

The remaining third has been openly hostile, engaging in economic sabotage and performing the tragic role of "suppressed opposition" for international consumption. Most of these people are represented by the Higher Council of Economic Enterprise ("COSEP"), which has conducted a relentless

campaign against the Sandinista government from its inception. That campaign includes an attempt in 1980 to overthrow the government. The plan was to assassinate the Sandinista leadership in conjunction with an invasion by former *guardias*. It was aborted when COSEP's vice-president was killed in a shoot-out with police while attempting to run guns to the would-be invaders.

The martyr's associates consoled themselves by angrily condemning his death as the unprovoked murder of a mere vocal dissenter; the evidence clearly suggests otherwise.<sup>131</sup> But COSEP used the incident as proof of Sandinista oppression, and the CIA made sure it was reported as such in the world press.

Since then, angry denunciations of the government have comprised the organization's principal stock in trade. Rejecting every opportunity to participate in legitimate politics, it serves



Kim Esterberg

*The impact of the U. S. embargo has severe shortages. A major headache is the problem of obtaining spare parts for the country's decrepit machinery and public transport facilities. Shown here is a relatively intact "bus" with an average load of passengers.*

as an instrument of the Reaganites' propaganda war. Its function is to provoke the government into responses which can then be denounced to the world as "totalitarian repression". This strategy has been fairly effective in drumming up opposition to the Sandinistas in the U.S. and, to a much lesser extent, in Europe.

"People are afraid to speak out for fear of being murdered... the Literacy Crusade is a vehicle for communist indoctrination... there is no religious freedom, no freedom of speech... the government practices genocide on native peoples... things are worse now than under Somoza", etc., etc.

There is no accusation too preposterous for COSEP spokespersons to utter; for they know that their fulminations are unlikely to be cross-checked by western journalists bopping in and out of Managua, and that hardly anyone takes the trouble to seek out the many "patriotic businessmen" who would refute them in both word and deed.

Meticulous grooming of the international press corps by the CIA has made the COSEP office an obligatory stop for reporters in need of newsworthy morsels from "The Business Community" — which, in this case, amounts to less than two percent of the population.

## U.S. government agencies

It is no secret that COSEP has received substantial funding from the U.S. government and other right-wing interests. Its close ties to the CIA-*contras* are also well-known. The two foreign agencies of the U.S. government are so completely entwined that there has been a steady procession of COSEP leaders to the *contra* political headquarters in Miami.

COSEP is also closely affiliated with the three political parties, known as *La Coordinadora*, which followed U.S. instructions to boycott the 1984 election so that they could denounce it as fraudulent. The breadth of their support was indicated by the turnout for the grand opening of their new offices in the summer of 1987. The general public was invited to attend; 200 people showed up.<sup>132</sup>

Other political allies of COSEP include the newspaper *La Prensa*, and the conservative hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Then there are the two compliant unions left over from the Somoza era, representing two percent of organized labor, which are financed by the U.S. government and the "AFL-CIA". Their political agenda is indistinguishable from that of COSEP, with which they meet frequently to plan strategy against the government.

There are also points of agreement between COSEP and the unions, representing ten percent of organized labor, which are affiliated with the two small communist parties. There is no clear evidence that these unions have received direction from the U.S., but it would not be the first time that the CIA has paid communists to discredit socialists. It was a productive tactic in the early stages of the assault on Allende's Chile, for example.

In any event, both the COSEP and the "communist" unions have generated much useful propaganda by provoking the government to reactions which can then be portrayed as state repression.

There is little doubt that the interests represented by COSEP would have been inclined to obstruct the revolution without any encouragement from the U.S. But there is also little doubt that CIA money and promises have substantially augmented that obstruction, especially in matters of economic sabotage. "Were it not for imperialism," contends a Sandinista

*(Continued on page 146)*

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*"We flounder now.... When they told us not to participate in the 1984 election, the United States destroyed us as a credible opposition. We are now outside Nicaraguan political life. I can give a speech to a poorly-attended rally and scream about oppression to foreign journalists, when I can find them. I can go to Honduras to join the contras and work for the CIA. If I am too old for fighting I can go to Miami and complain for the rest of my life. Those are my only choices."*

— Coordinadora member<sup>133</sup>



### **“Blatant half-truths and distortions”**

IN LATE 1985, a delegation of U.S. lawyers visited Nicaragua to investigate charges that civil rights were being systematically violated by the Sandinistas. They found virtually all such charges to be false or exaggerated. Some excerpts from their report:

“Nicaraguans currently enjoy far greater freedom of expression than many of their neighbors in other Central American nations, and certainly far more than one would expect from reading the mainstream press in the U.S....

“The U.S. government has consistently engaged in forms of censorship in the name of preserving democracy, even in the absence of an emergency of the magnitude confronted by the Nicaraguan government. Their criticism is particularly ironic, given the selective and distorted news coverage of the situation in Nicaragua by the U.S. media....

“The extremist opposition’s claim that dissent has been completely stifled in Nicaragua is clearly an exaggeration. At the same time that they made this claim, the COSEP growers handed us a copy of their own newspaper....

“The most outrageous exaggerations of the extremists relate to their claimed fear of reprisals.... The extremists’ behavior belied their expressed fears. It is hard to believe that persons who truly feared for their lives would feel free to attack the government so openly.... We found it somewhat amusing that three of the COSEP growers strenuously objected to telling us their names (because of the supposed danger), but then proceeded to call each other by name throughout our meeting....

“We find it a telling irony that those who complain most strenuously about the lack of freedom of expression are responsible for such blatant half-truths and distortions.”<sup>134</sup>

(Continued from page 144)

leader, "we could talk to the business sector, establish rates of profit based on their productive experience and say to them, this is the new situation in Nicaragua. And, with the popular power that the revolution has, these businessmen could accept it as a real consequence of the political phenomenon that Nicaragua has lived through.

"But those that are trying to sabotage the revolution, that are boycotting it, that are decapitalizing the economy, do so because they are energized, supported and pushed from outside by a power that makes them feel confident. That is the imperialist policy."<sup>135</sup>

### **The *contra* cardinal**

A crucial element of the Sandinista revolution has been the extensive involvement of practicing Catholics — priests, nuns and laymen of the "Christian base communities". Their motto is, "Between Christianity and the revolution there is no contradiction", a liberating idea that has spread rapidly throughout Latin America and other parts of the Third World since the Vatican II Council of 1962-65.

Clergymen occupy important positions in the new government — four cabinet ministers are priests, and their active participation in the revolution has gone a long way toward legitimating it. All but a few of the nation's 75 Jesuits, the largest contingent from any order, are "with the process".

Nevertheless, powerful segments of the Catholic Church find that process repugnant, because it challenges the established order and flirts with the traditional anathema, Marxism. There has been a severe backlash, led by the current pope, against Vatican II's encouragement of both "liberation theology" and the decentralization of church authority. Nowhere is its sting sharper than in Nicaragua, the hierarchy of which is regarded as among the most reactionary in all of Latin America.

Especially obnoxious to the hierarchy are those many priests and nuns who threaten its authority by nurturing a

parallel "popular church" which, the prelates feel, is morbidly preoccupied with the temporal concerns of the poor, and imputes an uncomfortable degree of spiritual wisdom to mere laymen. The resemblance of this dispute to the rending controversies of the Reformation is more than superficial.

These perceived threats to church discipline — liberation theology and the popular church — are inextricably linked. That is especially true in the context of the Sandinista revolution, with its strong Christian component. But the bishops prefer to cast the dispute more simply as between the Church and the State — a formulation which has the beneficent effect of obscuring the Church's dirty linen.

Chief spokesman for the hierarchy in Nicaragua is Cardinal Miguel Obando. As a bishop, he had signed on to the insurrection during its final stages. But, unlike so many of his priests, Obando's somewhat tardy rejection of Somoza never implied approval of the FSLN. Along with COSEP and Jimmy Carter, he rather hoped that the traditional elite would end up on top again, only this time with less unsavory leadership.

That didn't happen. Instead, he was confronted with the spectacle of the popular church, over which he exercised little authority, forging an alliance with the new government — something that the official church has done for centuries throughout Latin America, but with far different strains of secular power.

## **Substantial resources**

Obando has responded by attacking the Sandinistas with all the resources at his disposal, which are not inconsiderable. He is in many respects better equipped than the pro-*contra* business community. On his side he can count: an authoritarian pope and his reactionary court; most of Nicaragua's economic elite and, as the stresses of the revolution wear on, a growing portion of the narrow middle class; large numbers of poor Nicaraguans, unmoved by the popular church and still respectful of traditional authority; the worldwide network of

Catholic bishops, most of whom reflexively support Obando; conservative Catholic laymen, many of whom are wealthy and well-connected to the governments of the United States, Spain, West Germany *et al.*; and, needless to say, the Reagan administration, which has funneled hundreds of thousands of dollars to the cardinal by various means.<sup>136</sup>

Like COSEP and Ronald Reagan, Obando and all but a few of his bishops have been unable to discern anything of value in the Sandinista revolution, and they blame it for everything that is wrong in the country.

Obando's propaganda offensive against the revolution began almost with its inception. Even the literacy crusade was condemned as an exercise in communist indoctrination. One item of evidence was a page in a reading primer which contrasted the kinds of shoes worn by city workers with those of peasants. This was said to be an attempt to foment class conflict.

There has been a steady stream of accusations that the government interferes with the "independence" which the schools are said to have enjoyed in the good old days. The nature of that lost independence is indicated by the recollections of a teacher who has spent seven years of her career during the Somoza regime and seven during the revolution:

"My problem as a teacher before was less Somoza than the Church. The priests were very powerful, and religion was inserted everywhere. If you didn't teach that the New World was discovered because of divine intervention, someone would tell a priest, and the priest would tell his bishop, and the bishop would tell your administrator. The administrator would have to talk to you about this whether he wanted to or not. So you would always have to say that God willed the voyages of Columbus."<sup>137</sup>

Every other aspect of the revolution is treated by the cardinal with essentially the same sort of intellectual integrity. But it is his open support of the CIA-*contras* that has caused the greatest despair among his countrymen.

Obando has consistently maintained that the CIA-*contras* are patriots striving to free their country from Godless Communism, and has called upon the government to negotiate

with the former *guardias*. That is a suggestion regarded by most Nicaraguans as tantamount to requiring that West Germany accommodate itself to Hitler's Storm Troopers.

He has steadfastly refused to acknowledge his champions' widely reported brutality, suggesting that it could just as well have been perpetrated by the Sandinista army. Even if the CIA-*contras* were responsible, he argues, it is entirely the Sandinistas' fault for provoking them, in the first place.

This persistent denial has, understandably, caused great consternation among his flock: "The cardinal's claim not to know has not gone down well even with some of his senior clergymen in the exposed areas. 'Tell him to come to my parish,' said one of these, 'and help me bury the dead.'" <sup>138</sup>

So far, Obando has declined that and all similar offers. His first public act after being elevated to cardinal was to celebrate a mass for the CIA-*contras* — in Miami.



Kim Esterberg

Nearly 10,000 Nicaraguan children have lost at least one parent to CIA-*contra* violence; the U.S. equivalent would be 686,000. Cardinal Obando prefers either to ignore *contra* brutality or blame it on the government.

In June of 1984, a priest closely associated with the cardinal was found to be involved in a plot with anti-government union and political figures to establish an internal front of the CIA-*contra* war. The plotters were planning to sabotage buses, factories, utilities and other economic targets, using explosives supplied by the CIA. There were also plans to assassinate government leaders.

The priest, Luis Amado Peña, told his associates, "God wants that it not be 'bla bla bla'. Here, what's needed is four bullets in one of those sons of bitches. Believe me, there will be more deaths of certain of those fuck-ups, and with two or three of those deaths I will set out to sow horror."

It is known that Father Peña said and did these things, because his activities were captured on video tape, which also recorded his stated intention to terrorize the civilian population with high explosives and showed him delivering a suitcase of explosives to a co-conspirator.

After the major conspirators were arrested, the priest was turned over to the custody of Obando, who immediately allowed Peña to return to his parish. The cardinal then denounced the affair as part of "an enormous conspiracy" against the Church and declared that the video tape was doctored. The government offered to turn the tape over to Obando for professional analysis; but he declined, choosing instead to resume his charges of "ongoing persecution" by the Sandinistas, and these were of course reverently disseminated by the world press.<sup>139</sup>

Obando himself was never directly implicated in the Peña conspiracy, and nothing quite like it has recurred since. But there has been no diminution of the cardinal's devotion to the CIA-*contras*. "I do not object to being identified with the people who have taken up arms," quoth Obando.

## Selective pacifism

One of Obando's major themes is that the military draft is evil, since it violates the commandment not to kill and derives from "the absolute dictatorship of a political party" (some-

thing that the Reaganites might want to investigate in the U.S.). The anti-draft campaign has been hammered home relentlessly by Radio Catolica and the church press. An estimated 20% of draft-age youth has left the country to avoid conscription, and the cardinal can take a share of credit for that.

Again, there is no mention of *contra* violence, except to lay it all at the feet of the Sandinistas. That perception may explain why priests associated with Obando refuse to say funeral masses for soldiers and their families. On one occasion, eight mothers had been massacred by the CIA-*contras*, as they traveled to visit their sons at an army base. Their funeral was a major event in Leon, but no bishop attended and the use of the cathedral was denied "for those kinds of funerals".<sup>140</sup> Another time, an Obandoite greeted a peace march by locking his church and deploying barbed wire around it.

At least two of the cardinal's associates have lobbied in the U.S. for military support to the CIA-*contras*. Antonio Vega, President of the Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference, worked the lecture circuit of Washington in 1986, assuring several gatherings of right-wingers that "the great dilemma of the Nicaraguan church is how to get military support to free people instead of oppressing them, as is happening now."<sup>141</sup>

The bishop's performance came as no surprise to the people of his diocese, 4000 of whom had earlier signed an extremely unusual petition to the Vatican for his removal. They were outraged by his open support of the CIA-*contras* and his indifference to their victims. Vega is the spiritual leader who, when asked why he would not denounce the murder of a nine-year-old girl, replied, "It is worse to kill the soul than the body."<sup>142</sup>

After the U.S. Congress declared unofficial war on Nicaragua in the summer of 1986, by voting \$100 million for the CIA-*contras* as Bishop Vega had urged, he was barred from re-entering the country. Obando's press secretary, who had toured the European circuit on much the same mission, joined Vega in exile.

Naturally, the pope and his man in Managua were much offended by this "religious repression", and did not hesitate

to tell the world about it. Here was yet another demonstration of the Sandinistas' totalitarian tendencies.

The ceaseless invocation of that message has been the cardinal's principle duty in the CIA's destabilization campaign, and he has carried it out faithfully. Of all sources of internal opposition, the church hierarchy has undoubtedly caused the most trouble for the government. Its fulminations against the revolution have sanctified the resentments of the elite, while sowing suspicion of the Sandinistas among the churchly poor.

It is the Sandinistas' public image abroad that has probably suffered most. Outside of Latin America, there is little in the experience of most journalists and their audiences to prepare them for someone like Obando. His readiness to use the accumulated majesty of his office to advance a blatantly dishonest political agenda, his appalling lack of intellectual integrity, his identification with the interests of the elite and corresponding indifference to the suffering of the poor, and his moral blindness to the depravity of the CIA-*contras* — all go largely unremarked. What the world is made to see is a beleaguered church suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous commies.

The good cardinal required no prodding from the U.S. to conduct his crusade; the popular church and its role in the revolution constituted threat enough. But there is a transparent alliance, and it has been a profitable one for both parties. The cardinal gets lots of money and powerful friends; the Reaganites get a wickedly effective propaganda gimmick, i.e., "religious persecution", with blessings for the *contras* thrown in.

It is not the first time that the interests of U.S. foreign policy and Holy Mother Church have converged. Many of the Nazi war criminals spirited out of Europe by the U.S. after World War II made their journeys to Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Detroit, etc., on the strength of Vatican passports.

For years, Cardinal Spellman of New York was the principal agent of CIA-Vatican policy in Latin America. He was great pals with Somoza, Trujillo and other custodians of U.S. influence, all strong supporters of the traditional church. The Chilean hierarchy worked closely with the CIA in its tragically successful campaign against the Allende government.<sup>143</sup>



*“A belligerent group of priests, religious, nuns and lay people of diverse nationalities, insisting that they belong to the Catholic Church, in reality, by their acts, work actively to undermine the unity of the same Church, collaborating in the destruction of the foundations on which rests unity in the faith and in the body of Christ.”*

— Cardinal Miguel Obando

*“As a twentieth-century revolution, we are definitely influenced by Marxist thought.... But we have been equally or more influenced by Christian thought. In Latin America the Church had been for so long identified with the powers that be, with an established order that was not a Christian established order. We had been preaching resignation and helping the rich to continue exploiting, telling the people that later they would be rewarded if they accepted this exploitation.... If the attitudes of certain bishops don't change, we Christians will one day find ourselves in the painful position of asking ourselves: Can we celebrate the Eucharist in communion with those who use their religious influence against our people?”*

— Miguel D'Escoto, Catholic priest and Foreign Minister<sup>144</sup>

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After the removal of the Dominican Republic's elected government by a U.S. invasion in 1965, Cardinal Spellman dispatched a group of young priests to justify the intervention as God's work, and to preach against the evils of communism. But they found the natives in a resentful and unreceptive mood, and abandoned the missionary project. One of them was a Nicaraguan of the Maryknoll order — Miguel D'Escoto, who is now serving his country as its Foreign Minister.

## **Bad news**

All lines of the pro-contra opposition converge at the offices of *La Prensa*, the daily newspaper that played such a crucial role in the overthrow of Somoza. It is now dedicated to the overthrow of the Sandinistas.

According to a report by a delegation of U.S. lawyers, “The most striking feature of the pro-*contra* opposition is the extent

to which it is tied together by U.S. financing and supervision.... Officials from the U.S. Embassy regularly attend editorial board meetings at *La Prensa*, along with representatives of COSEP, the Catholic hierarchy, and the *Coordinadora*." According to a former CIA official, *La Prensa* was purchased by one of the agency's Panamanian dummy corporations in 1986.<sup>145</sup>

It is a seemingly odd outcome for the newspaper of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, whose assassination in 1978 had triggered the mass uprising which fueled the revolution (see page 32). The fate of *La Prensa* is a result of sharp political divisions among the surviving members of the Chamorro family. By 1980, the conflict was reflected in the pages of the newspaper: The columns ostensibly devoted to news started running explicit and implicit condemnations of the revolution, while the editorials were full of praise for such government initiatives as the literacy crusade and public health services.

The dispute was resolved by mass resignations in April of 1980. The paper's logo and equipment ended up in the hands of conservative family members affiliated with COSEP. But over 80% of the staff joined the martyred Pedro's brother, Xavier, in establishing *El Nuevo Diario* ("The New Daily").

"It was a new paper with a new name," says Xavier Chamorro, "but it was really *La Prensa* continuing.... It reopened on May 19th under the name *EL Nuevo Diario*."<sup>146</sup>

The faction which retained the venerable logo is having none of that, however. Pedro's widow, Violetta, dismisses the upstart rival of her brother-in-law: "Journalists. They come and go. It is like when somebody dies, there is always someone else to take his place. It changes nothing."<sup>147</sup>

Certainly that is the presumption of the Reaganites and the bulk of the world press. For them, the name's the thing, conferring respectability on the current management of *La Prensa* by nominal descent from the martyred patriarch. It doesn't seem to matter that practically all the people who worked with Pedro have taken their typewriters and line gauges elsewhere; they might as well be dead, as per Violetta Chamorro's dismissive comment.

It is an important issue in the battle for world public opinion. With pro-*contra* forces in possession of the country's most respected journalistic symbol, the Sandinistas confronted a predicament similar to that created by the Catholic hierarchy. They could either tolerate a steady ideological onslaught with uncertain consequences, or interfere with *La Prensa's* publication and thereby guarantee the indignation of the uncomprehending world outside. In practice, they have tended to leap back and forth between both horns of the dilemma, satisfying the requirements of the Reaganites in either case.

That the CIA had landed at *La Prensa* became apparent after it resumed publishing with a pro-*contra* staff. The front page was transformed into a carbon copy of Chile's *El Mercurio*, which had been used to great effect in the overthrow of the Allende government ten years before. As with *El Mercurio*, page design and content were manipulated to convey a general impression of social chaos and impending doom, often with the use of religious symbols. Tableaux emphasizing the cross and the Virgin Mary began to appear regularly on the front page.

### The Blessed Capitalist

One day, the Blessed Virgin presented herself to a humble shepherd and a remarkably well-placed *La Prensa* reporter near the village of Cuapa. Speaking to the shepherd (dubbed "Bernardo" in apparent homage to Bernadette of Lourdes), she discoursed implicitly on the evils of Marxism: "According to the CIA's newspaper, the Virgin was not happy with current affairs in Nicaragua".<sup>148</sup>

Since then, Cardinal Obando has faithfully included Cuapa on his itinerary for visiting dignitaries, and it has become a popular destination for pilgrims seeking deliverance from Sandinista oppression.

There were the usual omens of disaster — pictures of dead cattle, rumors of disease-ridden livestock imported from Cuba, the births of malformed infants, "Astrologer predicts 1982 will be a year of Great Turmoil" — that sort of thing.

A 1982 study by a Jesuit research institute summarized the very evident goals of *La Prensa*: to create a sense of crisis; depict government programs as threats to private property, religion and the family; accentuate divisions between the government and the pro-*contra* opposition; characterize the army as a repressive instrument of the Sandinistas, and the pro-*contra* opposition as the democratic civilian alternative.

In an analysis of 18 major news stories during an ordinary six-day period, the Jesuits' study concluded that the articles covered only four actual events in Nicaragua, while ignoring or trivializing such as these: the Honduran Minister of the Interior refutes accusations that Sandinista soldiers had killed 200 Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras; France sells defensive military equipment to Nicaragua; a major policy speech by Nicaragua's foreign minister; a conference on innovations developed by Nicaraguan workers during the preceding year.<sup>149</sup>

Even the *National Geographic*, which is not usually regarded as a radical rag, was taken aback by *La Prensa's* manic belligerence: "The government of heaven would find it difficult to coexist with *La Prensa*, which is not only pugnacious but selectively edited as well (and has received \$100,000 in U.S. government funds). A reader would hardly know that there is fighting in Nicaragua. It likes stories about Soviet troops fighting in Afghanistan and alcoholism in the USSR."<sup>150</sup> Adds *Newsweek*, "On occasion, U.S. embassy bulletins of events were printed verbatim without attribution."<sup>151</sup>

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*"The government must act, obviously; and since the Sandinista government is not stupid, it has taken the obvious steps. The war must be won. Therefore the government enforces a military draft. Labor productivity must rise. Therefore the government squeezes the workers. Profitable sectors of the economy must be encouraged. Therefore the government grants as many favors as it can bear to the big capitalist cotton and coffee farmers. A government that enforces a draft, squeezes the workers, favors the capitalists, and does all this in the name of socialism, so that workers and capitalists both feel betrayed — such a government is bound for trouble."*

— Paul Berman, *Mother Jones*, December 1986

In addition to the U.S. cash mentioned in the *Geographic* article, *La Prensa* has received funding from AMERICARES, a right-wing organization that has donated several million dollars to the CIA-contras. Most of AMERICARES' sponsors are also members of the Knights of Malta, a fellowship of influential U.S. Catholics with close ties to the CIA. They have been financing the activities of Cardinal Obando, as well.

### Voice of the CIA

The connection between the CIA-contras and *La Prensa* is so obvious that their representatives don't even bother to deny it anymore. Several *La Prensa* staffers have already made the easy transition from internal propaganda work to CIA functionary based in Honduras, Costa Rica or Miami. *La Prensa's* editor told a delegation of U.S. lawyers in 1985 that "he supports the *contras* and would welcome a *contra* victory. It is difficult to imagine any country permitting this type of advocacy, by the editor of a major daily newspaper, at a time when the armed forces of one's own country are under attack by a foreign-backed army."<sup>152</sup>

But the Sandinistas did permit such advocacy, and more — until the summer of 1986, when the U.S. Congress approved \$100 million in open military financing of the CIA-contras. Until then, it had contented itself with censorship of stories with potentially harmful economic and/or military repercussions. The censorship began after the CIA's war began to heat up in early 1982, and applied to all newspapers, including *El Nuevo Diario* and the government's own *Barricada*.

It is not entirely clear why *La Prensa* was shut down, since the government should have been able to achieve its purposes with expanded censorship. Probably it was a combination of frustration, pique, and deference to growing outrage among supporters of the revolution, of which there are a great many.

Whatever the motive, it had the effect of nullifying much international goodwill toward Nicaragua. Nothing has tarnished the image of the Sandinistas abroad more than the closing of *La Prensa* and the banishment of the two pro-*contra*

clergymen, which occurred at the same time. In both cases, condemnation proceeded smugly from an inability or unwillingness to comprehend the severity of the provocations or the cumulative effects of a grotesquely unequal war of attrition.

### **Native resentments**

The CIA has invested many millions of dollars in the study of ethnic minorities. It has nothing to do with anthropology, and everything to do with destabilization.

As the United States' own history demonstrates, indigenous people are often victims of gross abuse. Such mistreatment deposits layers of resentment which can be dredged up on appropriate occasions for the greater glory of U.S. foreign policy.

The Hmong of Vietnam, the Meos of Laos, and the Kurds of Iraq are but three of the minorities that have been armed and trained by the CIA, then thrust into battle against their national governments. In every case, they have been abandoned to reprisal and neglect after their usefulness has expired.

In Nicaragua, the dubious and transitory blessings of U.S. alliance have fallen on the "Miskitos", the label generally applied to the Miskito, Sumu and Rama Indians of the Atlantic Coast region. A remote and roadless area, it was until recently more accessible from New Orleans than from Managua.

The history of the Miskitos, who comprise less than half of the regional and only three percent of the national population, includes a lengthy association with the British and a corresponding dislike of the "Spaniards" of the Pacific region. Both the Somoza dynasty and the revolution that overthrew it were projects of the Spanish-speaking majority, which has tended to regard the Miskitos with ethnocentric contempt.

This history of mutual isolation and distrust set up an inevitable tension between indigenous groups and the predominately Spanish-speaking Sandinistas. The insurrection against Somoza had little impact on the Atlantic region; in some of the more remote areas, it had gone virtually unnoticed. When FSLN officials began to arrive in late 1979, full

of revolutionary zeal and naively confident of incorporating the Miskitos into “the process”, they were met with something less than wild enthusiasm. The slogans, banners and patriotic ditties — all in Spanish — which had aroused so much passion in the Pacific region, tended here to accentuate the prevailing climate of alienation from Managua.

Mistrust soon grew into suspicion, when documents left behind by Somoza revealed that the ranks of *La Guardia Nacional* had included some 3000 Miskitos, a figure vastly out of proportion to their share of the population. It also emerged that the Miskitos’ most charismatic leader, Steadman Fagoth, had been a Somoza spy for years.

Giving these revelations added punch was the assumption that the remote and sparsely populated Atlantic region would be a likely target of the anticipated CIA counter-revolution; it was the nation’s Achilles heel. Thus, the Sandinistas began to look upon the Miskitos as potential enemies, and acted accordingly. As far as the CIA was concerned, the situation was perfect.

Opportunity presented itself in 1981, when the government briefly jailed Fagoth and other Miskito leaders on suspicion of counter-revolutionary activities. That was followed by a nasty skirmish between some Miskitos and

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*“I have been killing for the past seven years. There’s nothing I like better. If I could, I’d kill several people a day. ”*

— *Miskito contra leader*<sup>153</sup>

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an army patrol. There were a few deaths and casualties on both sides, but the numbers and circumstances were soon magnified by rumor into a dreadful massacre.

Tried-and-true methods were employed to convince the world that the Sandinistas had embarked on a policy of “genocide”. For instance, a gruesome photo of piled bodies being consumed by flames somehow found its way into a leading French newspaper, and was then widely reproduced by the world press. By the time the French “source” admitted that the photo actually depicted a Red Cross operation from the Somoza era, the powerful image had already been burned into millions of minds around the world.

Meanwhile, Steadman Fagoth had joined the CIA in neighboring Honduras, taking 3000 young men with him. Their ultimate plan was to take over the Atlantic region, expel all the *mestizos* and other non-Indians, and establish an independent state with Fagoth at its head.

Some of Fagoth's recruits were trained as frogmen and demolition experts; they would eventually launch a few ineffectual jabs at economic targets along the coast. Others began to attack settlements along the border between Honduras and Nicaragua.

### **"Indians killing Indians"**

A native minister of the region's leading Protestant denomination described what happened next: "They started to carry out sabotage actions, assassinations of Indians by Indians, kidnappings of Indians by Indians — simply because they were indigenous teachers, simply because they were indigenous health workers, simply because they were indigenous agricultural technicians. In December 1981... they killed approximately 60 persons, indigenous soldiers and civilians."<sup>154</sup>

The government responded to the escalating attacks by relocating civilians from the war zone to new housing further south. The implementation of the move was abrupt and heavy-handed, causing further resentment and providing another golden opportunity for anti-Sandinista propaganda.

The world press was once again full of stories about government brutality, and the Miskito population was incited to take up arms against the monsters from Managua. "Radio broadcasts and leaflets from Honduras told the Miskitos that the Communists were coming to bury them alive, prohibit their religion and language, steal their land and send their children to Russia. Numerous Miskito villagers expressed a fear, implanted by the counter-revolutionaries, that the Sandinistas' liquid polio vaccine would make them sterile. It was even said to be a potion containing the urine of Fidel Castro."<sup>155</sup>

Those who failed to co-operate were urged to reconsider: "Fagoth tortured and killed young Miskito men in the refugee



camps when they refused to join Misura [Fagoth's organization]. Indeed, by 1983 press reports began surfacing that Misura was using force to conscript Miskito refugees. Similarly, officials at the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in Honduras made private declarations that Misura was the greatest security problem faced by refugees.<sup>156</sup>

Fagoth has chosen to conduct his crusade from Miami, having been expelled from Honduras after attempting to assassinate his colleagues, among other indelicacies. His remaining followers have been conducting a fitful guerilla campaign that reached its height during 1982-85. They have managed to rape, torture and murder a large number of Indians, but are further from their goal of establishing an independent territory than when they started.

This is due partly to the animosity that their brutal conduct has aroused, and partly to the increasing sophistication of the Sandinistas. Acknowledging their initial mistakes, they have worked steadily to improve communication and increase mutual trust. The recent passage of a new constitution with guarantees of regional autonomy was a major step toward reconciliation. Refugees are streaming back from Honduras at an accelerating pace, and entire units of Miskito *contras* have accepted amnesty.

By the end of 1987, the CIA was beginning to phase out this theater of its multifaceted war. But it has served its purpose: An image of the Sandinistas as genocidal brutes has been indelibly etched in millions of memories around the world, and scarce Nicaraguan resources have been diverted to the defense of the Atlantic region.

\* \* \*

As with all wars, the total damage of the CIA-*contra* assault is difficult to calculate. But as one point of comparison: The number of Nicaraguans killed in just seven years of conflict is proportionally greater than the combined total of U.S. citizens killed in World Wars I & II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. This, from what the Reaganites characterize as a "low-intensity conflict".

## Selected Costs of the War: 1980-1987

(In parentheses: U.S. equivalents)

### Deaths

Civilians	3,218
Nicaraguan army	2,496
CIA-contras	16,781
<b>Total</b>	<b>= 22,495</b>
	<b>(1,536,000)</b>

### Casualties

Civilians, wounded and kidnapped	7,255
Nicaraguan army	7,507
CIA-contras	5,919
<b>Total</b>	<b>= 20,681</b>
	<b>(1,418,112)</b>

**Displaced civilians**                      **250,000 (17,150,000)**

### Economic losses

Destruction of property	\$144.5 million
Production losses	\$531.5 million
Losses due to embargo	\$187.8 million
Blocked loans	\$364.9 million
Multiplier effects	\$2,371.3 million
<b>Total</b>	<b>= \$3.6 billion</b>
	<b>(\$6.1 trillion)</b>

Source: Central American Historical Institute, Managua

NOTE: All figures are approximate, and do not begin to provide a complete accounting of the devastation.