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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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Second edition published 2015 by
Nordic News Network
Lidingö, Sweden
www.nnn.se

ISBN 978-91-637-3804-3

First edition published 1988 by
Sea Otter Press
Bainbridge Island, Washington, USA
ISBN 0-929004-01-9

U.S. Library of Congress Catalogue Data

Burke, Al. Misery in the name of freedom.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. United States—Foreign relations—Nicaragua.
2. Nicaragua—Foreign relations—United States.

I. Title.

E183.8.NSB87 1988 327.7307285—dc19 88-6740

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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

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.¹

“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

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.

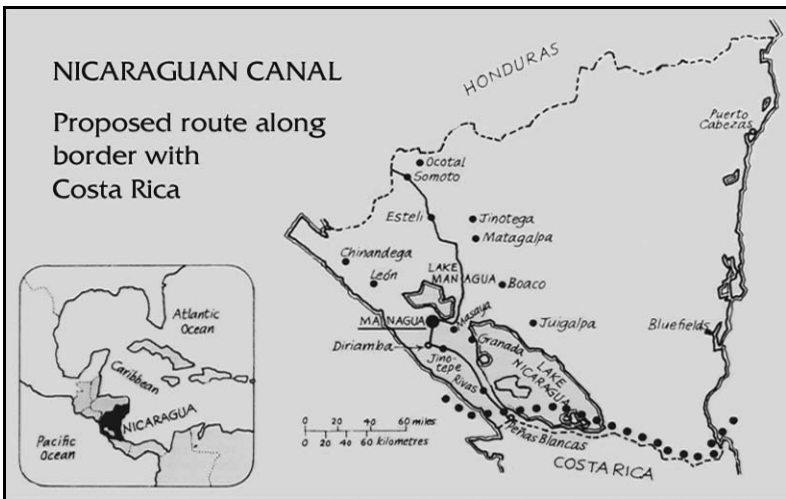
But Nicaragua is rich in natural resources — especially lumber, precious metals, and prime agricultural land — and these began to attract large amounts of investment capital from the U.S.

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."²

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."³

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."⁴

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

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."⁵

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!"⁶

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

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!”⁷

Proxy governments

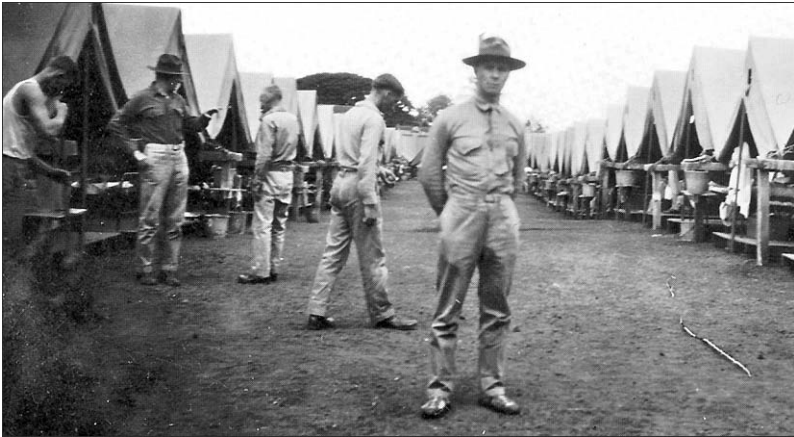
Not surprisingly, there soon arose a general suspicion that the U.S. proxy government had something other than the nation’s best interests at heart. In 1910 the U.S. Ambassador in Managua would cable his superiors that, “The natural sentiment of an overwhelming majority of Nicaraguans is antagonistic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

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."⁹

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.

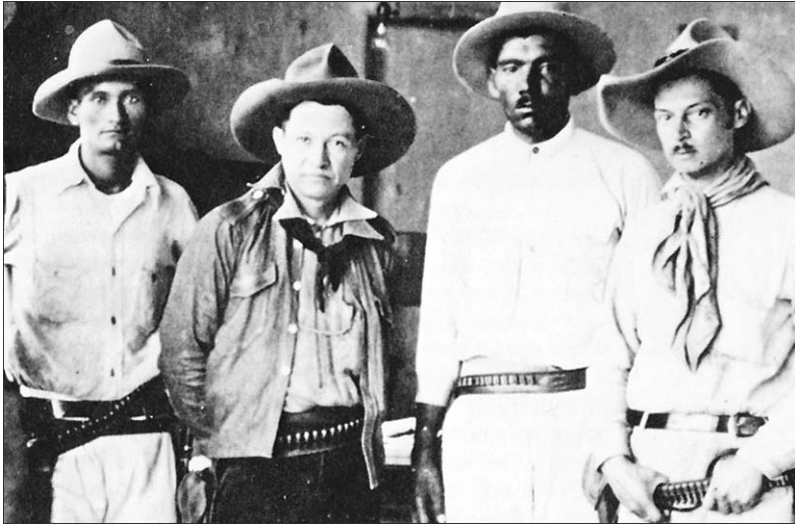
The U.S. solution to the commotion in Nicaragua was to trot Adolfo Diaz out of retirement and sit him in the president's chair once again. This was not a popular decision, and the revolt sputtered on. But by July of 1927, all save one of the opposition generals had been intimidated and or bribed into 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.”¹⁰



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'."¹¹

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.

"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".

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."¹²

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

(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.¹³

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”.¹⁴

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

Who are we?

We are tigers!

What do tigers eat?

Blood!

Whose blood?

The blood of the people!

— *Marching chant of
La Guardia Nacional*

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".¹⁵

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."¹⁶

"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.”¹⁷

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.”¹⁸

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."¹⁹

“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”.

“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.

Sandinó'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".²⁰

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*²¹

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.

“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.

*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*

(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*²²

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."²³

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.”²⁴

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 systematically 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.”²⁵

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 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".²⁶ 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."²⁷

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.²⁸

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.”²⁹

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.³⁰ 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."³¹

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?"³²

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."³³

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.

"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 Ortega³⁴

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.”³⁵

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.³⁶

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.³⁷



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.”³⁸

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.

“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 owner³⁹

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.⁴⁰ 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."⁴¹

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*⁴⁴

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.⁴²

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.”⁴³

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 campaign⁴⁵

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."⁴⁶

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."⁴⁷

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".⁴⁸

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."⁴⁹

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."⁵⁰

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

"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

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.⁵¹

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."⁵²

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."⁵³

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.⁵⁴

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.”⁵⁵

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."⁵⁶

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."⁵⁷

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.

"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 guard⁵⁸

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.”⁵⁹

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

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."⁶⁰

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."⁶¹



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.⁶²

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.⁶³

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".⁶⁴ 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."⁶⁵

"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.”⁶⁶

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!”⁶⁷

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.”⁶⁸

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".⁶⁹

(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

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."

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."⁷⁰

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.⁷¹

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."⁷²

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*

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”.⁷³

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."⁷⁴

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.

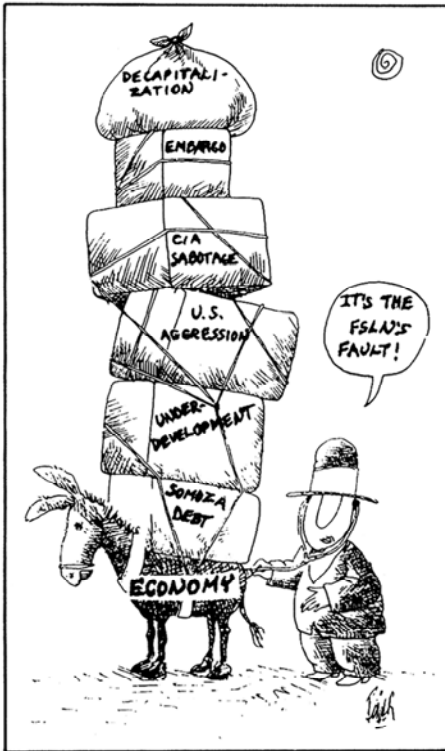
But it is an analysis that omits a great deal. It does not explain, for instance, why it took four years for Sandinista "mismanagement" to stifle progress. In 1979 the economy was in a severe state of shock, but the FSLN managed to get it on its feet again with very little help. For revolutionary Nicaragua 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."⁷⁵



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?”⁷⁶

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.”⁷⁷

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.

“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 Hartmann⁷⁸

“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.”⁷⁹

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.”⁸⁰

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."⁸¹

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."⁸²

(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".⁸³

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."⁸⁴

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."⁸⁵

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."⁸⁶

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."⁸⁷

(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.

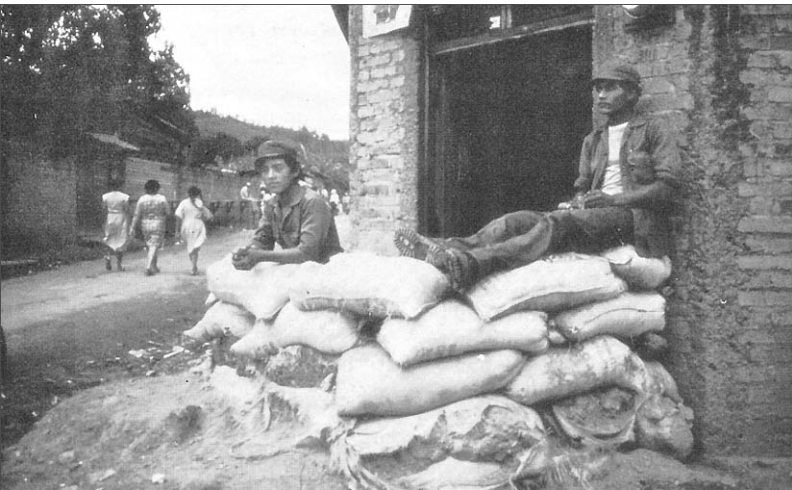
The first target was the remote and poorly defended north-east region on the Atlantic Coast, populated by indigenous peoples with historic animosity toward the majority "Spaniards" of the Pacific region. But that effort failed to do much more than deepen the distrust between natives and Sandinistas. 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."⁸⁸ 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

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”.⁸⁹

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.”⁹⁰

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.⁹¹ 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.⁹²

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."⁹³

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.⁹⁴

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”.⁹⁵

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

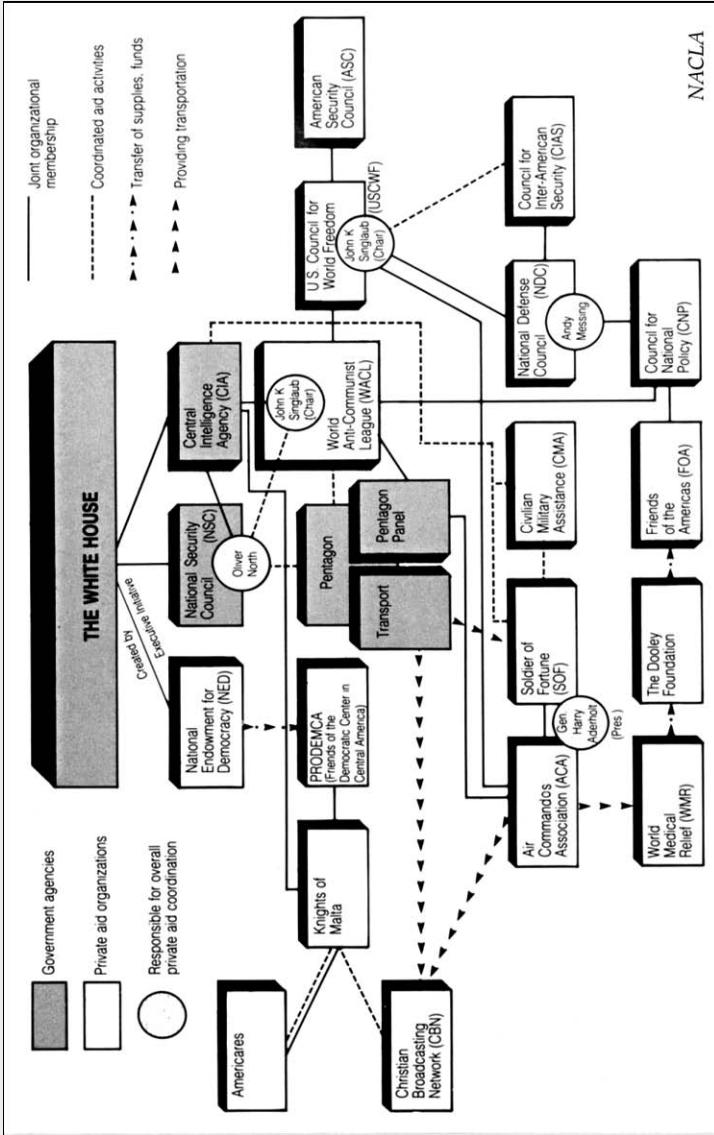
therefore become prudent — and considerate toward Congress — for the CIA to conduct its destructive activities “off the books”.

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.”⁹⁶ 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.”⁹⁷

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.”⁹⁸

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.

"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 mercenaries⁹⁹

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."¹⁰⁰

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."¹⁰¹

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."¹⁰²

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*.¹⁰³

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*.¹⁰⁴

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 1980.¹⁰⁵

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*.¹⁰⁶

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."¹⁰⁷

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 1980.¹⁰⁸

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.

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."¹⁰⁹

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

"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”.¹¹⁰

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 officer¹¹¹

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.”¹¹²

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.”¹¹³

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.¹¹⁴

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.¹¹⁵

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.¹¹⁶

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.¹¹⁷

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.¹¹⁸ 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*¹¹⁹

“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*¹²⁰

“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*¹²¹

“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.¹²⁴

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*¹²²

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.¹²³

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

“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*

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.¹²⁵

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.

“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."¹²⁶

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.

“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

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.”¹²⁷

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."¹²⁸

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.¹²⁹ (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

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

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.

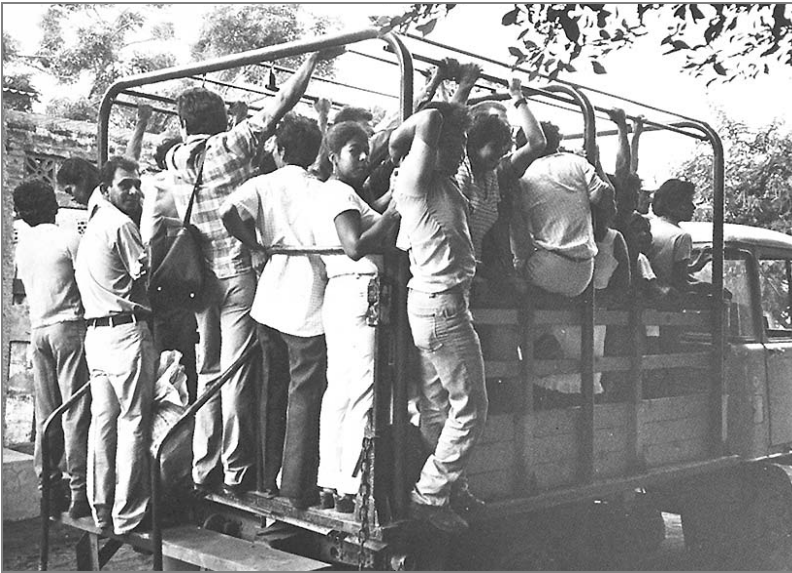
The business sector was a logical destination for many of those CIA dollars, but not everyone has been willing to play. About a third of the business community has been sympathetic and co-operative toward the revolution, another third skeptical and restrained.

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.¹³¹ 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.¹³²

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)

"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 member¹³³

“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.”¹³⁴

(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."¹³⁵

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.¹³⁶

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."¹³⁷

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.'" ¹³⁸

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.¹³⁹

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".¹⁴⁰ 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."¹⁴¹

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."¹⁴²

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.¹⁴³

“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 Minister¹⁴⁴

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 1986.¹⁴⁵

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*."¹⁴⁶

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."¹⁴⁷

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".¹⁴⁸

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.¹⁴⁹

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."¹⁵⁰ Adds *Newsweek*, "On occasion, U.S. embassy bulletins of events were printed verbatim without attribution."¹⁵¹

"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."¹⁵²

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

“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 leader¹⁵³

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."¹⁵⁴

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."¹⁵⁵

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.¹⁵⁶

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
Total	= 22,495
	(1,536,000)

Casualties

Civilians, wounded and kidnapped	7,255
Nicaraguan army	7,507
CIA-contras	5,919
Total	= 20,681
	(1,418,112)

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
Total	= \$3.6 billion
	(\$6.1 trillion)

Source: Central American Historical Institute, Managua

NOTE: All figures are approximate, and do not begin to provide a complete accounting of the devastation.

PACKAGING THE ACTIVITY

BY 1985 IT WAS COMMON KNOWLEDGE in the United States that Nicaragua was suffering under the yoke of a Marxist-Leninist tyranny which, among other depravities, had: been “exporting revolution” to neighboring democracies; betrayed the revolution against Somoza by breaking a solemn promise to install democracy; arbitrarily suppressed freedom of religion and the press; committed massive human rights abuses against its citizens; and generally assumed the fearful aspect of a “totalitarian dungeon”, as one would expect of a Soviet-Cuban vassal.

None of which was true. But no matter: These and related themes were twisted into the dominant frame of reference within which to view Nicaragua; it was done by the same folks who brought forth the Reagan administration.

That enterprise operates according to the logic of the sales campaign, exactly like those employed to sell soap, cigarettes, feature films and presidential candidates. “Ronald Reagan is governing America by a new strategic doctrine — the permanent campaign. He is applying to the White House the techniques be employed in getting there. Making more effective use of media and market research than any previous president, he has brought into the White House the most sophisticated team of pollsters, media masters and tacticians ever to work there.”¹⁵⁷

Staging and sequencing

That formidable array of marketing expertise was early brought to bear on Central America, when opposition to administration policy in the region began to grow in Congress and among the U.S. general public.

While the assault on Nicaragua was still secret, the White House had turned its first visible attention to the socialist insurgency in El Salvador, with discouraging results. The right-wing government tottered on the verge of collapse, and many in the United States became anxious about the possibility of the Reaganites mirroring the country in another protracted military adventure — that darn post-Vietnam syndrome again.

“What was wrong with El Salvador was the packaging of the activity, in terms of policy and presentation to the public,” concluded a key manipulator in the White House. “It wasn’t well-staged or sequenced.... The whole issue of running the Presidency in the modern age is control of the agenda. We deal with what ought to be the buildup of things six to nine months out. It’s a process question.”¹⁵⁸

The answer was a propaganda campaign, at home and abroad, of staggering proportions and mendacity. It would be aimed almost entirely at Nicaragua, and perform several inter-related functions:

- engineer consent to military intervention by emphasizing the threat of communist expansion in the region
- cover up the failure of administration policy in El Salvador, blaming it on subversion by Russia and Cuba via Nicaragua
- divert attention from the extraordinary brutality of the U.S.-sponsored regimes in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras
- elicit support for the CIA-*contras*
- neutralize opposition to the *contras* while at the same time making it politically impossible to approve, or even condone, the Sandinistas.

In peddling these deceptions, the administration has resorted to the classic Big Lie technique of a few simple ideas, endlessly repeated to the accents of loaded phrases such as “Marxist-Leninist... totalitarian dungeon... communist beach-head”. The similarity of this procedure to the methods of Josef Goebbels in Nazi Germany, and to the nightmare world of

George Orwell's *1984*, has been noted by many — including the human rights organization, Americas Watch, which has observed that a typical State Department attack on Nicaragua “would do justice to Orwell's Ministry of Truth”.¹⁵⁹

Bully's pulpit

Well before the advent of the TV satellite, Teddy Roosevelt had exulted in the “bully pulpit” of the U.S. presidency. Now, that office is one of the most powerful indoctrination facilities on earth, as a result of its almost unlimited access to national and international news media. Indeed, the richest prize of the presidency is its mediated power to define reality for a large segment of the nation's populace, and for those abroad who look to the U.S. for guidance.

That power to define is especially pronounced with regard to international events, about which relatively few U.S. citizens know very much and even fewer seem to care. The United States is the “developed” country with the lowest rate of foreign language facility, where a significant portion of college students locate “Africa” in the area of the globe that cartographers try to reserve for Canada, and 80-90 percent of the citizenry is “on an extended vacation from citizenship”.¹⁶⁰

In this context of ignorance and neglect, it is not terribly difficult for a U.S. president to influence the vague and often confused notions that pass for common knowledge. As noted above, the Reagan administration has invested heavily in the

“Corruption of language was central to Orwell's terrifying vision in 1984. President Reagan on the subject of Nicaragua sounds more and more these days like something from the pages of Orwell. His disregard for facts has become hallucinatory. His rhetoric rings with hate. ‘Somoza was bad’, he said the other night, but ‘the Sandinistas are infinitely, worse’. There are no words adequate to convey the insult that statement does to history and to the victims of 40 years of Somoza pillage. “

— Anthony Lewis¹⁶¹

manipulation of public opinion. For that purpose, it can draw on the enormous propaganda resources at its disposal, of which the foremost are: the White House staff, the State Department, the CIA and, most disturbingly, the mainstream press.

Official stories

The White House and the State Department have been deeply involved in the propaganda business for decades. Much of that business is handled directly, as with the mountains of slick publications cranked out by the State Department on nearly every aspect of U.S. foreign policy. Given the source and its dishonorable history, this stuff tends to arouse scepticism; it is of interest primarily to true believers in search of an "authoritative" citation for some right-wing diatribe.

Far more potent is the constant stream of messages conveyed through the legitimating offices of the "free and independent press". Since they are privately owned and often critical of some aspects of government policy and conduct, news media are generally regarded as more credible sources of information than are official pronouncements.

Consequently, presidential image-makers devote most of their energies to shaping the headlines and TV images that influence public opinion. In doing so, they pay meticulous attention to the mechanics of news-making; White House press officers frequently know as much about deadlines and the quirks of editors as do the reporters through whom the news is initially filtered.

The news that goes out from the executive branch is carefully attuned to the current mood of the White House, and frequently contradicts more even-handed reports of subordinate officials who fail to meet doctrinal standards. Again, Americas Watch:

"The misuse of human rights data has become pervasive in officials' statements to the press, in White House handouts on Nicaragua, in the annual Country Report on Nicaraguan human rights prepared by the State Department and, most notably, in the President's own remarks. When inconvenient, findings

of the U.S. Embassy in Managua have been ignored; the same is true of data gathered by independent sources.”¹⁶²

The Reaganite line on Nicaragua has been marketed in numerous presidential speeches and by numerous government agencies, including two especially created for that purpose. Operating from the White House, the Outreach Working Group on Central America has concentrated on inflaming passions in the U.S. It has published a series of tortured “White House Digests” denouncing tyranny and the like, and for several years hosted weekly anti-Sandinista pep rallies:

“The speakers addressing those meetings make up a Who’s Who of the right.... Last April [1984], the evangelists who filled the room to hear a panel discussion of religious persecution in Nicaragua called out ‘Amen!’ after every anti-Sandinista pronouncement.”¹⁶³

Relch-speak

Somewhat less hysterical is the State Department’s Office of Public Diplomacy on Latin America and the Caribbean which has concentrated on influencing reporters, with considerable success. Its director, aptly named Otto Reich, has followed a

“Over the past 10 to 15 years, the presidents and their aides have been fine-tuning a press manipulation strategy that seldom fails in any momentous way. It is executed by teams of sophisticated media specialists who swarm through the White House.... There are spokesmen who give the impression of saying a lot while actually saying a little; pollsters whose fingers are constantly on the public pulse; image merchants who strive to design impressions that will convince the public it is getting what it wants; television experts who stage news events and turn popes and monarchs into presidential props; media monitors who maintain a continuous watch on the press, spot trends, and provide early warnings of trouble; ‘enforcers’ who use a variety of techniques to cow recalcitrant reporters and their sources.”

— Joseph C. Spear, *Presidents and the Press: The Nixon Legacy*

practice of releasing information which tends to confirm administrative conceptions while withholding any which does not. "To be less partisan," he has explained, "would be to do the job of the other guy."¹⁶⁴

A typical example of Reich's handiwork is a front-page *Washington Times* story about a reported massacre of 50-60 political prisoners by Sandinista troops. The article was based on a "classified U.S. government document", which turned out to have been a cable from an embassy official asking whether or not he should bother to investigate a single informant's unsubstantiated allusion to the alleged massacre.

Lifting a page from the CIA, Reich paid and otherwise encouraged various "experts" to submit anti-Sandinista articles for publication in the mainstream press. Naturally, the relationship between such authors and their State Department benefactor was never voluntarily disclosed, lest the experts' *bona fides* be called into question.

It was just such a Reichian scholar who persuaded the *Wall Street Journal* to print his alarming assessment of Nicaragua's Soviet-built helicopters as deadly offensive weapons that threatened the balance of power in Central America. That was news to the U.S. Defense Department, whose own experts have described Nicaragua's armaments as primarily defensive — a point of view somehow omitted from the *Journal* article.

A favorite device of administration propagandists is the carefully edited Damning Quotation. The State Department has repeatedly used the words of Tomas Borge to substantiate Nicaragua's aggressive designs on neighboring countries. In the U.S. version, Nicaragua's Minister of the Interior is made to say only that, "The revolution goes beyond our borders. Our revolution was always internationalist." Invariably omitted are the words that follow in the full quotation: "This does not mean that we export our revolution. It is sufficient that they follow our example."

By itself, each instance of this chicanery would probably have little lasting impact. It is the incessant repetition from so many different sources — including all those formally outside

the administration, but co-ordinated by it — which eventually produces the desired effect. Contradictory evidence is of no consequence; it is simply ignored and official doctrine is repeated once again, most often in a slightly louder voice.

Inexorably, U.S. public opinion is led to a conception of world events that mirrors the administration's. There may be some differences of opinion about appropriate responses, but seldom about fundamental definitions. Thus, the Reaganites have successfully demonized the Sandinistas, while masking the stench of the CIA-*contras* with such verbal deodorants as "freedom" and "democracy".

Unfathomable resources

While the State Department and the White House take care of the propaganda business at home, the CIA makes sure that the rest of the world gets a proper slant on things. Several former agents have indicated that at least one-third of CIA expenditures are dedicated to planting and manipulating information of every description. It is impossible to calculate the total investment in such activities, since the agency's expenditures are concealed under seemingly innocuous headings of several departmental budgets. Also, it derives income from the many profitable business fronts it operates worldwide, and receives cash payments from corporations seeking a little help from their friends.

Consequently, it is entirely possible that even the CIA's director does not fully comprehend its total budget and sources of income. But some hint of their scope emerged from congressional hearings in the mid-1970s.

Those hearings revealed that the CIA operated wire services to which over 30 U.S. newspapers subscribed. It also owned some 200 newspapers, magazines and book publishing companies. Hundreds of scholars were paid to incorporate agency viewpoints into their published works, including one Harvard professor who received \$105,000 for his book on the Middle East. Several hundred journalists, including some

very big names, were enlisted to write articles criticizing such infidels as Fidel Castro and Ho Chi Minh. A major conspirator was a *New York Times* reporter who recruited European journalists to extol the virtues of the neutron bomb.¹⁶⁵

Useful statements

Many other devices of a similar nature were exposed during the hearings. It seems that little has changed since then, although some duties are now farmed out to other agencies or to the "private sector" in the interest of prudent obscurity. An example of the latter is illustrated by a National Security Council document, "Plans to Provide the Facts to the International Community", concerning the 1984 elections in Nicaragua. It outlines a program in which European and Latin American journalists were urged to write editorials challenging the legitimacy of the elections, and U.S. labor leaders were instructed to solicit appropriate criticisms of the Sandinistas from their international brethren.

"We will approach significant and knowledgeable national leaders, in and out of government, to encourage public statements condemning the Nicaraguan elections as they are now set up. Useful statements should come from government officials, political party leaders... intellectuals, church and labor leaders."¹⁶⁶

As usual, many of these denunciations eventually returned home via the U.S. press, in an established pattern of complicity.

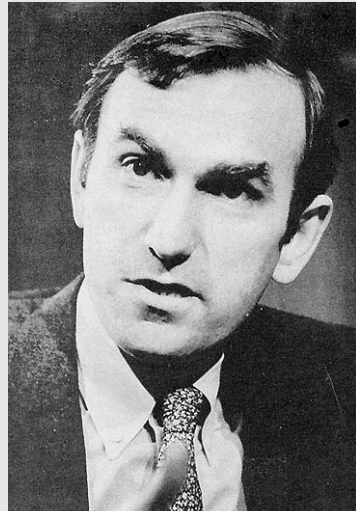
Another government agency spreading the White House word abroad is the United States Information Agency (USIA). Under the direction of an old Hollywood crony of Ronald Reagan, the USIA has lately been debased into a peddler of political dreck. It often works in tandem with the CIA on such projects as an anti-Sandinista horror film distributed via West German television, the U.S. Public Broadcasting System and other respectable outlets. Entitled "Nicaragua Was Our Home", the film purports to document the terrible abuse of Nicaragua's Miskito Indians by the Sandinistas. The thing was apparently slapped together with USIA funds by CAUSA,

the political arm of Rev. Moon's World Unification Church, which operates some of its aggressively anti-communist missions in Honduras.¹⁶⁷ The film is a typical CIA catalog of lies, half-truths and distortions, and has been exposed to millions of unsuspecting viewers, with no hint of its origins.

Despite such occasional successes, efforts to drum up fear and loathing of the Nicaraguan demons have not fared very

Minister of Propaganda

After the president, himself, the Reagan administration's most prolific and effective liar has been Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, designated "point man" on Nicaragua. Author of numerous broadsides in the mainstream media and a frequent presence on TV news programs, his viperous debating style has earned the admiration of right-wing ideologues.



Abrams' disregard of the truth finally strained even

the elastic standards of Congress in 1987, when he was barred from testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Latin America. That extremely rare sanction was applied only after Abrams had loftily acknowledged giving false testimony to Congress.

On one occasion, explained Abrams, he lied in order to preserve the privacy of the Sultan of Brunei, from whom he had extracted \$10 million with which to subvert congressional restrictions on funding of the CIA-contras.

well in Europe. Grassroots moral and financial support for the revolution remains strong, even in those few countries whose governments officially oppose the Sandinistas.

This doubtless has much to do with the fact that in most European nations, socialists either hold power or comprise the main opposition. Also, the press is less uniform in outlook than in the United States. Most journals are affiliated with political parties, and are disinclined to adopt parallel attitudes toward the projection of U.S. power. The typical consumer of news in this country would very likely be astonished to discover how routinely the United States is depicted overseas as an “empire” — and not an especially benevolent one, either.

Diverse perspectives

In fact, nothing more clearly illustrates the generally conformist nature of mainstream U.S. journalism than the rich diversity of perspectives available to European newspaper readers. A leading critic of the U.S. mainstream press notes that, “Every other developed country has a national press and a relatively unimportant local press. In those countries, the dozen or more national papers, headquartered at the national capital, are the only ones to carry serious political and economic views. They are available in every locality, and they compete with each other politically and economically. All readers have a choice of papers that cover their political views and social backgrounds.”¹⁶⁸

“For us to answer that it is not true about the [Soviet] missiles is to put ourselves on the defensive, because the Reagan administration makes us justify something we are not doing. And we know that this is interminable, because even if we deny it, no matter how much we deny it, within a week Shultz, Kirkpatrick, any of them will repeat that Nicaragua is willing to install nuclear missiles, and we will have to say once again that it is not true.”

— Nicaraguan Vice-President, Sergio Ramirez¹⁶⁹

The implications of this for reporting on events in Nicaragua are clear. For example: "The Nicaraguan elections and dialogue had a different effect in Europe, and specifically in the Socialist International, than they had here. We're dealing with alternative perceptions of reality. I was stunned by the extent to which social democratic opinion in Bonn, Amsterdam and London, also in France and Scandinavia, was buoyed by the elections.... We met with a group of German Social Democrats, including Schmidt's former finance minister, who are planning all sorts of things, from youth brigades in the event of an intervention, to ways of getting aid from socialist unions."¹⁷⁰

This suggests that the CIA will have to work a little harder to get its point across in Europe, and that the chief value of its efforts there to date consists of "blowback" to the U.S. That value can be quite substantial, however, as evidenced by the widespread credit granted to its "Miskito genocide" hoax.

Relentlessly one-sided

A rich diversity of journalistic perspectives is something that the CIA definitely does not have to worry about in Latin America generally, and in Central America particularly.

In Costa Rica, for example, the sole exceptions to a right-wing monopoly on news are two small weeklies, the English-language *Tico Times* and a university paper. Everything else is burning with an elitist terror that Costa Rica's poor might one day try to emulate their counterparts across the northern border.

Notes a U.S. observer, "It would be hard for North Americans to comprehend how relentlessly one-sided the Costa Rican newspapers are. When I lived in Costa Rica in 1985, I read continual accounts of alleged Sandinista incursions, bombings, and murders of Costa Ricans. To my knowledge, there was never a story about *contra* incursions, bombings, or murders committed in Nicaragua.... All the newspaper coverage of Nicaraguan-Costa Rican relations was designed to make the Sandinistas look like criminal psychopaths, with the Costa Ricans their defenseless victims."¹⁷¹

Apparently not satisfied with right-wing domination of the Latin American press, the CIA has taken extra pains to ensure that its message gets across. In Costa Rica, at least three leading editors and five other journalists have been paid generous sums to publish “stories, commentaries or editorials attacking Nicaragua and sympathetic to the *contras*”. A former CIA-*contra* information officer told the World Court that, “Approximately fifteen Honduran journalists and broadcasters were on the CIA’s payroll, and our influence was thereby extended to every major Honduran newspaper and radio and television station.”¹⁷² As an added benefit, stories planted by these agents often find their way into the U.S. and European press.

The state of the art is much the same in other parts of Central America, and deviations from right-wing orthodoxy are severely punished. “To cover the largest story in Guatemalan history [i.e., the ongoing slaughter of unarmed civilians by the army], journalists risked being killed. In El Salvador, there were

“Our picture of reality, does not burst upon us in one splendid revelation. It accumulates, day by day and year by year, in most unspectacular fragments from the world scene, produced mainly by the mass media....

“Despite 25,000 media outlets in the United States, twenty-nine corporations control most of the business in daily newspapers, magazines, television, books and motion pictures.... The chief executive officers of the twenty-nine corporations that control most of what Americans read and see can fit into an ordinary living room. Almost without exception, they are conservative Republicans....

“While it is not possible for the media to tell the population what to think, they do tell the public what to think about. What is reported enters the public agenda. What is not reported may not be lost forever, but it may be lost at a time when it is most needed....

“[It is] continuous emphasis and repetition that creates high priorities among the general public and in government.”

— Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*

simply no left-wing opposition reporters around. Almost all have either been assassinated in recent years or have fled the country.”¹⁷³

Angry airwaves

Since plenty of cash is usually needed to buy a newspaper, and literacy is either limited or non-existent in much of the region, radio and television assume a special significance for the dissemination of “news”. Again excepting Nicaragua, the broadcast view of the world is almost entirely what the Reaganites and the ruling elites prefer it to be.

“Radio operations have been a key element in political overthrow operations,” notes a lapsed CIA agent,¹⁷⁴ and the assault on Nicaragua is no exception. Several *contra* radio stations broadcast anti-Sandinista messages daily from Honduras and Costa Rica, which between them account for 44 of the 75 foreign radio signals penetrating Nicaraguan airspace. There is also a new Voice of America installation in Costa Rica; the signal from its 50,000-watt transmitter saturates Nicaragua with the truth according to the Reaganites.

The CIA radio network emits a steady stream of bad news about the Sandinistas, coupled with visions of how sweet life will be when the *contras* take over. The broadcasts have probably helped to spread anxieties about religious persecution and forced collectivization to the more remote areas of the nation, and have been credited with some conversions to the *contra* cause; but the total effect is unclear.

The results among Nicaragua’s neighbors have been much more gratifying, however. Fed a steady diet of journalistic carrion and deprived of any alternative, residents of surrounding U.S. client-states have acquired a distaste for the Sandinistas.

Not surprisingly, the propaganda offensive against Nicaragua has achieved its greatest success in the USA, where the current occupant of the White House is treated with remarkable deference by the general public and the mass media.

“The information about Nicaragua which is reaching the majority of the American public is, for the most part, slanted against the Nicaraguan revolution and the Sandinista government. By focusing inordinate attention on the criticism voiced by the Reagan administration, with very little independent coverage of the advances which undeniably have been made in the interests of the great majority, the mainstream press perpetuates a distorted picture of reality....

“Disinformation about Nicaragua in the American media is widespread and pervasive.... Coverage of the October 15, 1985, State of Emergency decree in Nicaragua provides [one example].... Many papers and networks immediately turned to the White House for the Reagan commentary.... It is interesting to note that the New York Times, only a few weeks later, commended Argentina for imposing a state of siege, arguing that such action was appropriate, while Nicaragua’s wartime state of emergency was not; indeed the Times editorial failed to even mention the existence of the war going on in Nicaragua!”

— Freedom of Expression in Nicaragua,
National Lawyers Guild

Particularly since the spread of television, a symbiotic relationship has evolved which entwines the projects of the presidency with the hectic daily process of the major news media. In many respects, the press has come to serve as a *de facto* extension of the White House, an unseemly function that was finally acknowledged after the Contragate/Iranganate scandal erupted in 1986 (see page 106).

As journalist Robert Parry has noted: “In the first six years of this administration, the press seemed to have lost its determination to hold the government to hard facts. The press seemed to be almost as entranced as was most of the country. The press also seemed to be a little fearful that if it wrote stories that were perceived as tough on this president, the public would not like it.”¹⁷⁵

That observation has been echoed by a number of Parry’s colleagues, and it highlights two key factors in the triumph of

White House propaganda: the natural insecurities of journalists, and the myth of Ronald Reagan's invincible popularity. No less than are politicians, journalists and — especially — publishers both influence and are influenced by public opinion. Perhaps the greatest achievement of White House image-makers has been to persuade the mainstream press that Ronald Reagan is the object of unparalleled adoration by the United States citizenry.

In fact, reliable data indicate something quite different. "While the media were trumpeting the president's phenomenal skills as a communicator, the polls were telling a far different story — namely, that Reagan was not a hit with the public; he was, in fact, one of the least popular presidents in the post-World War II period...."

"A look at press coverage... during the first two years of the Reagan administration shows that the press consistently assumed a degree of popularity that was not reflected in the polls.... Might it be that Reagan had been a communicator not so much in speaking on radio or TV to the general public, but in establishing genial relations face-to-face with the Washington political and media establishment?"¹⁷⁶

"I ceased long ago to be amazed that American television stations and newspapers continue sending people down to my country who have no knowledge of its language or its history. What still surprised me, though, is how the U. S. ambassador or his press attaché can make a statement based on an assumption or premise manufactured in Washington, and the reporters proceed from there.

"For instance, I watch how your administration has so beautifully moved the argument to where it is now a 'given' that Nicaragua is threatening and subverting its neighbors, so that's why the contras are necessary. Very rarely do I hear the reporters say, 'Wait a minute. It's Nicaragua that's being threatened and subverted from those neighbors by U.S.-allied forces.'

"I would say that your government officials are very, very good at their jobs, but the U.S. press not so much, huh?"

— Central American employee of U.S. embassy¹⁷⁷



Jim Eitel

Paramedics sort through remains of village pharmacy destroyed by CIA-contras. Civilians and the facilities set up to serve them are the main targets of terrorist attacks, but it is nearly impossible to learn that from the U. S. mainstream press, which has consistently ignored or understated contra brutality.

The precise origins of Reagan's mythification remain obscure; but there is no doubt of its disastrous consequences for Nicaragua and other hapless objects of Reaganite aggression. The sturdy souls in Congress, reminded daily by the *New York Times* and network TV news of the jovial president's presumptive stranglehold on public opinion, were palpably afraid of incurring his regal displeasure. The feeling was very strong that he could at any time, with a spot of Great Communicating, turn the folks back home against their elected representatives in Congress.

Likewise, as noted above, the mainstream press was nudged by the myth of its own devisement to lay down a

royal carpet of ink and broadcast time for just about anything that Reagan was given to read.

In short, the myth of Reagan's popularity eroded the confidence of politicians and journalists in their abilities to independently assess the public mood. In a variety of explicit and implicit formulations, the question was repeatedly asked: How could such a profoundly ignorant and shallow human being even be considered for president? But there seemed to be no arguing with the election results, and nobody was paying attention to the contradictory polling data. It was not a terribly distant journey from there to the reluctant concession that maybe this "amiable moron" knew something they did not. It was a humbling and disconcerting thought.

All of which goes a long way toward explaining the general servility of Congress and the press in recent years. But there are other factors contributing to the abysmal treatment of Nicaragua. One is the Cold War's pervasive sense of great peril lurking just beyond, and sometimes within, the nation's borders. Another is the occupational culture of mainstream journalism.

The cult of objectivity

It often seems to publishers and editors that everyone has a complaint or three about the press. Chided from all points of the political compass for their variously defined "bias", journalists console themselves with the notion that if their work is criticized equally by the more extreme regions of the political spectrum, they are probably close to The Truth, which "always lies somewhere in between".

This is a complacent formula which rescues its adherents from any responsibility for exercising independent judgment. But it offers distinct advantages, career- and otherwise, and it has a dignified name: "objectivity". It can also be a comfort to passive readers and viewers who, secure in the presumption that the news they consume is "value free", are spared the pangs of base uncertainty and the perplexing task of analyzing incomplete or conflicting reports.

In practice, journalistic objectivity tends to settle on a lowest common denominator of political discourse, heavily weighted toward the White House. Indeed, it seems to be nothing more nor less than another name for “common knowledge”; and so, the crucial question has to do with how knowledge comes to be common enough to be treated respectfully by the mainstream press.

For most U.S. citizens, The Truth about places like Nicaragua is not something learned at mother’s knee. While there may be a variety of voices speaking out on such issues, surely the loudest and most insistent belongs to the chief executive. By sheer repetition from the bully pulpit provided by the mass media, and from the honor accorded his office, much of the president’s conception of faraway places seeps into the national consciousness. It is almost impossible to avoid, unless one has some special reason, training or motivation to do so.

In recent decades, it has become something of a blood sport among right-wingers to denounce the “liberal bias” of the media — by which they mean a failure to confirm their prejudices. Their sense of indignation has been strengthened by the Reaganite ascendancy, and all the noise they make has evidently been heard and noted by the press.

At least with regard to Nicaragua, there is very little need for right-wingers to fret. On the contrary, they can probably take a great deal of credit for the surrealistic picture of that beleaguered nation painted by

The principal “debate” conducted in the mainstream press is whether the U.S. should stomp on Nicaragua, or leave it to rot in totalitarian squalor.

major news media. It is possible to wade through a sea of newspapers and endure countless hours of newscasts without suffering a single kind word for the Sandinista revolution, except for the odd letter-to-the-editor or opinion piece.

The principal “debate” conducted in the mainstream press is whether the U.S. should stomp on Nicaragua, or leave it to rot in totalitarian squalor. As if such casual arrogance were not enough, the U.S. reporters dispatched south of the border

are usually ill-equipped to do anything but recycle embassy handouts. "Roughly 80 to 90 percent of American journalists covering Central America either don't speak Spanish fluently or don't bother to get out in the countryside and talk with ordinary folk."¹⁷⁸

In addition, the enthralling premises of the Cold War continue to cast their spell over the news. A review of the editorial stances adopted by such "liberal" publications as *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and the *Washington Post* discloses an uncritical acceptance of the United States' "right" to attack any nation that excites the displeasure of a sitting president — as long as it is first labeled as communist or "Marxist-Leninist".

Utilitarian bent

To the extent that the Reaganite assault on Nicaragua is criticized at all, it is primarily on utilitarian grounds: First, "there's the likelihood that the scheme just isn't going to work.... A second major worry for these critics is that the whole operation may backfire.... As a corollary to their first two objections, liberal doubters suggest that the current tactics may harm U.S. strategy throughout the isthmus." The final objection raised is that "Somocista incursions are only going to strengthen the Sandinistas."

For those whose criticism is based on such concerns, the Reaganite onslaught is objectionable, "Not because Nicaragua is a sovereign nation entitled to follow whatever political course it thinks appropriate. Not because the Sandinista revolution is a just and popular response to decades of poverty. And certainly not because the victorious rebels are striving, against increasingly awesome odds, to create a distinctively Nicaraguan form of socialism."¹⁷⁹

The limited perspective of mainstream journalism is continually on display, as even the most prestigious publications apply a not-so-subtle spin that tends to validate official distortions.

For instance, the government of Nicaragua is almost never referred to as such. Instead, its legitimacy is implicitly questioned with such stock phrases as “the Marxist-Leninist government of Nicaragua” or “the leftist Sandinistas who rule Nicaragua”. Yet, one never encounters a U.S. equivalent such as “the AdamSmithist-AynRandist government of the United States” or “the rightist Republicans who rule the U.S.”

A senior editorial writer of the *Wall Street Journal* once confessed that, “I don’t have the foggiest idea what Marxism-Leninism is”. Yet, the *Journal’s* editorials and news columns hardly ever fail to attach that label to the Sandinistas and to other groups in disfavor with the White House.¹⁸⁰

Routine errors

Among the worst casual offenders are wire services such as the Associated Press and United Press International, which are responsible for most of the international news reaching U.S. citizens in printed form. Here is a 1987 example:

Managua, June 18 (UPI) — Daniel Ortega warned today that if the Central American summit, scheduled to take place this month in Guatemala, is postponed, he will not attend another meeting.

What Ortega really said had been reported the previous day by the Nicaraguan News Agency:

Managua, June 17 (ANN) — Daniel Ortega today reiterated that his government continues to believe that the meeting of Central American presidents, scheduled for the 25th and 26th of this month, is urgently needed.

The difference is as clear as that between petulant intransigence and anxious concern.

(Continued on page 188)

“Dangerous Self-Delusions”

William A. Dorman

AMONG OUR COUNTRY'S more dangerous self-delusions is the notion that because its press is vigorous, privately-owned, officially non-ideological, and free of overt government control, Americans get a clear, unhindered view of the world. Furthermore, it is widely believed that insofar as press bias *does* exist, that bias serves as a check against the power of the state rather than as an instrument of it...

Knowledge of foreign affairs actually comes to us from a system of news-gathering deeply flawed by the subtle interplay of ideology, ethnocentrism, dubious professional practice, and economic forces. As a result, U.S. journalism is not the proudly independent institution it believes itself to be, but instead defers all too often to the established perspectives and formulations of the national security state. This virtually precludes any possibility of a serious debate on the conventional premises of U.S. foreign policy....

The American press devotes less space and time to the Third World than the press of any other major power.... Beyond this tendency to slight the developing world lies the more serious problem of mainstream journalism's tendency to distort social reality.... U.S. public opinion is far more negative toward the Sandinistas than it ever was toward the Shah of Iran. Allende was subjected to close and constant scrutiny, while the problems that fester under Pinochet's dictatorship are the subject of only occasional mild concern....

American journalists strongly believe that the U.S. press is beyond ideology — that the news media are autonomous models of civic truth-seeking, serious auditors of the state, because of a number of professional rules and

practices that, if routinely followed, supposedly ensure non-biased coverage of events. Ironically, these conventions can actually serve to perpetuate the ideology and ethnocentrism that distort reporting from the Third World.

Take, for example, the prevailing assumption that objectivity is best achieved when the correspondent uses only direct or indirect quotations from all *authoritative* sides of an issue, letting assertions of fact stand on their own without interpretation or comment. [As a result] officials are given chance after chance to sway the jury of public opinion to their way of thinking.... The tradition of journalistic objectivity, as it has come to be practiced in America, substitutes a passive and reassuringly safe routine for the "disciplines of documentation and critical judgment".

Most foreign news reaches the mainstream press through routine channels that are hardly disinterested and are likely, in fact, to be officials or agencies of the U.S. government... Generally, such expressions as "left-wing", "communist", "Marxist", and "Soviet-supported" appear regularly without justification or explanation. These pejorative phrases act as buzzwords; they are short, they have high emotional content, and they are widely accepted as having an understood meaning....

It is at the level of internalized restraints that ideology operates most effectively. Ideology as used here simply means a well-ordered world view.... This is not to say that a journalist necessarily holds a set of doctrinaire, highly systematic, rigidly-imposed categories that cause him to shape his writing toward a particular political end, but that he has a particular, characteristic *perspective* that subtly affects all his work. Take the example of the reporter who recalled covering Chile under Allende: "I didn't 'interpret' the Allende regime as being against the best interests of the U.S. government. I *knew* it."

These types of widely-shared ideological assumptions — about the threat posed by the Soviet Union, about the nature of politics, economic development, and rebellion in the Third World — have caused the news media in many cases to follow the cues of official Washington.... Developing countries are perceived and portrayed merely as stakes in a zero-sum game between Washington and Moscow....

Ideology also has much to do with setting the news agenda, with determining what qualifies as news. The result for the Third World is a pronounced double standard. The economic failures, human rights violations, and abusive treatment of minorities on the part of those Third World countries that oppose U.S. interests are treated as newsworthy, while similar behavior in client regimes goes relatively ignored....

Equally troubling, policymakers' strategic assumptions are largely left unexamined and unchallenged; only tactics come in for a critical view. This tendency reflects a general deference to the national security state, which is as much a world view as a set of institutions.... Rarely do the media question the conventional wisdom about, say, the nature of the communist threat in the Third World. And the press almost always falls into step with the government at the first sign of a confrontation between America and hostile or uncooperative forces in the developing world. In other words, the press has tended to perform during the Cold War as journalism always has during hot ones.... Is a fish aware of water?

Journalists working in the mainstream media often fail to realize that they have adopted a particular ideological perspective.... In fact, it is precisely because journalists believe they are above and beyond ideology that they are most susceptible to its effects. Journalists have

(Continued...)

“Dangerous Self-Delusions” (cont.)

been trained to think that by scrupulously following the narrow rules of objectivity they will remain free of ideology’s clutches. They are encouraged to believe in a state of innocence that simply does not exist....

To argue that the American press has served the interests of the national security state is not to claim that anything close to a conspiracy exists, or that deference is the same thing as abject submission. Moreover, the news media cannot be thought of as a monolith. Like any set of institutions, the press is rife with contradictions. The work of individual reporters and, at times, larger elements of the national press may display sufficient flashes of independence as to convince policy-makers that they have no ally in the media....

The press may have grown less trusting toward the presidency in domestic affairs, but there is little or no evidence of a similar trend on national defense or foreign policy issues....

Reagan has certainly not suffered at the hands of the press for his interventions in Lebanon, Grenada, Central America or Libya. What has confused many observers of the press is that, while the press usually goes along with the White House on strategic and foreign policy matters, it can be exceedingly tough on the president in other situations: when tactics come into question; when contradictions in rhetoric or policy become overwhelmingly obvious, at which point it is usually too late to correct the damage done; when the policy consensus breaks down or a new one forms, as happened with the Philippines; when a president seems unsure in his actions; or when there is evidence of some sort of cover-up or scandal. The important thing to note about all these situations is that the press usually does not create them; it simply exploits them....

The news media frequently ignore, underestimate, or denigrate the political aspirations of Third World people.... Ethnocentrism plays an important part in this process. The press' cultural myopia has often served official Washington's interests, especially by convincing the American public that Third World peoples are incapable of self-governance, that the best they can hope for is life under a Westernized ruler. In this view, developing countries do not have politics, only fates....

All societies, of course, are prone to feelings of cultural superiority. One of the press' tasks, however, is to restrain these tendencies, not to allow them to be manipulated by the state to justify its ill-conceived policies. On this count, the U.S. media have fallen short....

The Reagan White House has constructed a sophisticated and sustained public relations campaign, based on fear-mongering and appeals to moralism.... The rules of what passes for objectivity, particularly the dependence on established authority and the requirement that news be reported largely in the form of quotations, make it difficult for journalists to refute administration statements — much less to effectively challenge policy-makers' underlying assumptions. By quoting ideologically charged and often factually misleading statements by such an authoritative figure as the president, without at the same time providing substantive contrary evidence, reporters end up validating official positions. For journalists not to take sides when doing so is warranted is, in fact, to take sides....

Right-wing critics may well be correct when they argue that the national press' values are more liberal than those of the general population. But that liberalism does not necessarily mean that the press is hard on Reagan and other conservative officials. Though Reagan is sometimes scolded in editorials and on op-ed pages, journalists

(Continued...)

(Continued from page 182)

Perhaps the most instructive examples of those “dangerous self-delusions” to which William Dorman refers (page 183 ff.) can be found in a notoriously “liberal” publication like *Newsweek*, since its coverage of Nicaragua has been among the least

“Dangerous Self-Delusions” (cont.)

still pretty much give him his own way in the news columns, which is where bedrock opinion about events in the Third World is formed....

Acutely sensitive to the charge of being overly liberal and soft on communism, journalists (like the leadership of the Democratic party) feel compelled to outflank conservative criticism. One way is to scrupulously observe journalist conventions of “objectivity”, which are inherently biased toward established power. Another is to ignore the left’s analysis of events. A third is to respond only to media criticism that comes from the right. A press that is concerned with dodging conservative criticism is certainly not going to be able to do an adequate job as watchdog. Present events bear eloquent testimony; the media have done little or nothing to restrain the Reagan administration’s resurgent militarism....

Unfortunately, the U.S. press seems unlikely to try to break the national security state’s hold over public discourse. It remains for countervailing forces outside the news industry to make the attempt. In the absence of an organized left, such an effort can only come from elements of the general public, activist organizations and the academy.... The American press seems in desperate need of its own reality check if it is adequately to perform as such for the rest of us.

Excerpted from “Peripheral Vision: U.S. Journalism and the Third World”, World Policy Journal, Summer 1986

conformist of the mainstream press. It has embarrassed the White House on several occasions, first with its 1982 exposé of the “secret war”, then later with stories about CIA-*contra* ineptitude, U.S. financial support for Cardinal Obando, and the murderous suppression of press freedom in the administration’s Central American client-states.

But look what *Newsweek* routinely does to the Sandinistas. A fairly typical treatment is the 31 August 1987 piece entitled, “Should the Sandinistas Be Trusted?” Among its numerous misstatements are these: “In 1979 the Sandinistas assured the Organization of American States they would protect civil liberties and a pluralistic political system; since then they have shut down opposition news media and harassed the Roman Catholic Church on their way to essentially one-party rule.”

As indicated elsewhere in these pages, *Newsweek*’s depiction of events is far from accurate. The business about the OAS is one of many White House lies that have been refuted. “When Mr. Reagan first started playing the ‘broken promises’ card in 1983, an OAS official said he was entirely mistaken.” It is the U.S. that has repeatedly violated the OAS charter, with its assaults on Nicaragua and other member states.¹⁸¹

As for the rest: Nicaraguans enjoy the greatest degree of civil liberty in Central America, with the possible exception of Costa Rica. Political pluralism was institutionalized in the new constitution and with the 1984 elections, certified as among the most honest in Central American history.

The “opposition news medium” shut down, *La Prensa*, is a self-confessed ally of the CIA-*contra* terrorists. The “Roman Catholic Church” has never been harassed — only those clerics who have openly supported an attempt by a foreign power to overthrow the government by force; note that there is no mention of the popular church. By “one-party” rule, *Newsweek* apparently means the large majority that the Sandinistas won in the fair and open 1984 election. By that standard, countries such as France and Canada are also suffering under the yoke of one-party rule — although the level of voter support for the governments of those countries is considerably smaller.

Note also that, with all the talk of news media being shut down and churches being harassed, there is not a single reference to the national emergency occasioned by the U.S. assault, nor to the fact that U.S. governments have imposed equal or more severe "repression", in far less perilous circumstances.

The *Newsweek* article also cites an "opinion survey sponsored by the U.S. Information Agency and conducted by the Costa Rican affiliate of The Gallup Organization" which found widespread fear of the Sandinistas throughout Central America. Whatever the *bona fides* of the "Costa Rican affiliate of The Gallup Organization" may be, there is no doubt concerning the interests of the USIA, which has been debased by the Reaganites into a crude propaganda apparatus worthy of the Soviet Union.

Furthermore, a *Newsweek* article published one year previously (28 July 1986) had documented the near-total control of right-wing elites over the news reaching the surveyed populations, but there is no mention of this.

The article provides a not unusual example of a news organization ignoring the obvious implications of its own reporting.

So, here is a not unusual instance of a mainstream news organization ignoring the obvious implications of its own reporting.

Finally, the article relies heavily on the perspectives of "senior administration officials". Elliott Abrams is given yet more space to berate the Sandinistas; as usual, his remarks go unchallenged, even though he had long before acquired a well-deserved reputation for prodigious mendacity. Conversely, *Newsweek* granted the Nicaraguan government no opportunity to respond, nor did it publish a response from any of the many knowledgeable U.S. observers within walking distance of its offices who might have uttered a word or two in the Sandinistas' defense.

Again, this example has been chosen because it is typical of a publication that represents the best, not the worst, of U.S. mainstream reporting on Nicaragua.

What's fit to print

As the unofficial official newspaper of the United States, the *New York Times* has a powerful voice in the conduct of foreign affairs. Its influence on opinion leaders at home and abroad is legendary, and its wire service distributes the *Times'* view of the world to many other organizations — including the TV networks that are guided by it in preparing their influential nightly newscasts.

The *Times'* reporting on Latin America has often betrayed a distinctly Cold War perspective. Its coverage of Salvador Allende's Chile was particularly icy, diverging very little from the truth according to Kissinger/Nixon.

Its empathy with the Reaganites' conception of Central America became apparent in 1982, when the editors yanked Ray Bonner out of their bureau in El Salvador because his impolitic snooping into army and death squad barbarities had offended right-wing sensibilities. "The attack from the right was fierce. The *Wall Street Journal* in a blistering editorial, accused Bonner of being 'overly credulous' in the face of what had clearly been a propaganda exercise'....

"A co-author of the editorial, George Melloan, went further during an appearance on the *McNeil-Lehrer Report*, claiming that 'obviously Ray Bonner has a political orientation in covering El Salvador' which, in the context of the broadcast, could only be taken to mean that he was a Marxist.... Bonner's articles predictably did not go down well with the U.S. government, either. Thomas Enders, then Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American affairs, attacked the stories before congressional committees.... By the summer of 1982, Bonner was *persona non grata* at the embassy." He was taken out by *Times* editors that August.¹⁸²

The people of El Salvador thereby lost their most helpful ear in the United States, and the balance of the press corps received a clear message. Indeed, the residual effects of Bonner's fate were probably more significant than his actual expulsion, as suggested by a former editor of the *Washington Post*: "Every year there is a distressing list of reporters and

editors of newspapers and magazines who are fired or demoted because they stumbled on the private politics of their owner.... The worst damage is not in one particular incident, but in the long-lasting aftermath in which working professionals at the editorial level behave as though under orders from above, although no explicit orders have been given."¹⁸³

Lesson learned

It appears that the present staff of the *Times* has learned from the example of Ray Bonner. He has been replaced by the likes of Shirley Christian and Stephen Kinzer, who have not exactly added further distinction to their profession. "A rapturous apologist for Latin American fascism",¹⁸⁴ Ms. Christian has written favorably about the brutal military rulers of Chile and Argentina.

Christian's pro-*contra* book, *Trouble in the Family: Inside the Nicaraguan Revolution*, has become a standard text for Reaganites seeking to document the perfidy of the Sandinistas. The subtitle is a misnomer, since the book's perspective is entirely from outside the revolution. As a distinguished historian points out:

"Christian gives a glowing and optimistic report of the *contras*, while suppressing everything that is abhorrent about their activities.... She barely mentions the brutal ex-guardsmen of the former dictator.... She ignores the numerous atrocities which the *contras* have committed [and] plays down as much as possible the role of the CIA.... Equally one-sided is Christian's treatment of the Nicaraguan government. Nowhere does she make it clear that the Sandinistas have instituted free universal health care and free universal education.... She does allot two or three paragraphs to land reform. By contrast, 20 pages are allotted to the *contra* leaders."¹⁸⁵

This, it seems, is the style of "objective" reporting which the editors of the *New York Times* feel appropriate for their coverage of Latin America.

In recent years, most of the news about Nicaragua in the *New York Times* has been gathered by Stephen Kinzer, who

seems to have encountered enormous difficulty in locating Nicaraguans who tolerate, let alone support, the revolution.

Articles carrying the Kinzer by-line tend toward favorable assessments of CIA-*contra* capabilities, complaints by pro-*contra* business and church elites, peasants frustrated by shortages of seeds and fertilizer, accusations and intimations of Sandinista misdeeds, etc., etc. It is truly a marvel that the government has managed to survive, given the oppressively grim reality that Kinzer has portrayed.

Clearly, there is much more to Nicaragua than Kinzer chooses — or is allowed — to report. Observers from the U.S. who have witnessed events subsequently reported in the *Times* frequently remark on the disparity between the actuality and the printed word. Relates a Seattle teacher and her engineer husband:

“The new constitution was proclaimed and signed by President Ortega at a big public rally in Managua. We were there and saw close to 200,000 people. The *New York Times*, however, saw only ‘thousands’. What its coverage stressed was not the national celebration we witnessed, but several demonstrations the opposition staged on that day.... The *Times* referred to ‘thousands’ at one [opposition] demonstration. But a visiting political science professor from the University of South Dakota was there and said, ‘There may have been a hundred’.”¹⁸⁶

The *Times*’ editorial spin was also noted by a journalist from India who visited Nicaragua in 1986: “The *New York Times*, in [an editorial], had just called the Sandinistas ‘Stalinists’. Stephen Kinzer, the paper’s man in Managua, had belatedly filed a report (without visiting the scene) on the most recent *contra* atrocity, the mining of a road in northern Jinotega Province, near Bocay. The mine had blown up a bus and killed thirty-two civilians, including several schoolchildren. Kinzer’s report suggested that the FSLN could have planted the mine itself, in a bid to gain international sympathy.”¹⁸⁷

The resulting impression of Kinzer among many of those living in Nicaragua who lack a proper journalistic upbringing

is that, “Evidently the *Times* keeps him on a short leash. The scuttlebutt among North American residents is that Kinzer is only allowed to write one article favorable to Nicaragua out of three. Even the generally favorable articles usually feature at least one low blow.”¹⁸⁸

Not surprisingly, *Times* editors dismiss such accusations as preposterous. And, in fact, there is no need to postulate anything so gauche as an editorial command in order to explain the distinct odor of the Reaganites wafting through the pages of the *New York Times*. As noted above, the specter of Ray Bonner’s fate and other “objectivity” lessons are probably sufficient to inspire the appropriate attitude.

Entertaining president

The elevation of entertainer Ronald Reagan to the presidency has eliminated the last vestige of any doubt that television has become a major force in U.S. politics, although there is some debate over the precise nature of its influence.

One thing is certain, however: The impact of television derives primarily from visual images and juxtapositions, and very little from systematic debate. Public apprehension of the Vietnam War is a case in point. Opposition to the war sharpened on a procession of powerful images — a Buddhist monk consumed by the gasoline flames of his own enlightenment, a South Vietnamese police official blowing out the brains of a

“I would say it is a fundamental taboo in the major media — in print, or on television or radio — to say good things about the Sandinistas. Instead, Sandinista-bashing has become a media way of life.... We recorded 85 lies, on Central America alone, that the administration has told Congress, and I’m sure we didn’t get them all. The record shows that most of these were let go by the press, even the press that knows better. And when I asked a reporter, ‘How come you didn’t report that?’ he said, ‘Ahh, what’s the use of it? No one’s interested in that stuff.’”

— Saul Landau, *Institute for Policy Studies*¹⁸⁹



Jaime Perozo

Four faces of the Nicaraguan army. The Reaganites have attempted to portray the few thousand CIA-contras, many of them kidnapped, as heroes of a popular uprising; but they are opposed by the vast majority of the Nicaraguan population. The government has armed a citizens' militia of over 100,000 citizens and has announced plans to increase that number to 600,000 as a deterrent to U. S. invasion. That clearly suggests a high level of trust between the government and the people, and a lack of support for the CIA terrorists, but U. S. news media have generally followed the administration's lead in characterizing the civil defense plan as a dangerous "military build-up" that threatens the peace of the entire region.

handcuffed prisoner, a young girl screaming naked down a road in agony from the burns inflicted by a U.S. bomb, etc., etc.

Subsequent administrations have learned from that experience, and have taken pains to engineer more reassuring poses. With precious few exceptions, the major networks have been all too eager to comply. In the world of TV news, the most important event of the day can be the Leader of the Free

World chopping wood at his California hideaway, or perhaps dispensing grandfatherly smiles to the Girl Scouts' champion cookie salesperson at a "photo opportunity" in the White House Rose Garden.

Concerning Nicaragua: We get an "in-depth report" which shows flashes of U.S. entertainers in Managua, impales them on snide commentary about their support of the revolution, and then zooms away without a single word of response from the presumptively ridiculous celebrities. On the evening news there are snippets of Soviet military equipment thundering down the streets of Managua; nothing about the U.S. aggression which has necessitated it. Dedicated young "freedom fighters", duded out in U.S. Army togs, liberate the Honduran countryside while yearning to be free. Elliott Abrams emits another barrage of anti-Sandinista invective and an earnest hymn to Democracy.

At an international conference of parliamentarians held in Managua, the network camera lingers on seating plaques for the delegations from Hungary and Bulgaria, while somehow failing to notice those for Spain, France and Norway. A CIA-*contra* leader conducts a chorus of cheers at the White House for a steadfast president with cries of "Viva Reagan! Viva Reagan!".... You get the picture.

Pictures you don't get: an old woman being taught to read by a teen-aged volunteer; an infant having its life preserved at one of the new dehydration treatment centers; peasants receiving title to the first land they've ever owned; a factory worker participating in a company board meeting; a farmworker being trained in the use of biological pest controls; a young man with his testicles stuffed in his mouth and his guts wrapped around a tree; Rosa with her breasts cut off....

Two independent video producers experienced at first hand the methods by which the major TV networks capture their images of Nicaragua, after taking some footage of a civilian relocation project. *Voice of America* and the *Washington Post* portrayed the operation as a cruel and arbitrary dispossession, but the videographers didn't see it that way. "We were surprised, because the people we'd met had said they'd been

terrorized by the *contras*.... There was only one woman that was dissatisfied with moving....

"The CBS producer saw our footage and said, 'Oh, this is really beautiful housing. I didn't know they were building housing like that. This is fantastic; I'm really amazed.' And then he said at the end, 'We can't buy any of this.... Unless you can bring us footage of the Sandinistas burning down houses, we don't want to buy any.' Everybody seemed to be after that story.

"We did sell footage of the evacuation to ABC. But in the story, ABC used the voice of a man who they said refused to be interviewed on camera, who told them he hadn't been allowed to bring his animals. They didn't use any of our footage which showed that, in fact, people were bringing their animals and saying that they wanted to leave... ABC really went out of their way to get a negative story."¹⁹⁰

Under control

As must employees everywhere, journalists operate within the confines of an occupational culture which imposes limits on the realm of the permissible. That culture is transmitted and enforced through the usual mechanisms of social control: "In the real world of the newsroom and the board room, the news is fiddled with by management, either crudely through direct intervention or more subtly by picking editors who know what is expected of them."¹⁹¹

While it should be obvious, for example, that Ronald Reagan fits the definition of "war criminal" as much as any Nazi leader hung or imprisoned by the Nuremberg Tribunal, anyone who says that sort of thing out loud is extremely unlikely ever to become editor of the *New York Times* — or of the *South Succotash Sentinel*, for that matter. Best not even to think about it.

Worse, the regulation journalistic mind-set is becoming regressively more narrow as a result of corporate agglomeration. "The seeming cultural pluralism provided by thousands

of newspapers, magazines, radio stations and TV channels is belied by their near-total absorption into giant media combines. The consequence is a national discourse that is increasingly one-dimensional.”¹⁹²

Barring interference from countervailing forces, that single dimension is most likely to be charted by White House media managers, and we can expect news reports increasingly to resemble this example:

“LONDON. December 26, 1776 — Ragtag leftist colonists assaulted a German-oriented group of His Majesty’s loyalists today in Trenton, N.J., in what is ‘clearly a terrorist attack’, sources here said.

“The sources, who declined to be identified for fear of reprisal, said the attack on the Hessians, mounted by radical rebel commander George Washington, probably could not have been carried out without secret arms shipments from France.

“The Paris regime is said to be aiding the subversive American independence movement, which is allegedly seeking to unseat duly-established representatives of the British Crown.

“The Crown has long contended the purported rebellion could have been brought to a speedy close months ago were it not for the insurgent mobs’ refusal to negotiate, and their access to weapons from leftist nations abroad, unidentified Parliamentary spokesmen said.

“There was no comment from the increasingly disheveled American rebels, who claim to be fighting for ‘freedom’ in the 1½-year-old ‘dirty war’ that so far has taken the lives of 1097 of the Crown’s smartly dressed crack troops. Insurgent casualty figures are unavailable.”

This illustration was provided by Emmett Murray, a copy editor for the *Seattle Times* who is fluent in Spanish and worked for many years in Latin America. His employers have in the past nominated him for the Pulitzer Prize; but in 1987 he was prohibited from dealing with any news relating to Latin America, after being found in possession of a “liberal bias” in such matters.¹⁹³

"Most people assume that the United States is free from overt censorship, but a San Francisco-based media group has discovered the opposite to be true. Neighbor to Neighbor, a national television campaign to broaden public understanding of the conflicts in Central America, has been refused the right to air its television special, 'Faces of War', in all but three of the nations top twenty-two TV markets....

"Neighbor to Neighbor Director Nick Allen asked, 'If a station is selling time to TV evangelists like Jerry Falwell who preach for increased U.S. military intervention in Central America, why won't they sell us time to present our views?'"¹⁹⁴

Shill game

Since the mainstream media are willing to transmit just about anything the White House wants the public to see and hear, it only remains to provide reporters with something to report. Speeches and interviews by administration officials are usually a safe bet; they have made "Sandinista Evil" one of the top political tunes of the 1980s.

To enliven the performance, the Reaganites have employed an assortment of skills in Nicaragua and at home. One of the more bizarre was the guy who was paid \$2500 to dress up like a priest and tell a Congressional committee that the Sandinistas themselves dress up like CIA-*contras* and commit atrocities in order to discredit the president's freedom fighters.¹⁹⁵

The pro-*contra* opposition within Nicaragua performs a similar function, but on a much grander scale. The angry business leaders, the CIA press, and the reactionaries in the Catholic hierarchy have been very effective at provoking the government into responses which can then be trumpeted to the world as outrageous acts of repression.

The anti-communist fervor of fundamentalist churches has also been put to good use. Likewise, the cult of Reverend Sun Myung Moon, whose World Unification Church has established "missions" in Honduras that cater to Miskito refugees from Nicaragua. In addition to collaborating with the USIA

on the production and distribution of a propaganda film about those refugees, the Moonies have sponsored an endless parade of anti-Sandinista speakers in the U.S., and in countless other ways have worked with considerable success to spread myths of Miskito "genocide" religious persecution, etc.

Many of these phony stories first come to print in the Moonies' own *Washington Times*. It has become the daily newspaper of choice for the Republican Party's right wing — and the racist government of South Africa which gives it almost a million dollars annually. The chief editor is a frequent guest at the Reagan White House. "What the *Washington Times* has come to resemble... is the closest thing to a government-sponsored newspaper that the United States has seen in modern times."¹⁹⁶

Sanitary engineering

After the secret war and the brutality of its *Guardia* perpetrators came to light, the Reaganites performed a little sanitary engineering by setting up a political front of exiled Nicaraguans in Miami. As one of them later testified to the World Court, the CIA "explained to me that the [CIA-*contra* operation] had a bad image in the United States, and particularly among members of the Congress, because it was perceived as an organization of ex-national guardsmen. He told me that in order to maintain the support of the Congress for the CIA's activities it was necessary to replace the political junta with a group of prominent Nicaraguan civilians who had no ties with the National Guard or the Somoza government."¹⁹⁷

These respectable citizens in sober business suits thus became the public face of the CIA-*contras*. Their job was to recite the standard text to television cameras and Congressional hearings. And so it came to pass that the likes of Aldolfo Calero and Arturo Cruz achieved the transient status of mini-celebrities in U.S. political life.

This public drama ran into difficulty, however, when some of the players began to take their roles seriously and tried to impose modest financial and ethical restraints on the terrorists.

That was not in the script, and the resulting failures to communicate led to frequent resignations. Consequently, the administration has been forced to play a frenetic game of "Musical Leaders", with substitutes usually recruited directly from the road show run by COSEP in Managua.

The pathetic illusions of this tragicomic opera, which in one of its several versions performed under the title of "United Nicaraguan Opposition" (UNO), were recently disabused by a desperate act of its producers. In an attempt to short-circuit a Central America peace initiative in late 1987, the Reaganites rushed their counter-proposal to the U.S. public's attention without the slightest pretext of consulting the collaborating heroes of Nicaraguan democracy. They were summoned to the White House *after* the fact, and given a few minutes to study the proposal before declaring their enthusiastic support at a prearranged press conference.¹⁹⁸



The White House

At a White House pep rally, head cheerleader Ronald Reagan proclaims his devotion to his 'freedom fighters'. Immediately to his left, Adolfo Calero is shouting, "Viva Reagan! Viva Reagan!" At the far right of the photo is Arturo Cruz, who later resigned from the CIA-contras' political front because, as he put it, "UNO never had anything more than a paper existence, and the Reagan administration never wanted it to be anything more than that."

It was that sort of thing which led Arturo Cruz to resign months later, despite strenuous efforts by the administration to retain his services. Although the pay was good — he was receiving at least \$84,000 a year — the work was not satisfying: “My basic mistake was agreeing to join UNO in the first place. UNO never had anything more than a paper existence, and the Reagan administration never wanted it to be anything more than that. UNO was born dead, and for that reason today it is a corpse.”¹⁹⁹

But it has been a useful corpse. With characteristic objectivity, the mainstream press has faithfully reported its every rattle of anti-Sandinista protest and still treats it as though it has a life of its own.

***Contra* rights**

There has been so much indisputable evidence of CIA-*contra* atrocities that it has been necessary on occasion for the administration to impeach or divert attention from it. One proven technique is simply to make counter-accusations against the Sandinistas; there is no need to substantiate such claims, because everybody is presumed to know what them Marxist-Leninists are like. Since the other side is just as vicious as ours, the argument goes, so what’s the big deal?

Then there’s the one about the Sandinistas putting on *contra* suits and molesting the peasantry under false pretenses. Ronald Reagan really likes this one and, though they may not openly endorse it, U.S. news media can usually be relied upon to pass it along uncritically.

The cleverest trick has been to set up competing “human rights” organizations which ignore *contra* depravity while vilifying the government. One such is the Permanent Human Rights Commission (“CPDH”) in Managua. It was originally established by the traditional opposition to Somoza, but now receives its funding from the U.S. and “has become a virtual instrument of the right-wing Social Christian Party, acting as an apologist for National Guard prisoners.”²⁰⁰ The CPDH pretends to know nothing about the CIA-*contras*, but reports

every rumor of government abuse as fact, without bothering to investigate. It is frequently cited by U.S. news media, which invariably refer to it as a legitimate “Nicaraguan human rights organization”.

There is another human rights organization in Managua, directed by a Catholic nun, which *does* investigate reported abuses by both the army and the CIA-*contras*. It is hardly ever mentioned by U.S. news media.

Back home in the USA, the main problem is: What to do about Amnesty International and Americas Watch, two organizations with respectable credentials that have sounded repeated alarms about CIA-*contra* brutality?

That problem seems to have been addressed by setting up one fresh alternative and, quite possibly, corrupting another.

In league with the League

The International League for Human Rights is an established U.S. organization with a reputation of no particular distinction. In 1986, shortly before a crucial vote in Congress on CIA-*contra* military aid, the League sent a four-person team to Nicaragua. One of the “investigators” was Robert Leiken, a former consultant to *contra* spokesman Arturo Cruz. Leiken’s notoriously misleading reports on events in Nicaragua have been rubbished by journalists who witnessed them first-hand. Another delegate was Nina Shea, an ideologue with connections to the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing “think tank” deeply implicated in the campaign to destabilize Nicaragua.

The final report bore a striking resemblance to the accusations of the pro-*contra* CPDH — probably because it was based almost entirely on the unsubstantiated gossip of that CIA front. The “investigators” did not bother to look into the behavior of the CIA-*contras*, nor did they invite the government to respond to the accusations made against it.

“The report invokes ‘patterns of abuse’ and ‘methods of torture’, which duly translated into headlines in the U.S. press.... Primed with this grab bag of rumor and unsubstantiated

assertions, the League team raced back to the United States to inject its report into the *contra* debate... exaggerating even its bogus numbers, even though the report was not to be published for another four months.”²⁰¹

One of the four “investigators”, a human rights official in the Carter administration, has since disowned the fabricated report. But it is still being cited as solid evidence of Sandinista depravity.

The fingerprints of the CIA are all over the Puebla Institute, another “human rights organization” that has emerged in recent years to excoriate the Sandinistas. A self-styled “Catholic lay organization”, its director is Nina Shea (see above). According to a former official of the CIA-*contras*, the Puebla Institute was first created in 1983 as a publishing front for an anti-Sandinista book, and was later transformed into its current manifestation as a defender of human rights.²⁰² It has been yet another CIA success story, frequently cited by the mainstream press as an impartial observer of Nicaraguan government abuses; needless to say, CIA-*contra* brutality holds little interest for the Pueblogues.

Hardly worth mentioning, were it not so casually referred to by the mainstream press from time to time, is the “Commission on Human Rights” grafted by Congress onto the bloody corpus of the CIA-*contras* as a bone of humane invention. It is supposed to investigate complaints against the president’s terrorists and institute necessary reforms. An official of Americas Watch has described its accomplishments to date:

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“Journalists, like politicians, don’t want to be labeled as leftists or as being ‘soft on communism’.... Many reporters are familiar with the way that the New York Times’ Herbert Matthews was vilified for having reported too sympathetically about Castro in the 1950s. If Nicaragua should go communist, journalists who have written anything favorable about the Sandinistas will be treated harshly.”

— Raymond Bonner²⁰³

“I believe there is very strong control”

The *contras* are a creation of the U.S. government and are accountable to it. They don't make their own decisions. So, in the end they will have to do what the Reagan administration decides to do.... It's totally irrelevant what a *contra* leader wants to do. If he wants a cease-fire, the U.S. will replace him. He's not there to make an accommodation with the Nicaraguan government, but to enforce the interests of a foreign country....

[As regards U.S. news media] I believe that there is very strong control, in the sense that the United States, through the wire services and the State Department, sends so much news to the press that the press has no choice but to repeat what the administration says. The administration has the capacity to stage press conferences, orchestrate situations, invite people to special events, send out statements and news releases constantly and in such a way that people working in different media have to rush and just repeat. They have no time even to check the truth of such information....

Very often they are edited, and they can't see what happens, particularly when they are syndicated....

And sometimes the administration creates news stories to cover for things it wants to neutralize, or hide, or play down. It has a great capacity to create parallel events to distract attention from something it doesn't want people to remember. Or even to create parallel institutions — like the *contra* human rights organization — which will neutralize, or obscure, or confuse, so people will not know which is the true one....

I have been surprised since I [came to Managua]. I've seen very little militarization, even with that huge crowd last night. At least you would expect to see some water cannons, like in other countries, in case the crowd got unruly or panicked. They didn't have anything!

(Continued on following page)

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“The commission’s performance in monitoring *contra* abuses, its failure to denounce violations when they occur, and its near-total inability to prosecute and punish *contra* offenders reflects the irrelevance of UNO’s civilian leadership. Since [its] creation, *contra* abuses have proliferated.... The lesson for Congress is that \$3 million worth of ingenuously appropriated conscience money will neither buy effective monitoring of *contra* human rights abuses nor transform the practices of the *contras* and their commanders.”²⁰⁴

Bipartisan partisanship

For harried executives everywhere, a time-honored public relations remedy is the “blue ribbon commission” assigned to study a problem and, if all goes well, issue a set of recommendations which reinforce the position of its creator.

To soothe congressional anxieties about its not-so-covert operations, the Reagan administration in 1983 cobbled together something called the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America. It was headed by Henry Kissinger, the

“There is very strong control” (cont.)

Perhaps one of the explanations is a deep sense of equality; nobody pushes anybody. I think that’s one of the accomplishments of the revolution, that a simple worker feels as much dignity as a bigshot....

I don’t see hungry people here. In the United States you read that people are dying of hunger. Here, I could not see it. Most people look very healthy, strong, alive — they don’t act like hungry people. I only saw a few beggars — not like in Tegucigalpa, or even in city streets in the U.S....

— Former CIA-*contra* leader; accepted amnesty in 1986²⁰⁵

former Secretary of State respected among U.S. conservatives as the nation's most astute foreign policy expert — and one of the chief architects of U.S. policy toward Latin America.

The commission was styled “bipartisan” because it is a buzzword often used to legitimate a contentious policy by implying a consensus around it. To be sure, both Democrats and Republicans were included, but none of the twelve carefully selected commissioners was likely to rock the ship of state. All were considered to be manageable; they did not disappoint.

The closest thing to a potential opponent of Reaganite doctrine was Henry Cisneros, the Spanish-American Mayor of San Antonio, Texas. He did, in fact, issue a modest dissent that recommended disbanding the CIA-*contras*, but it was lost in the sea of blue-ribbon complicity.

The loudest voice belonged, as intended, to the imposing figure of Kissinger, who had been responsible for the infamous “Christmas bombing” and similar acts of diplomacy against Vietnam some ten years previous.

Kissinger was also a principal instigator of Chile's ongoing nightmare. His appreciation of Latin America was distilled in these 1969 observations to Chile's foreign minister: “You come here speaking of Latin America, but this is not important. Nothing important can come from the South. History has never been produced in the South. The axis of history starts in Moscow, goes to Bonn, crosses over to Washington, and then goes to Tokyo. What happens in the South is of no importance.”²⁰⁶

Forearmed with this profound and humane perspective, Kissinger led his fellow commissioners on a whirlwind tour of Central America, including an eight-hour stopover in Managua. Their encounter with the Sandinistas did not go smoothly, partly because it came just five days after the devastating CIA attack on Corinto, and partly because the objects of bipartisan scrutiny understood full well the nature of the enterprise: “We see in this commission the fundamental purpose of opening political space for Reagan within the U.S.”²⁰⁷

Furious at being lectured to by little brown men who do not make history, Kissinger returned to home base and, as his first order of business, had the U.S. ambassador to Nicaragua transferred for insufficient antipathy toward the Sandinistas.

The commission's report soon followed and, as pre-ordained, supported administration policy. It made passing reference to the region's poverty and recommended an economic assistance program identical to the Kennedy administration's "Alliance for Progress", which had years before served to solidify the economic and political dominance of ruling elites.

But, inevitably, it emphasized The Threat of Communist Expansion, which was apparently so obvious that there was no need to document it: "The report charges — with an argument built on assumption rather than evidence — that the Soviet Union is the manipulator of indigenous revolution in the area.... No coherent argument is presented for the assumption that the revolutions represent a threat to U.S. national security. Lacking evidence and analysis, the report's case is reduced to the assertion that there is a 'Soviet-Cuban thrust to make Central America part of their geostrategic challenge'.... The report makes much of the domino theory that suggests that revolutions spread like communicable diseases. [But] the principal 'dominoes' of the region for whose sake the security policy is ostensibly pursued — Mexico and Panama — oppose the military course of U.S. policy."²⁰⁸

The commission's majority also absolved the United States of any responsibility for the mess in Central America, and tacitly endorsed the CIA-*contras*, warning that "Nicaragua must be aware that force remains an ultimate resource."²⁰⁹

Despite the political weight of its chairman, the report was not a complete success. Several congressmen even had the temerity to point out that its assertion of Soviet influence lacked supporting evidence. The report's patronizing attitude also had the effect of intensifying resentment of the United States throughout Latin America.

Thus, the Kissinger Commission fell short of the hopes that launched it. It has been used mainly to rally the faithful and,

with some success, as a sacred text to be cited years afterward whenever the administration tries to persuade some gullible audience that its policy has “bipartisan” support. And, it did fill many column inches of newspapers and precious minutes of network air time with anti-Sandinista messages.

Garbage threshold

Presidential speeches, shills in Congress, provocations in Managua, phrases of the Moonies, the Kissinger commission, posturings of the UNO-ites, ersatz human rights organizations — these are all grist for the nation’s propaganda mills, witting and otherwise, and all have been used as vehicles for the Big Lie campaign against Nicaragua.

Even were it prepared to do so, the national press would likely encounter great resistance from its clientele if it were to systematically counteract White House propaganda. Public opinion polls and readership surveys indicate that a clear majority of U.S. citizens has a low threshold of tolerance for bad news about the presidency, especially if it is suspected of being true. So fast and furious is the barrage of intellectual garbage spewed forth by the White House that the news media could easily exhaust their entire resources in trying to mop it up, and it would be a thankless task.

Of course, the media could simply refuse to dignify such rubbish with their attention. But that would not do; for, “If the president says it, it’s news.” And so, most of what he and his minions proclaim slips by unchallenged. If they repeat something often enough, it stands an excellent chance of becoming common knowledge.

For justifying aggression, there is nothing more efficacious than a few scary messages, endlessly repeated in such a way as to draw attention to the victim and away from the aggressor — much as Hitler blamed fictitious threats from Poland for his 1939 invasion of that country. Through the application of selective evidence and double standards, by distilling complex reality into simplistic notions of good vs. evil, and by launching

all attacks through a fog of patriotic claptrap, the Reaganites have labored to promote hatred of Nicaragua. Here are six of their favorite themes....

“COMMUNIST BEACHHEAD”

According to a typical tirade delivered by Ronald Reagan, “Nicaragua has launched a campaign to subvert and topple its democratic neighbors. Using Nicaragua as a base, the Soviets and Cubans can become the dominant power in the crucial corridor between North and South America. Established there, they will be in a position to threaten the Panama Canal, interdict our vital Caribbean sea lanes and, ultimately, move against Mexico. Should that happen, desperate Latin peoples by the millions would begin fleeing north into the cities of the southern United States, or to wherever some hope of freedom remained.”²¹⁰

No one in his or her right mind seriously believes this, least of all the military planners of the Defense Department. But the Reaganites have been mouthing such claims since they first took office. They have encountered a good deal of scepticism: In 1982 a Congressional committee “inquired about statements by administration officials... which reportedly indicated that ‘detailed outlines’ of Soviet and Cuban plans in Central America had been obtained.... In a written response, the CIA clarified that... no ‘detailed plan’ had been obtained.”²¹¹

So much for the quality of the evidence used to document the domino theory for the Western Hemisphere. But mere facts never get in the way of a Reaganites’ story, and they have continued to repeat this one as received wisdom; the baseless assertions of the Kissinger Commission are a case in point.

In an effort to strengthen its case for communist expansion, the State Department commissioned a study on “Soviet Attitudes towards Aid to and Contacts with Central American Revolutionaries”. Usually referred to as the Jacobsen Report,

after its principal author, it has not been widely disseminated by the administration — probably because it arrives at exactly the opposite of the desired conclusion:

“The Nicaraguan revolution caught Moscow off-guard,” states the report, which notes that the Moscow-aligned Socialist Party of Nicaragua won only 1.3 percent of the votes in the 1984 election. According to Jacobsen, the Soviets have been willing to provide Nicaragua with limited economic and military support, but are decidedly *not* interested in bankrolling another Cuba, or provoking a shooting war with the U.S. over Central America. Its Latin American interests lie elsewhere — in Brazil, Peru and Argentina, for example .

“The bottom line was that the Sandinistas would indeed have to defend themselves. Finally, one must note that Moscow apparently expects to benefit whatever the course of events. She appears to calculate that the political-ideological PR harvest that would accrue from an all-out U.S. invasion would outweigh the loss of immediate advantage.”²¹²

The administration’s professed alarm at the growth of Nicaragua’s military strength is also discounted by independent analysts. Data from the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London show that “Nicaragua is no match for its neighbors.... The combined regular forces of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala are twice as large, have superior firepower and, more importantly, air forces capable of dominating the skies.... Their total population is more than five times that of Nicaragua, a substantial manpower margin in any strategic equation.”²¹³

The disparity is especially pronounced with respect to air power. Nicaragua’s small collection of aging planes is no match for the sophisticated modern fighters issued to U.S. client-states. The country’s inability to defend its own airspace is so complete that the CIA makes routine supply drops to its *contra* bands in Nicaragua with hardly any interference. A supply plane does occasionally get shot down, but from the ground.

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Sifting through the Mainstream News

ANYONE WHO HAS TAKEN the accompanying critique of mainstream news at all seriously may be forgiven a certain consequent despair. If so, take heart: It is, in fact, possible to extract a great deal of useful information, even from such voices of the establishment as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, as long as suitable precautions are taken.

It doesn't come without effort, however; a steady investment of time and energy is required in order to become reasonably well-informed. It is also necessary to tolerate a high degree of uncertainty, in recognition of the fact that all knowledge is provisional; news reporting, as with all human endeavors (including this one), is subject to the perils of omission and inaccuracy. The rest is almost easy. With respect to gathering information about the Third World, here are a few suggestions....

Be a media critic, not a passive consumer

Understand that perfect objectivity is exceedingly rare — and for any organism more complex than an amoeba, probably non-existent. Develop the habit of questioning every item of information you encounter, especially the buzzwords and stock images that lodge surreptitiously in the mind. The second or third time you see anyone or anything labeled as “Marxist-Leninist... radical... freedom... democracy”, etc., ask for precise details. When national leaders employ such words, it is nearly always for purposes of manipulation. No need to get nasty about it; but persistent scepticism is especially helpful with international news, since there are fewer checks on misleading information than with the domestic variety.

As for TV news, which for some reason seems to enjoy a degree of public trust equal to or greater than that of

print media, don't expect too much. TV news tends to emphasize fleeting impressions with a high potential for distortion. Time constraints, alone, make it impossible to present anything like a comprehensive picture. Be particularly alert to the subliminal effects created by the juxtaposition of images; one way to become more sensitive to that problem is to turn off the sound from time to time and study the images that flash by. At most, TV offers visual impressions and alerts viewers to important issues they ought to read more about.

Distrust your government on principle

This is a disturbing thought to many citizens, even those inclined to sharply criticize their leaders. But the question here is how to become well-informed, not comfortable. As the Reagan administration has demonstrated, your leaders are not trying to provide you with a first-rate education. Rather, they are trying to engineer your consent to their projects, and will say or do anything for that purpose — or, failing that, to get you so confused that you will be disinclined to interfere. The president will never lie to you unless he feels it is necessary or convenient to do so; when it comes to attacking other countries, it is never necessary, but almost always convenient.

Never forget that we live in the Age of Maximum Marketing, and that the White House operates in much the same fashion as any other powerful organization seeking to influence public perceptions. Regard pronouncements of the president and his associates quite literally as advertisements that have been planned days or even months in advance, often to coincide with some other event for maximum effect. White House operatives now refer shamelessly to the “packaging” of “products” to be “sold” to the public....

Sifting through the Mainstream News (cont.)

So, when you hear the president utter phrases like “protecting democracy... defending human rights... confronting the Evil Empire”, think in terms of “Ride the High Country with Marlboro cigarettes... Better Living with General Electric... Bedtime for Bonzo... Rocky Mountain Fresh Coors Beer”, etc. This may seem excessively cynical, but it merely reflects the need to erect barriers against the cynical manipulation that has become standard procedure for the White House.

The issues, themselves, remain vitally important. What needs to be challenged is the government’s typically self-serving approach to them. One simple reality check on administration policy toward another country is to compare it with others and try to discover a general rule. If the U.S. should attack any Latin America country that receives support from the Soviet Union, why not start with Argentina and Peru which receive much more of it than Nicaragua? If the abuse of human rights is an appropriate pretext for assault, why didn’t the U.S. invade Chile or Guatemala long ago? If economic sanctions will only make South Africa more intransigent, how can they inspire democracy in Nicaragua? Etc., etc....

Seek alternatives to the official version

The symbiotic relationship between mainstream news media and the White House has resulted in the establishment of something very like an official press, one that is all the more influential due to its subliminal operation. This is a condition that places a premium on alternative sources of information, including many that slip into mainstream newspapers. Although they remain subject to the discretion of editors, guest articles and letters-to-the-editor often provide assessments and

snippets of information that may be ignored by the paid employees of the same journal. They also provide a lot of nonsense, but in this they differ little from editorials and the reports of foreign correspondents.

Accordingly, it is a good idea to treat letters, columns and guest articles (at least initially) with as much respect as any front-page article. Some of the best reporting on Nicaragua to appear in the *New York Times* has come in letters from people like Edgar Chamorro, a former CIA-*contra* leader, and George Wald, a Nobel laureate who is active in the international solidarity movement. Likewise, columns by Anthony Lewis and John B. Oakes have offered well-informed rebukes to the Cold War inanities of Times editorials.

Nevertheless, it is essential to sample the smorgasbord of non-establishment news sources, many of which are referenced in the "Notes" section of this book. Particularly informative on Third World issues are publications of a mainline religious persuasion, e.g. *Sojourners* and *Christianity in Crisis*. They often present foreign points of view, and a correspondingly instructive contrast to the chauvinistic discourse of the White House. (The same cannot be said of the diverse media outlets going forth and multiplying from the thriving fundamentalist movement/business, which desecrates a Godless Commie lurking behind every burning bush. Gladly would its acolytes smite the infidels; for that and other purposes, they have forged an unholy alliance with the Reaganites.)

Apart from their immediate value, alternative publications should be supported to the fullest extent possible by everyone desirous of preserving informational choices, since the mainstream media are becoming ever more conglomerated and homogenous.

It is impossible for anyone to study the entire range of international issues, but attention to one often yields

Sifting through the Mainstream News (cont.)

knowledge that can be applied to others. For instance, an understanding of the CIA's activities in Nicaragua will very likely be useful for following events in El Salvador and the Philippines in the years ahead.

Know thy editor

Newspaper editors and their TV/radio counterparts are the principal gatekeepers of news from the outside world. In the absence of any other information, it may as well be assumed that most are men and women of good will and dedicated to their work. But they are no wiser or less fallible than other human beings with comparable training and aptitude, and it is healthy to *continually* ask two questions of their presentations: Why are you telling me this? And more importantly: What are you *not* telling me?

It is difficult to evaluate information or ideas that are never disclosed, which is why it is crucially important to seek out other-than-mainstream news sources whenever possible, and to treat them with as much initial respect as anything that appears on TV or in the pages of the *New York Times*. Above all, be not impressed by technical wizardry; dazzling graphics and pretty pictures have about as much to do with accurate reporting as does a Pepsi-Cola commercial with sex or nutrition. For the rest, there is much to be learned — or at least inferred — by paying careful attention to the proceedings.

For one thing, all news of any significance should be checked for internal consistency. To take a not-unusual example from a daily newspaper in the generally dreadful Hearst chain: The headline reads, "Full democracy returns to Philippines"; but the lead paragraph states that the president had issued decrees "... establishing a

citizens' army and stipulating penalties of up to six months' imprisonment for membership in the Communist Party". Now, this sobering glimpse of "full democracy" may result from simple incompetence; more likely, it is yet another expression of the prevailing ethical blindness toward anything that smells of communism. In either case, it raises obvious questions about this particular article and the newspaper that published it.

Mainstream reporting on Nicaragua is replete with similar examples, some of which have been noted elsewhere in these pages. Fortunately, such deviations are there for all to see; usually all that is required to spot them is the same level of alertness one would bring to the problem of crossing a busy street.

The strange calculus of editorial priorities also bears close watching. Our overall impression of the world outside, and our sense of the relative significance of any particular event, are very much influenced by the choices of editors — headline size and placement of articles, total column inches devoted to a particular subject, length and sequence of broadcast items, etc.

Such decisions are almost invariably made in deference to the received traditions of mainstream journalism, and not as the result of anything resembling a careful analysis. The tendency of TV news to feature the president riding the range or chopping firewood, while the mayhem he has ordered goes largely unmentioned, has already been noted. Newspapers devote headlines and oceans of ink to the dishonest pronouncements of the Prevaricator-in-Chief, while ignoring knowledgeable critics. Meanwhile, such trivialities as the life-on-earth-threatening "ozone hole" in the upper atmosphere, or the alarming implications of world population growth, are typically compressed into five column inches and buried at the bottom of page nine, to the extent that they are mentioned at all.

(Continued...)

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The Reaganites ignore these factors and point instead to Nicaragua's superiority in tanks and attack helicopters. But military analysts from both inside and outside the government have demonstrated that the tanks would be almost useless for an attack against a neighboring country; the helicopters would be easily picked off with anti-aircraft missiles available to U.S. client-states.

A U.S. intelligence report in 1984 concluded that, "The overall buildup is primarily defense-oriented, and much of the recent effort has been devoted to improving counter-insurgency capabilities."²¹⁴ The report also reveals that Soviet

Sifting through the Mainstream News (cont.)

Nevertheless, the odd article or editorial occasionally penetrates the fog of Cold War presumption which normally enshrouds the mainstream news. Such rare gems should be seized upon as points of comparison with the general run of things. For instance, it has slipped out once or twice that Nicaragua's Foreign Minister is a priest, and that many other priests are serving in the government. Typically, these fleeting revelations are glossed over in a mere line or two, and drowned in a sea of anti-Sandinista cant. To the sharp of eye, however, an obvious question suggests itself: What's all this about the Catholic Church being persecuted?

Finally, with respect to any Third World country of interest to the U.S. government, a general rule applies: News reports which fail to mention the machinations of the CIA have not even begun to scratch the surface of the story. Hardly any do.

Above all, it is essential to eschew passive consumption, and to engage the news in active dialogue. That takes work. But since when is it supposed to be easy to understand other societies and their inter-relations?

"The truth is that the only Central American country in danger of invasion by regular forces is Nicaragua. The only country likely to do that is the United States."

— Council on Hemispheric Affairs

aid has increased in direct proportion to the CIA-*contra* onslaught. As the *Wall Street Journal* has reported, "Soviet military aid to the Sandinistas began as a \$5 million trickle in 1979, and rose slightly to \$7 million in 1980. In 1981, when Congress authorized covert support of the *contras*, Soviet-bloc aid soared to \$45 million."²¹⁵

The chief cause of Nicaragua's arms build-up is the threat of a U.S. invasion, which would be far from the first in the nation's history. The White House has taken pains to feed those anxieties: "The Reagan administration has intentionally reinforced those fears, senior administration officials confirmed.... From the start, administration officials have said [that the military maneuvers in Honduras] were intended to intimidate Nicaragua. 'One of the central purposes is to create fear of an invasion,' a senior Administration official said. The American troops 'push very close to the border, deliberately, to set off all the alarms' he added."²¹⁶

It certainly came as no surprise, then, that Nicaragua has tried to increase its defensive capabilities. In fact, that was part of the White House plan. It was also part of the plan that Nicaragua be forced to get its military equipment from the Soviet bloc, in order to accent the "communist beachhead" motif.

Nicaragua's provisional government had first tried to obtain arms from the U.S., but was instantly rejected. It then turned to the Netherlands and France, and from those two allies of the U.S. acquired a small supply of defensive weapons. The Reaganites described this commerce by its friends as a stab in the back and applied "intense political and economic pressure.... Delivery of the equipment to Nicaragua faced long delays, and there have been no further arms sales.... Washing-

ton's choice to pursue policies designed to isolate Nicaragua politically and militarily have contributed directly to Nicaragua's dependence on the Soviet Union for military equipment."²¹⁷

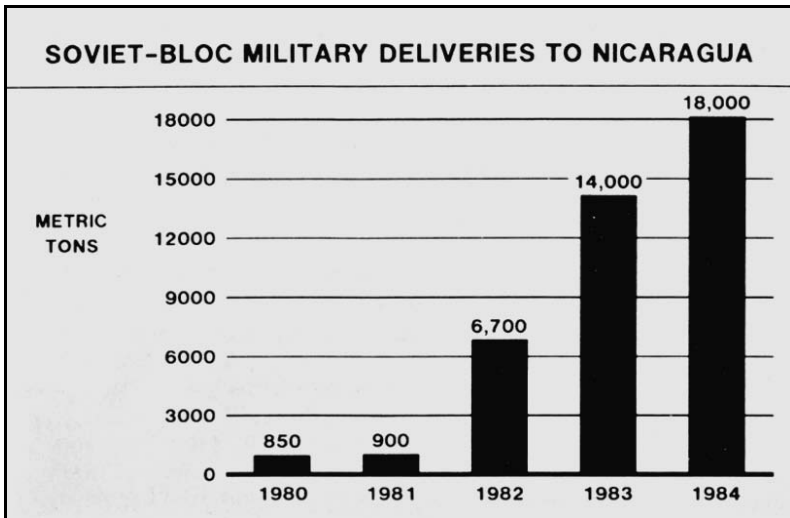
The resulting escalation has followed the pattern established by the U.S. in Vietnam; every fresh wave of matériel has been met with a somewhat smaller response from the Soviet bloc. Any doubt that the U.S. was primarily responsible for the escalation in Central America was eliminated in the wake of the "Reagan-Gorbachev summit" in December 1987. One element of that meeting was an offer by the Soviets to sharply reduce military shipments to Nicaragua if the U.S. would do likewise with its *contra* terrorists and its client-states in Central America. "The offer was rejected out of hand. The White House spokesman... called it 'absolutely unacceptable' and 'ludicrous'."²¹⁸

There is a ludicrous footnote to these proceedings: The White House has arranged for the CIA-*contras* to get military supplies from both communist Poland and "Red" China.²¹⁹

Phantom troops

When the available evidence does not meet its requirements, the administration has shown a characteristic zeal for inventing facts that do. Its public assessments of Nicaraguan troop strength have been especially expansive. In 1983, for example, a key State Department official told a Congressional committee that, "The current — and growing — 138,000 man armed force in Nicaragua stands in sharp contrast to the 33,000 man armed force in El Salvador." But a subsequent Congressional study estimated that Nicaragua could only "field about 40,000 well-trained men."²²⁰

Through the modern miracle of satellite photos, the Reaganites have also counted 36 new military bases in Nicaragua, recapitulating one of the main introductory themes of the Grenada invasion. But according to the Jacobsen report, "One of the sites mentioned, Tipitapa, has been visited by a number of Western journalists; the construction in question is



American Friends Service Committee

The Reagan administration blocked efforts by Nicaragua to obtain defensive arms from the U.S., France and the Netherlands. Data published by the Defense Department reveal that Nicaragua did not receive its first shipment from the Soviet bloc until many months after the first CIA-contra attacks.

that of a very large sugar plant." At another site, a retired U.S. Army colonel found "two open tin-roofed sheds on each side of the custom house which were empty except for piles of dirt and debris on the floors. From their appearance, these sheds had not been used for a very long time."²²¹

With few exceptions — invariably milked for maximum publicity by the White House — top U.S. military leaders in the region have failed to discern the same communist threat that so agitates the Reaganites. The prevailing view is that, "Guerrilla uprisings, no matter how anti-American or how dependent on Soviet assistance, spring largely from genuine economic and political grievances that can't be swept away by U.S. troops."²²²

Modest commitment

So much for the military argument. With equal cogency, the Reaganites have also pointed to economic assistance and trading relationships as evidence of Soviet influence in Nicaragua. But as the Jacobsen Report (cf. page 210) indicates, "Aid from Western Europe and UN agencies has been even more substantial, and hence crucial. Furthermore, it must also be said that in the context of her overall aid to Third World nations, Moscow's commitment to Nicaragua is modest.... There were a total of 95,685 Soviet and East European 'economic technicians' in Less Developed Countries in 1981; of these, only 930, less than one percent, were in Latin America. Nicaragua hosted 200, barely over one-fifth of the Latin America number, and one five-hundredth of the overall total."

The same pattern holds for something like educational assistance. There are many Nicaraguan students receiving technical training in the Soviet Union; but there are more from Colombia, and a proportionately greater number from Costa Rica, which is so often cited by the U.S. as a paragon of Central American democracy.

The U.S. State Department reports that fifteen other non-communist nations of Latin America, including Argentina and

Nicaragua: 1984 Trading Partners

EXPORTS	PARTNER	IMPORTS
12%	U.S.A.	16%
29%	E.E.C. (Europe)	12%
6%	Soviet bloc	26%
12%	Latin America	27%
25%	Japan	3%
16%	Other	16%

Source: *Central American Historical Institute*²²³

Peru, have preceded Nicaragua as recipients of substantial Soviet aid. If such aid is to be used as a pretext for destabilization, then the CIA is going to be very busy in the years ahead.

Trading relationships also reflect the Sandinistas' oft-stated commitments to diversification and non-alignment. The long-term goal is for trade to be distributed in roughly equal portions of 25% to the Soviet bloc, Europe, Latin America and the United States. Progress toward that goal has been impeded by the U.S. trade embargo and forced dependency on Soviet bloc armaments. In 1984, the last year before the embargo, the trade figures were approximately as shown in the diagram on the preceding page.

"While Soviet military aid to Nicaragua is crucial to the revolution's survival, the USSR has shown caution. Weapons deliveries are closely geared to the ups and downs of the contra war, and advanced fighter aircraft that might trigger a U.S. attack have been withheld...."

"Motivated largely by mundane commercial concerns, Moscow has built economic ties irrespective of ideology. Politics has taken backstage to the desire to meet domestic consumer demand with Latin American products, and sell Soviet goods for much-desired hard currency.... Among non-socialist developing countries, Argentina had by the early 1980s become the USSR's second largest trading partner after India.... Soviet arms sales to Peru, over \$1 billion since 1974, have been even more important than large development projects in the overall trade between the two countries, yet have attracted little attention...."

"Most Latin American countries now have a variety of relations with the USSR and many look to Moscow, not so much for development models, but for opportunities to enter fresh markets and acquire new sources of industrial goods and development assistance. Perhaps most importantly, Latin American governments interested in limiting North American influence have turned to the Soviet Union and its allies."

— North American Congress on Latin America²²⁴

The first United States ambassador to Nicaragua's revolutionary government was certain of its independence from the Soviet Union and all other nations. No fan of the Sandinistas, Lawrence Pezzullo nevertheless assured Congress in 1979 that the revolution "is very much a Nicaraguan phenomenon. There is no question about that. Sandinismo, whatever its opportunities ought to be, is a Nicaraguan, home-grown movement. Sandino predates Castro.... The nature of this thing is that you have to see it take its own form, rather than make prejudgments about it."²²⁵

This display of ambassadorial heresy was noted by the Reaganites, and Pezzullo departed his post after the CIA-*contra* campaign started to heat up. His successor arrived at similar conclusions and, with an imperious shove from Henry Kissinger, suffered a similar fate.

"EXPORTING REVOLUTION"

As a corollary of Communist Beachhead Theory, Nicaragua is said to be exporting revolution to neighboring countries, most threateningly to El Salvador.

This is an ancient theme, as old as empires, which have difficulty acknowledging the possibility that the impulse to rebellion might arise spontaneously from the oppressed people of their outlying dominions. Had they any sense of their own country's history, the Reaganites might experience an instant or two of embarrassed recognition that their complaint about Nicaragua mirrors the posture of King George III and his court, who blamed the French for inciting the otherwise contented American colonies to riot.

But the Reagan White House is noticeably lacking in both a capacity for embarrassment and a sense of history. Its standard text recites that revolution is exported when one country provides military assistance to a dissident group in another. Such a definition raises delicate questions about what the United States has been up to with its vast shipments of arms all over the world; and it rather begs the question of why dissident

groups ask for them in the first place. But such quibbles are surely not the stuff to jostle the certitudes of the Reaganites. For them, the only important question is whether or not Nicaragua is “exporting revolution” to El Salvador. The answer, they declare, is self-evident.

The Sandinistas have never tried to disguise their sympathy for other revolutionary movements in the region. Tomas Borge expressed a common view in Latin America when he argued that, “These revolutions are a necessary and inevitable step in the historical process of countries such as ours, where injustices are immense, where everything is yet to be done, where it is a crime to be young.... Don’t think that the Nicaraguan revolution is the result of happenstance. Those same conditions are accumulating in the rest of Central America, and their inevitable result is revolution.”²²⁶

But Nicaragua has its hands full trying to preserve its own revolution, and it has been careful to limit direct military assistance to other movements. In this, it has shown much greater restraint than several of its neighbors.

Conspiring in the overthrow of nearby governments is something of a tradition in Latin America. The Sandinista revolution was itself supported by Costa Rica, Panama, Mexico and Venezuela, among others. The revolutionary Farabundo Marti Forces of National Liberation (FMLN) in El Salvador also contributed, and the Sandinistas returned the favor after coming to power. FMLN leaders were offered refuge in Managua — just as CIA-*contras* are sheltered in San Jose, Tegucigalpa and San Salvador. For a brief period after the fall of Somoza, modest shipments of arms and other supplies were smuggled to FMLN units in El Salvador.

The Carter administration was aware of this traffic, and demanded its halt as a condition for continued assistance to Nicaragua. Eager to remove this excuse for U.S. hostility, and further persuaded by growing disarray within the FMLN, the Sandinistas chose to comply. There has been no valid evidence of arms shipments after April 1981.

But it was just then that the Reagan administration began its campaign to blame an undocumented Nicaragua-Cuba-

Soviet Union axis for the ongoing struggle in El Salvador. One of its first efforts in this regard was the 1981 "White Paper on Communist Interference in El Salvador". It got some big headlines at first, but then came in for some hard knocks as more careful readers noticed that, among other deficiencies, its principal conclusions were contradicted by its own evidence.

A former high-ranking official of the State Department has written that the White Paper "became a source of acute embarrassment to the administration, primarily revealing shoddy research and a fierce determination to advocate the new policy, whether or not the evidence sustained it. Some of the supporting documents turned out to be forgeries. Others were of such vague origin as to be worthless."²²⁷ It is a general critique that can serve for most information provided by the Reaganites, especially that relating to Nicaragua.

The next fiasco was a press conference in March of 1982 featuring a Nicaraguan youth who was supposed to have confessed to gun running into El Salvador for the Sandinistas. Instead, he told the assembled press corps that his confession had been extracted under torture, and

"Intelligence officials claim they can 'hear a toilet flush in Managua', yet they have not been able... to produce a captured van, or downed airplane."

— *Jacobsen Report*

that he only agreed to co-operate in order to escape the prison where he had been held captive for a year.

Meanwhile, evidence kept accumulating that the FMLN was getting most of its weapons by taking or buying them from the Salvadoran army. "U.S. officials in fact acknowledge that most of the arms in the guerillas' arsenal are captured, stolen or bought within El Salvador itself." A well-placed congressman concurred: "We are the principal suppliers of the rebels."²²⁸

The *coup de grace* was administered by a former CIA analyst of data from Central America. David MacMichael quit the agency in 1984, disgusted with the misrepresentations employed by the Reaganites to support their preconceived

notions. He has since become one of the administration's harshest critics and has testified on behalf of Nicaragua before the World Court.

According to MacMichael, "There has not been a successful interdiction or a verified report of arms moving from Nicaragua to El Salvador since April 1981.... The administration and the CIA have systematically misrepresented Nicaraguan involvement in the supply of arms to Salvadoran guerrillas to justify efforts to overthrow the Nicaraguan government."²²⁹

But who pays attention to the proceedings of the World Court? Undaunted and unashamed, the Reaganites pressed on. In 1986, they concocted a plan for Panama's military dictator, who was collecting hundreds of thousands of dollars on the CIA payroll, to frame the Sandinistas. The plan was for General Noriega to order a shipment of arms from a Soviet bloc country; it would then be seized just off the coast of El Salvador, and linked to Nicaragua with the use of phony documents.

The deal fell through when the general and the White House had a falling out over other matters. There is evidence that Noriega then supplied sophisticated weapons, including U.S. anti-aircraft missiles, to the FMLN in El Salvador.²³⁰

In short, the Reaganites have stumbled more than once in their efforts to blame the Sandinistas for the revolt in El Salvador. That has not dissuaded them from endlessly repeating the charge, of course. But it has become much more fashionable, instead, to lament the supposed "betrayal" of Nicaragua's own revolution.

"REVOLUTION BETRAYED"

To hear Ronald Reagan tell it, nobody was more eager for the overthrow of Somoza than he and his pals. Although there is no record of Reagan ever uttering a peep of interest in the insurrection, and though his political allies were all die-hard fans of Somoza, he has since waxed inconsolable over the "betrayal" of the revolution by the wicked Sandinistas:

“Theirs was a communist organization, and their support of the revolutionary goals was sheer deceit. Quickly and ruthlessly, they took complete control.”²³¹

To embellish this dismal tale, the president’s speechwriters invented the phantom “commitments to the Organization of American States” which were supposed to have been conveyed in a telex letter of 12 July 1979. There was such a letter, in which the provisional junta outlined an eight-point peace plan. But it is slender thread on which to hang a foreign policy, since it is neither a formal treaty nor a proposed constitution. According to an OAS official, it was merely “a telex sent by a group trying to reach power, to the secretary-general, which he communicated and made public to the member states... for no other reason than that it was interesting.”²³²

It may be inconvenient for the Reaganites to acknowledge, but the fact is that the Sandinistas have most assuredly kept faith with the stated objectives of their revolution. As one U.S. journalist discovered: “Many Nicaraguans consider the charge [of betrayal] laughable, if not completely beside the point.... To Anibal Fonseca, a physics professor and dean of the School of Sciences at the National University of Nicaragua, the charge of betrayal is a ‘completely phony issue’, raised by those who forget there is always resistance to change. Fonseca cites university education as one promise the Sandinistas have kept. ‘It was available before only to those who could afford it,’ he says. ‘Now, it is open to everybody’.”²³³

“I believe that if we had and would keep our dirty, bloody, dollar-soaked fingers out of the business of these nations so full of depressed, exploited people, they will arrive at a solution of their own.... And, if unfortunately their revolution must be of the violent type, because the ‘haves’ refuse to share with the ‘have-nots’ by any peaceful method, at least what they get will be their own, and not the American style, which they don’t want crammed down their throats.”

— David M. Shoup, U.S. Marine Commandant (ret.)

Fraudulent opposition

Another promise kept is that of broad-based participatory democracy, most significantly through the labor unions and mass organizations, but also through the electoral process. In fact, the 1984 elections posed such a threat to the plans of the Reagan administration that it took extraordinary steps to undermine their integrity and legitimacy. Its actions were so outrageous that a Swedish parliamentarian on the scene stated that, "If U.S. officials had acted similarly in Sweden or in any Western European country, they would have been expelled from the country."²³⁴

That view was corroborated by most of the international observers who monitored the election. One of the most thorough investigations was conducted by the delegation of the U.S. Latin American Studies Association (LASA) which reported several attempts by the U.S. to sabotage the elections and to impeach their legitimacy abroad.

While the CIA-*contras* busied themselves with killing election officials and scaring peasants away from the polls, the U.S. embassy staff concentrated on creating the impression that opposition parties were excluded from participation. One party leader was offered a substantial wad of money to withdraw and claim unfair treatment. He refused, but his campaign manager did accept a similar offer.

The presidential candidate of the strongest opposition party was solicited personally by the U.S. ambassador and other embassy officials on several occasions. "There was a well-beaten path to his door," notes the LASA report. He eventually succumbed to these entreaties, reportedly for a promise of the presidency after the Sandinistas were defeated.

As its *pièce de résistance*, the U.S. patched together a coalition of opposition parties for the specific purpose of withdrawing in protest from the campaign. Dubbed the *Coordinadora Democrática* (Democratic Coordinator), the operation was run by the CIA through COSEP. Almost as an afterthought, Arturo Cruz was selected as the official non-candidate for president.

"The administration wanted the opposition candidate, Arturo Cruz, either not to enter the race or, if he did, to withdraw before the election, claiming the conditions were unfair.... 'The Administration never contemplated letting Cruz stay in the race,' one official said."²³⁵

Not in on the joke, the Sandinistas made concession after concession to the *Coordinadora*, but to no avail. "Cruz spent the last few weeks before the election in Washington, participating in staged media events.... The overwhelming weight of evidence available to us suggests that the *Coordinadora* did not, in fact, intend to run; it chose, instead, to pursue its political goals in 1984 outside the electoral process."²³⁶

The mainstream press in the U.S. carried out its part of the operation with customary complicity. As the LASA report observes: "The Reagan administration effectively focused attention on the participation or non-participation of Cruz as the litmus test of free elections in Nicaragua. While there was never any credible evidence that Cruz and the *Coordinadora* had a broad popular following in Nicaragua — Cruz himself had lived in Washington, D.C. since 1970, returning to Nicaragua only for a year during 1979-1980 — the Administration successfully portrayed them as the significant opposition force, without whose participation any election in Nicaragua would be meaningless."²³⁷

The mainstream press followed the White House script almost verbatim. The big news was Arturo Cruz and his noble struggle for democracy, with the *New York Times* running headlines like "Election Plan in Nicaragua Is Criticized by Opposition" and "Going through the Motions in Nicaragua".

Such distortions formed a mirror image of mainstream reporting on El Salvador's fraudulent elections months earlier. A review in *Quill*, published by the Society of Professional Journalists, concluded: "While many individual stories showed balance and understanding of the complexity and context, the overall tone of the coverage echoed the Reagan administration pitch: the elections in El Salvador were an expression of imperfect democracy; the election in Nicaragua was a sham."²³⁸

MiG madness

Pre-packaged as a sham, the actual results of the election were trivialized or ignored by the press. To make sure that they were, the White House contrived its infamous "Mystery MiGs" hoax. For several days surrounding the Nicaraguan election, the news was full of anxious reports that a shipment of powerful Soviet MiG fighter planes was on its way to Nicaragua. Supposedly, this presaged a major Soviet-Nicaraguan military expansion in the region.

Harassed and bullied by 'Land of the Free'

*From the report of Lord Chitnis,
1984 election observer from Britain's House of Lords*

All the normal features of campaigning were covered, but there were some unusual and particular provisions. For example, the state made available to each of the registered parties, irrespective of their national strength, approximately \$900,000, which must make some parties in this country green with envy....

Parties were free to buy time on radio and television up to a maximum. In addition, time was assigned to the parties both in radio and television in a way similar to, though greatly in excess of, that used in Britain....

Voters could not be said to be under any visual or psychological pressure to vote in any particular way.... The only complaint of harassment received was from a leading Conservative who said that their supporters were being harassed by the *contras* not to vote....

As American harassment of the Nicaraguan government continues, as it certainly will, more people throughout the world will realise that what is happening is that the democratically-elected government of a sovereign nation is being quite unjustifiably harassed and bullied by those who claim to come from "The home of the brave and the land of the free".

The U.S. government, however, knew very well that there were no MiGs on the way. The authoritative British military journal, *Jane's Weekly*, reported that, "Crates appearing to carry MiG fighters and said by U.S. officials to be destined for Nicaragua were in fact off-loaded from a Soviet freighter in Libya. This information was known to administration officials before they leaked the story."²³⁹

But most folks don't read *Jane's Weekly* or anything like it, and it took several days for the hoax to peter out in the press; it was never exposed as such. The benefits to the administration were substantial. For starters, the Nicaraguan election results were blown even further into journalistic oblivion.

The manufactured incident also provided an excuse to publicly threaten Nicaragua with a "preemptive strike", forcing the Sandinistas to prepare for an invasion at a time when they had expected to bask in the glory of their impressive electoral victory. The very real threat was emphasized by a barrage of spy-plane sonic booms which reminded the populace of the 500-pound bombs that Somoza's planes used to drop on them. The MiG scare also served to alarm the U.S. public about the "massive arms buildup" in Nicaragua, while greasing the political skids for future attempts to destroy the non-existent weaponry.

It was yet another triumph of White House marketing. A National Security Council briefing paper gloated "We have succeeded in returning the public and private focus back on the Nicaraguan elections as the key stumbling block to prospects for national reconciliation and peace in the region.... The PLI [opposition party] withdrawal from the elections has left the Sandinistas holding a near-worthless hand."²⁴⁰

Constitutional guarantees

The Reaganites may have succeeded in pinning the epithet of "Marxist-Leninist" on Nicaragua, but a description of its conduct and a reading of its new constitution suggest something else, entirely.

The constitution establishes several fundamental principles that are anathema to communist regimes, including political pluralism, mixed economy, separation of powers, international non-alignment, and judicial review.

Mixed economy

Critics of the Sandinistas assert that these and other constitutional provisions are just so much worthless scribbling. But after eight years, the economy bears a closer resemblance to those of Norway and the Netherlands than to Cuba and the Soviet Union. Approximately 60 percent of Nicaragua's economy remains in private hands, while in "free enterprise" Costa Rica the ratio is just the opposite — 60 percent under government control and 40 percent in private hands.

To COSEP complaints of excessive government control, a small rancher responds, "That's resentment talking. They do not have the privileges they once had. The robbery of this country is definitely over." Adds a wealthy businessman: "I have reached the conclusion that old-fashioned capitalism is going out of style, and should go out of style. It ends up putting too much power in the hands of the few. I think we are living in a mildly socialistic society. There are a great many capitalists in Nicaragua and the government is protecting us. But the freedom to do anything to your workers — no. That, happily, no longer exists."²⁴¹

Despite extensive land reform, there are still plenty of large plantations intact, even though many have become suspiciously inefficient. Government administrators receive training from a Managua outpost of the Harvard Business School. Some 40 multi-national corporations, including Exxon, Hertz and IBM "have survived, grown, and generated profits, despite the foreign exchange shortages that continue to obstruct the repatriation of their earnings."²⁴²

Obviously, the accusation of "Marxist-Leninist betrayal" has been used by the Reaganites' as a smokescreen for their

(Continued on page 235)

The Group of 12 and “Betrayal”

The Group of 12, or “*Los Doce*”, was comprised of those prominent Nicaraguans who in late 1977 declared their open support for the FSLN in an advertisement that ran in the pre-CIA version of *La Prensa*. Their declaration conferred legitimacy on the revolution, and attracted a large portion of the middle and upper classes. They were soon joined by three other influential citizens, and most of the fifteen spent the next two years in Europe or the Americas, gathering support for the struggle against Somoza. Although their numbers are small, they retain close links with key sectors of Nicaraguan society, and are especially well-qualified to address the charge that the Sandinistas have “betrayed the revolution”.

Only one of the fifteen has turned against the Sandinistas. Another moved to Mexico before the fall of Somoza and remains there. The remaining thirteen continue to work for the revolution.

The lone defector was Arturo Cruz, who served briefly as the provisional government’s Central Bank President and as Ambassador to the U.S. He resigned in 1981, claiming disagreement with the government’s socialist policies and its “antagonism” toward the United States. Cruz was subsequently recruited by the CIA to shill as the *Coordinadora Democrática*’s candidate-who-would-not-run for president in 1984, and soon afterward joined the CIA-*contra* political front at a salary of \$84,000 per year and other considerations. He resigned from that post in 1987, charging that the organization “never had more than a paper existence”.

Among the thirteen who remain are: Enrique Baltodano, a large coffee producer who became Nicaragua’s Comptroller-General; Miguel D’Escoto, Maryknoll priest, now Foreign Minister; and Ricardo Coronel, cattle rancher and Vice-Minister of Agricultural Development.²⁴³

(Continued from page 233)

assault on Nicaragua. That is a dubious rationale for aggressive warfare under any circumstances. David MacMichael, the lapsed CIA agent who testified against the United States at the World Court, feels that in this case it was a hoax from the beginning: "Of course there are a few true believers in the government who think the Soviet Union is behind everything, but for the most part they're a pretty cynical bunch who thought they could win easily in Nicaragua and publicize this as a defeat of the evil empire."²⁴⁴

"TOTALITARIAN DUNGEON"

"The Nicaraguan people are trapped in a totalitarian dungeon," Ronald Reagan has proclaimed on many occasions. Things really got out of hand, it seems, after the Sandinistas invoked a national State of Emergency in 1985, "suspending virtually all civil liberties" as the White House would have it.²⁴⁵

True to form, this report on the death of freedom in Nicaragua was greatly exaggerated. The State of Emergency was, in fact, a limited response to the escalating attack by the United States and its lackeys. As Amnesty International observed, "These measures were relaxed by the legislature in November, 1985. The restriction on freedom of expression was

"In the conduct of internal politics, the 'communist threat' has frequently served as a pretext for suppressing social reform movements calling for improved living standards, a more just distribution of wealth, and participation of the masses in the government of the country. Those who resist any change in the traditional structure of society have recourse to the simple expedient of identifying popular protest with communism and the legitimate demands of the underprivileged classes with Marxist subversion."

— Enrique Rivarola, Argentinean diplomat²⁴⁶

"We were told that the government had arbitrarily seized the land of Enrique Bolaños, the current President of COSEP and largest landowner in the Masaya region, simply because he is an opponent of the government. When we looked further into the story, however, we discovered that this incident began with two attempts by the government to clear militant squatters from Bolaños' land...."

"After the first of these two occupations, the government persuaded the peasants to leave; after the second occupation, the peasants refused. It was only at this point that the government offered to buy Bolaños' land at a fair market value or, if he preferred, to give him two acres of land outside the immediate area for each acre of land that was in dispute. Bolaños refused both offers, and then claimed that the government had ruthlessly confiscated his land."

— Freedom of Expression in Nicaragua
National Lawyers Guild²⁴⁷

was limited to censorship of matters concerning military and economic affairs considered prejudicial to national security. The restriction on freedom of movement was limited to war zones; and public meetings, demonstrations and strike actions were permitted with prior authorization."²⁴⁸

Lively debate

By 1988 over 60,000 U.S. citizens had visited revolutionary Nicaragua. With few exceptions, they have reported an atmosphere of lively debate, with no restraints on non-violent opposition to the government.

The human rights organization, Americas Watch, points out that, "Any Nicaraguan and any visitor to Nicaragua can walk into a score or more of offices in the country's capital and encounter the officers and employees of various independent institutions who will not only voice their opinions freely in criticism of the state, but will also do so for attribution. Some will hand out literature expressing those opinions.

"This is inconceivable in any state appropriately described as totalitarian. Moreover, it is inconceivable in many of the

countries vigorously supported by the United States. While a visitor to nearby El Salvador, Guatemala or Haiti, for example, may encounter criticism of the government, if it is criticism that is as strong as one regularly encounters in Nicaragua, the speaker will ordinarily request anonymity. Similarly, it is impossible to find independent institutions speaking so freely in more distant allies of the United States such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Zaire and Morocco."²⁴⁹ Not to mention Chile, which has endured a suffocating State of Emergency since 1973 with the full support of the United States.

An important index of trust between the people and their government is the size of the national militia. Over 100,000 ordinary Nicaraguans have been armed to help fight off the CIA-*contras* and discourage a U.S. invasion; there are plans to increase that number to 600,000, more than one third of the population over fifteen years old.

A journalist from India has raised the obvious question: "If the [pro-*contra*] opposition were correct, and the Sandinistas were so unpopular, how was it that the government could hand out all these guns to the people and be confident that the weapons would not be turned against them? There wasn't another regime in Central America that would dare to do the same — not El Salvador nor Guatemala, not Honduras, not Costa Rica. While in tyrannical, 'Stalinist' Nicaragua, the government armed the peasantry and they, in turn, pointed the guns, every one of them' against the counter-revolutionary forces. Could this mean something?"²⁵⁰

Censoring the CIA

The censorship and suspension of *La Prensa* has also been used as evidence of totalitarian dungeonism. The facts tell a different story. For one thing, censorship applies to all newspapers, including *El Nuevo Diario*, founded by the bulk of *La Prensa's* original staff. Though difficult to condone, Sandinista censorship is considerably more benevolent than the assassination and expulsion which the U.S. freely tolerates in client-states such as El Salvador and Honduras.

Given *La Prensa's* central role in the CIA's destabilization campaign (cf. "Bad news", page 153), a great many Nicaraguans have argued for years that it should be shut down altogether. As early as 1982, a Jesuit research institute in Managua reported that, "More and more groups and persons within Nicaragua are protesting the reporting of *La Prensa*. Some of the groups which have protested in recent weeks include: Mothers of the Heroes and Martyrs, the Nicaraguan National Journalists Union, unions affiliated with the Sandinista Workers Central, the Bishop of the Atlantic Coast and the Ecumenical Center."²⁵¹

Publication of *La Prensa* was finally suspended by the government in July of 1986, after the U.S. Congress approved \$100 million of open military assistance to the CIA-contras. Days before that vote, the nominal director of *La Prensa* had argued for approval of the funding in a *Washington Post* guest article.

The CIA's paper was allowed to resume publishing again in October 1987, in compliance with the regional peace initiative led by Costa Rica's President Arias. Its first issue included a front-page editorial denouncing the "totalitarian communist" regime of the Sandinistas, and much more in the same peaceful spirit.

An analysis of its first six weeks of resumed publication concluded that "*La Prensa* has continued to faithfully reflect U.S. policy for the past seven years. The paper also continues to misrepresent the economic and military situation, at times with flagrant lies. The misrepresentations can only have the effect of destabilizing the government, rather than contributing to a peaceful solution."²⁵²

The government's knowledge of Latin American history, especially the fate of the Allende regime in Chile, informs its perspective on freedom of the press. "After the death of Chile," notes the editor of the Sandinista newspaper, *Barricada*, "a generation of sociologists — French, English and North American — have done excellent analytical work explaining the political errors that Allende committed, and one of these

was his maintenance of abstract freedom of the press. We are not disposed to having our revolution reversed, and we do not want another generation of sociologists saying we made the same mistakes as Allende." ²⁵³

Unfortunately for the people of Nicaragua, the U.S. public and mainstream press lack a kindred appreciation of Allende's fate and the misery suffered by Chileans since. As a result, the Reagan administration has been able to exploit the censorship and suspension of *La Prensa*, with considerable effect, as a prime example of Sandinista oppression. It is therefore necessary to "promote democracy" with the grisly inducements offered by the CIA-*contras*. It is a dubious argument, as Americas Watch has pointed out: "If it were true... this would, of course, contradict everything that is known about the way that nations behave when they are at war. Even the freest nations radically circumscribe liberties under such circumstances." ²⁵⁴

"Communist indoctrination"

A common complaint of pro-*contra* critics is that the government is carrying out a project of communist indoctrination. Even sympathetic visitors from the U.S. can be taken aback when they hear the Sandinista anthem's reference to vanquishing the "Yankee invaders". But the term, Yankee, in this case does not equate with North American generally. It refers only to the imperialists who have exploited Nicaragua for most of the 20th century.

The Catholic hierarchy is particularly upset by what it regards as corruption of the education process. The Church has reason to be dismayed; for, although the government continues to subsidize most private Catholic schools, the bishops are no longer as free to determine the curriculum as they were under Somoza. Since few of his subjects went to school in the first place, it mattered little to the old despot what they learned there. Indeed, the greater the religious content, the better for instilling the habit of obedience to authority.

There is still ample provision for religious instruction. But according to Cardinal Obando and his supporters, it is not enough; and the rest of the curriculum is said to be reeking of you-know-what.

For the church hierarchy, even the Literacy Crusade is an example of the new “pedagogy of oppression, indoctrinating students in Marxist-Leninist dogma and Sandinista ideology.” These attacks never mention that the basic text of the Literacy Crusade is that subversive tract, the Christian Bible.



Jaime Perozo

Free totalitarian dental check-up

The question of political indoctrination was the subject of a 1986 report by Jesuit researchers. They investigated specific charges, for instance that pictures of hand grenades were used to illustrate math lessons. Noting that “Nicaraguans see soldiers every day”, the researchers found that “rifles and grenades appear on only one page [of all text books reviewed], and most examples were objects such as bananas, baseballs, chairs and trees.” Nor must Nicaraguan parents defend their offspring against the steady bombardment of televised cartoons and advertisements for war toys to which U.S. children are daily subjected.

The Nicaraguan Association of Parents of Christian Schools has charged that the Ministry of Education limited private schools to two hours of religious instruction per week. The Jesuit investigators found this to be untrue: “One principal, Fr. Xavier Llasera, added that his problem is the same as his U.S. counterparts — trying to find time in a busy academic schedule for religious studies.”

The Christian Parents group also charged that, “The Sandinistas have excessively influenced Nicaraguan education

in favor of their own political interests." The proof includes a history lesson which takes a critical view of the Spanish conquest of the New World, a sex education program for teenagers, and statements such as "General Sandino was born in 1895.... the anti-imperialist struggle began in 1926.... General Sandino was assassinated in 1934.... the FSLN was founded in 1961."

By way of comparison, the Jesuits' report quotes a high school history teacher who recalls the not-so-good old days: "Beginning with the first history books written in Nicaragua, history was completely distorted.... The Somozas were presented as 'progressive' and 'democratic', etc., while the treatment of Sandino was totally distorted....

"In every society, education is related to the overall goals and purposes of society. In Nicaragua, the government requires that some general educational norms be followed. The same is true for El Salvador and Costa Rica and elsewhere. This does not deprive anyone in any way of the right to criticize in the classroom. There is complete academic freedom. The teacher can also present material in addition to the minimal requirements."²⁵⁵

This may be compared with another teacher's account, on page 148, of the educational atmosphere during the Somoza era.

Suffering statistics

As final proof of Sandinista oppression, Ronald Reagan's speechwriters have poignantly invoked the hordes of refugees said to be fleeing their totalitarian dungeon: "As the refugees come flooding out of Nicaragua, it becomes harder and harder not to hear their cries of anguish, not to see the suffering of their shattered lives."²⁵⁶

Administration officials and their confederates toss out alarming statistics on freedom-loving Nicaraguans huddled in the refugee camps of Central America. By 1987, the totals were said to be 100,000 in Costa Rica, 250,000 in the other three countries of Central America, and 150,000 in the U.S.

“There is virtually not a single Third World or developing country which can truly boast a free press.... In Fiji, journalists are arrested and put in sewer tanks if they anger the military regime. The two national dailies were twice shut down [in 1987]. They are now operating under strict censorship. Similar tactics, with slight variations, are applied in developing countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific....

“American newspapers have their own problems. They are very naïve about the world outside of the American continent. As a result, many readers know very little about the rest of the world.... They rely a lot on the three major wire services.... From personal experience, I know that these wire services often get their facts mixed up. Maybe they think no one in the United States will challenge their ‘facts’ on something that happened in a distant part of the world.”

— Umendra Singh, reporter for the *Fiji Times*²⁵⁷

and Mexico. When pressed for a source for those figures, administration spokesmen usually cited the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

But as of October 1987, the High Commissioner’s office in Washington, D.C., was reporting that the total number of Nicaraguans in Costa Rica was 15,505; in Mexico and the rest of Central America, 27,131. There were another 50,000 or so in the U.S., for a grand total of less than 100,000. Asked about the oft-cited total of 350,000 in Central America, the UNHCR official replied, “We have no idea where that figure came from.”²⁵⁸

The total volume of refugee anguish was also greatly diminished in a 1985 report of the U.S. Census Bureau, which disclosed a net *in-migration* to Nicaragua during the first five years of the revolution. “On balance, since the Sandinistas came to power, despite the military conflict and the hardships resulting from it — deaths, forced relocations, economic shortages and an unpopular draft — Nicaragua has absorbed more former refugees than it has created new ones.”²⁵⁹

Needless to say, mere facts are of little or no interest to the Reaganites. On those rare occasions when they are confronted with indisputable evidence of their errors, they typically

respond by changing the subject and inventing some new disinformation. If that doesn't work, they can always sound the alarm about the communist thrust of Sandinista "tendencies".

Like so much else about U.S. policy toward Nicaragua, this has a familiar ring to it. A prominent Chilean editor and publisher recalls that the same notion energized right-wing anxieties about the doomed government of Salvador Allende: "You know, we were so caught up in the right wing's propaganda that we freely lent our media to echoing the image of Allende as a devious man of ill will who was about to drastically curtail freedoms. It wasn't until after the shock of the military coup that we realized he had never actually done any of it."²⁶⁰

"RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION"

"Like communist governments everywhere," recites Ronald Reagan, "the Sandinistas have launched assaults against ethnic and religious groups. The capital's only synagogue was desecrated and fire-bombed — the entire Jewish community was forced to flee Nicaragua. Protestant Bible meetings have been broken up by raids, by mob violence, by machine guns.... Cardinal Obando has put the matter forthrightly: 'We want to state clearly that this government is totalitarian. We are dealing with an enemy of the church'."²⁶¹

When specific allegations of persecution are investigated, however, they are invariably found to be completely false or grotesquely distorted. Elliott Abrams, for example, once informed readers of the *Washington Post* about "some of the major incidents of the last few weeks alone". One was the arbitrary detention of the bishop of the Atlantic Coast region "who has been harassed repeatedly". Another involved "the unfortunate priest who was forced to disrobe at gunpoint by Sandinista police and was marched naked through the streets of Managua to jail"²⁶²

Not quite. When the Atlantic Coast bishop learned of his alleged persecution, he emphatically declared that he had never been arrested, but that he had once consented to be

flown out of Puerto Cabezas when a large unit of CIA-*contras* threatened to attack it. As for the alarming case of the naked priest, a reporter from the *Philadelphia Daily News* witnessed the event and gave this account:

“The police did not force Carballo to disrobe. He was in that state when they found him. But what the police did do is save his life from the outraged, pistol-wielding boyfriend of the young woman Carballo was visiting.”²⁶³

The police covered the priest up, and removed him from the area for his own safety. Only later was he discovered to be a priest — the same Rev. Bismarck Carballo who was expelled from the country in 1986 after lobbying in Europe and the U.S. for military assistance to the CIA-*contras*. Expelled from the country at the same time for the same reason was Bishop Pablo Vega (cf. page 151).

Naturally, the two exiled clergymen instantly became pathetic symbols of Sandinista oppression. The Pope expressed his shock and outrage, and all over the world politicians with Catholic constituents joined in the chorus of the Vatican nag.

Those religious leaders best equipped to make judgments in the matter were not so quick to condemn the government, however. The Ecumenical Committee of U.S. Church Personnel in Nicaragua, with 35 Protestant and Catholic members, issued a statement which argued that, “Bishop Vega, by his public words and actions, was involved in what we Americans would call ‘advocating the violent overthrow of the government’ and treason in war time. The bishop had gone beyond the prophetic, critical stance which characterizes the church at its best in Latin America, and had entered into behavior which any government would have to consider illegal.

“From our own experience, we know that the government is serious when it affirms its respect for religious freedom. Many Christians rejoice that their government is helping them to build a new society based on gospel values and principles of sharing, love and respect for the dignity of every person.”

There were many in Nicaragua who felt that Vega and Carballo should have been grateful to have evaded prison.

The Sandinista leadership was under strong pressure from its constituency to prosecute them; their expulsion was ordered as the least troublesome option.

A U.S. Jesuit working at Managua's Central American Historical Institute reflected afterward, "I never thought I would be defending a government's decision to deport a bishop. [But Bishop Vega] is aiding and abetting the enemy by supporting the U.S.-funded *contras* and is guilty of treason, as the people put it plainly.... It is entirely unfair and unwarranted to accuse the government of persecuting the church simply because it took normal punitive action against someone who had clearly gone beyond the law."²⁶⁴

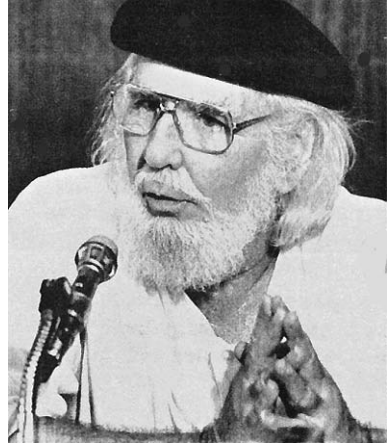
Papal rebuke

The most well-publicized instance of alleged anti-Catholic persecution had occurred three years prior to the forced exile of Carballo and Vega, on the occasion of the Pope's 1983 visit to Managua. The Sandinistas had actually been looking forward to this papal visit, assuming that it would imply a rebuke to the CIA-*contras* and confer a blessing on the revolution, which they felt to be a profound expression of Christian values. A case of naive presumption, that, compounded by bad timing.

The Vatican was just then in the throes of a mission to quench the fires of liberation theology and the popular church, which were viewed as grave threats to traditional authority (cf. "The *contra* cardinal", page 146). Coached by the reactionaries of the Nicaraguan hierarchy and the Vatican court, the Pope arrived in a mood to preach church discipline and very little else.

One of his first and most significant gestures after exiting his plane at Managua Airport was to publicly rebuke one of the revolution's living icons, Rev. Ernesto Cardenal, the Minister of Culture and a charismatic leader of the popular church. As nearly all of Nicaragua watched, in person or on television, Cardenal knelt before the Pope in anticipation of a

Ernesto Cardenal, poet, priest and Minister of Culture, is one of many leaders of the popular church who are very much "with the process" of the revolution. They have been almost completely ignored by U.S. news media, which have instead promoted Cardinal Obando as the only legitimate voice of Roman Catholicism in Nicaragua.



blessing, but received instead an admonishing finger and the command that, "You must regularize your situation with the Vatican."

A distinguished Irish observer later explained the implications of that public scolding: "In the eyes of many Nicaraguans, Ernesto Cardenal is something more important than a minister or even a priest. He is a poet... in a land where poets are esteemed to an extent, I think, unknown in any other part of the world.... When the Pope snubbed Ernesto, many Nicaraguans — all those who were 'with the process' and probably quite a few others as well — felt themselves snubbed, in the person of this admired and beloved Nicaraguan... It seemed gratuitous, petty — a needless piece of humiliation."²⁶⁵

The remainder of the Pope's 12-hour visit was imbued with much the same spirit. The culminating event was an open-air mass in Managua, with some 650,000 Nicaraguans in attendance. Coming at the end of an exceedingly hot and hectic day, shoving and shouting matches began to break out in the crowd between adherents of the traditional and popular churches, and there were accusations from each camp that the other had packed the gathering.

To this ecclesiastical disharmony the Pope added a stern warning: "Church unity is put into question when the power-

ful factors that build and maintain it... are brought up against earthly considerations, unacceptable ideological commitments, temporal options, or concepts of the Church which are contrary to the true one."

Noticeably lacking from papal discourse all day was any reference to the advances of the revolution, or to the suffering caused by U.S. aggression. When he referred to the popular church as "an absurd and dangerous project" some in the crowd began to cry out, "We want peace! People's power! They shall not pass! *He's* not a Pope of the poor; look at his dress!" and so on.

"Silencio!" cried the Pope.

Then fifty "Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs" took the stage and begged for a blessing: "The blood of our boys is crying out!... We want a prayer for our martyrs!" None was forthcoming, whereupon many in the audience began to boo and call out insults.

A nun later recalled the Pope's visit: "I love him, and the *campesinos* I work with here were very happy to have him visit. But he was poorly advised. Sixteen Christian boys from the *milicia* were buried the day before the Pope came. Their mothers asked the Pope to say a prayer for them. He refused. Something for these young *compañeros* killed on the border fighting *los contras*. Just one word. No. In Costa Rica he said he came to listen to the cries of the people. Here he spoke only of the need for unity in the church."²⁶⁶

In short, the papal visit turned out to be a fiasco for both principal parties. The Pope not only failed to subdue the popular church, but his intransigence served to strengthen it; he has since, publicly, softened his stance on liberation theology. For its part, the government ended up without a blessing, and with a reputation as an irreligious and ungracious host.

There were some clear winners, however. One of them was Archbishop Obando, since the day's events appeared to confirm that the Sandinistas and the popular church were every bit as dangerous to Vatican authority as he had warned — his elevation to cardinal two years later was very likely a direct consequence.

The Reaganites could barely conceal their lust to capitalize on the episode; here was a propaganda feast handed to them on a papal platter. They have been gnawing on the carcass of that dog day in Managua ever since.

Elements of the "Israel lobby" in the U.S. have been involved in the assault on the Sandinista government from its inception. The well-publicized hoax about the persecution of Managua's Jews and the desecration of their synagogue had its origins in a 1983 pronouncement of the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League.

Those charges have since been investigated by the American Jewish Committee, the World Jewish Congress and the Organization of American States, among others.

They all found the charges to be false. Even the pro-*contra* Permanent Commission on Human Rights in Managua has refuted them.²⁶⁷

The synagogue was damaged during the insurrection against Somoza, and had been abandoned by the time of the Sandinista victory in 1979. It was then appropriated by the government for use as a children's center. "When the government in 1983 offered to return the building, and made plans to move the children's association elsewhere, Managua's remaining Jews stated that they could not afford to keep it up. It may be put to another use supportive of the Jewish community if funds can be raised."²⁶⁸

The government, itself, includes many officials of Jewish descent, including the current ambassador to the U.S. As with so many other countries, however, there is a tradition of anti-Semitism in Nicaragua. It may be aggravated by the fact that



Rachel DaSilva

*The CIA-*contra* cardinal's unenviable reputation is limned by this angry message in the ruins of Managua: "Cardinal Obando walks with Calero. Death." (Adolfo Calero heads the *contras'* political front.)*

Israel was one of Somoza's strongest supporters, supplying him with arms even after the U.S. had ceased to do so; it has since become a major supplier of the CIA-*contras* and the genocidal government of Guatemala.

Christ killers

There are other sources of anti-Semitic sentiment, as well. One of the most vehement practitioners is that champion of religious tolerance, Cardinal Obando. His homily of 7 October 1984 was printed in *La Prensa* and includes this display of Christian charity: "The leaders of Israel... mistreated [the prophets], beat them, killed them. Finally, as supreme proof of his love, God sent his Divine Son; but they... also killed him, crucifying him.... The Jews killed the prophets and finally the Son of God.... Such idolatry calls forth the sky's vengeance."²⁶⁹

The issue of religious freedom has been addressed by the Protestant churches, whose members comprise 10-15 percent of the Nicaraguan population. A delegation from the U.S. National Council of Churches investigated administration charges of persecution in 1984 and found them entirely groundless. On the contrary, the Protestant community had grown from 80,000 to 380,000 since 1979. The greatest concern of all the Protestants interviewed — including members of the Moravian Church, to which most Miskito Indians belong — was the constant threat of CIA-*contra* attacks. Witnesses also criticized the Catholic hierarchy for "transfers and forced isolation of priests and communities who openly sympathize with the Nicaraguan political process".

Adds Dr. Gustavo Parajon, President of the Evangelical Committee for Aid to Development in Nicaragua (CEPAD), which provides support to 46 denominations: "Anyone who lives in Nicaragua knows that all churches are carrying out their respective ministries. *Ondas de Luz*, the evangelical radio station, operates 18 hours a day, freely preaching the Gospel. Church rallies, evangelistic campaigns, spiritual retreats are

held frequently.... Anyone who lives in Nicaragua or comes to visit will find out that there is freedom to worship and to proselytize.”²⁷⁰

“HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES”

As one might expect of a totalitarian dungeon, the human rights situation in Nicaragua is perfectly dreadful to behold when viewed through the distorted lens of the White House.

The Sandinistas’ most horrific crime against humanity is supposed to be “their campaign of virtual genocide against the Miskito Indians”, as Ronald Reagan has so movingly recited on numerous occasions. It has been explained elsewhere that this is a hoax, and will no doubt be recorded in the annals of the CIA as one of its greatest propaganda triumphs (cf. “Native resentments”, page 158).

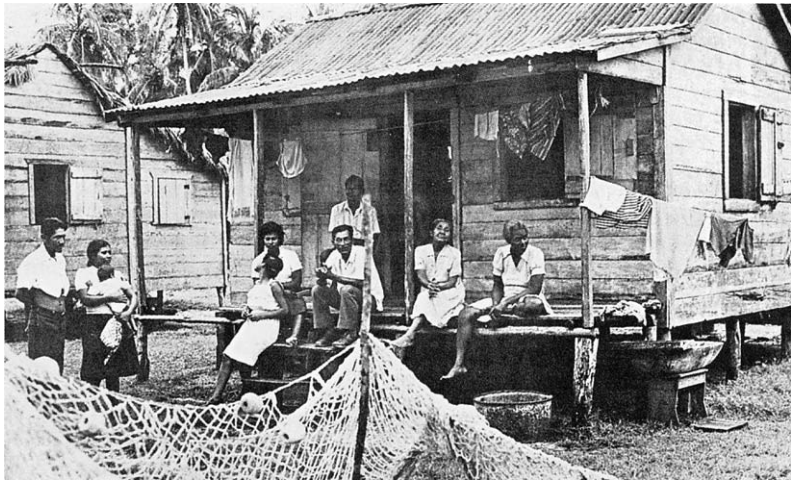
Initial efforts at promoting the myth of “Miskito genocide” were extremely successful, partly because there were few journalists or other observers in the region to question CIA propaganda. Subsequent operations have been subject to closer scrutiny and have thus been somewhat less convincing. In early 1986, for example, the Reaganites set out to manufacture timely reports of Sandinista cruelty, in order to generate support in Congress for a forthcoming vote on military aid to the CIA-*contras*.

As luck would have it, representatives of Americas Watch and reporters from both the *Boston Globe* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* were on hand to witness most of the ensuing theatrics. First, elements of the dwindling reserves of the Miskito-*contras* based in Honduras returned to Nicaragua and rounded up a fresh batch of “victims”. Villagers were frightened into becoming refugees with tales of the Sandinistas running amok in neighboring villages; those who remained unconvinced were subjected to more forceful persuasion. Eventually, about 2000 anxious souls were herded across the border into Honduras, where they were coached for several days on what to say to the reporters.

What reporters? Why, the 60 that the U.S. Embassy was planning to fly from Tegucigalpa in order to record the plight of the pitiful refugees. There was even talk of bringing Vice President Bush in from the Honduran capital of Washington, D.C., to lend his heartfelt sympathy to the proceedings.

But those preparations came to naught as a result of transportation difficulties; only a U.S. Army medical team and some officials from international relief agencies made it to the staged event — and when they arrived, there were no refugees in sight. It seems that the Miskito-*contras* had taken longer than scheduled to instruct their new comrades-in-suffering in the horrors they were supposed to have endured; as a result, they did not make it to the joyous rendezvous in time.

“The colonel [of the medical team] was very angry.... He said, ‘Where are the refugees?’.” One of the relief agency officials said, “It was the worst public relations job I’ve ever seen.”²⁷¹



Agencia Nueva Nicaragua

A Miskito fishing village at Pearl Lagoon. About 60% of all new investment for social services has gone to the sparsely populated Atlantic Coast region. That has caused some resentment among the Spanish-speaking majority, but the government justifies it on the grounds of historical neglect and strategic significance.

Fiasco or not, it was good enough for the Reaganites, and they set to the work of exploiting it. This latest installment in the ongoing Tragedy of the Miskitos played well among the faithful, and applied another martial nudge to swing votes in Congress. It was not a total loss.

But it had little bearing on actual events in Nicaragua, where the Sandinistas have reversed their early setbacks in the Atlantic region. There remains a residue of mutual distrust between the Miskitos and the government, deriving from two main factors: the pre-Sandinista, Spanish-speaking majority's historical contempt for indigenous peoples; and the threat to national security posed by the CIA-*contra* factions of the Miskito population.

But the tension that reached its height during 1981-82 has steadily diminished as a result of efforts by the government to address Indian grievances.

Those efforts have been led by the sole surviving founder of the FSLN, Tomas Borge. The Minister of the Interior has immersed himself in the Miskito language, and has employed his considerable prestige among the Spanish-speaking majority to promote an appreciation of indigenous cultures.

Regional autonomy

Previously neglected by Managua, the Atlantic region has received over 60 percent of all new investment in health and social services. This has caused no little resentment among the 90-percent majority of the Pacific region. But the government justifies the imbalance on the basis of historical neglect and strategic significance, arguing that the best defense against the establishment of a phony CIA-*contra* "government" in the Miskito region is the incorporation of the native population into the revolutionary process.

That goal came a great deal closer in 1986, when regional autonomy was embedded in the new constitution. A commission dominated by native representatives has been set up to work out the details.

Autonomy is consistent with the revolution's emphasis on empowering national minorities. A London-based human rights organization contends that, "As a contribution to the literature of human rights, the Nicaraguan Constitution is already something of a landmark, with its embellishments on the standard clauses [concerning human rights], its specific incorporation of the international law of human rights, its repeated acknowledgement of the demands of women, its novel solution to the problem of ethnic minorities.... It will be — indeed, it is already being — studied by drafters of other constitutions."²⁷²

Widespread support

Vernon Bellecourt of the American Indian Movement, who has witnessed the evolution of the autonomy process in the course of several visits to the region, reports that, "Nearly 100 percent of the Miskitos and their leaders support the revolution and feel they are benefiting from it. They completely support the autonomy process."

Adds his colleague, Bill Means, "Our delegation also witnessed a tremendous change in the attitude among the Atlantic Coast people. This change was obvious in many areas, but was most profound in the determination and commitment of the people to defend Nicaragua. [They] now recognize the true enemy of the people to be United States policy in the region... Because of the history of relations between national governments and Indian peoples in this hemisphere, we view this autonomy project as a revolutionary step towards creating an honorable relationship with a national government."²⁷³

There is still a wait-and-see attitude among many in the region, but doubts have been gradually dispelled, as the government consistently honors its pledges. One result is that the number of Miskitos in armed opposition had dwindled to no more than 500 by the end of 1987, down from several thousand in 1982. Some have returned to their villages, and now help defend them against CIA-*contra* attacks. Others have

joined the Sandinista army; still others have taken advantage of government grants for study at home or abroad.

Another result of the autonomy process is that growing numbers of refugees have returned from Honduras, to which they had fled in panic from the CIA terror campaign or had been abducted by Miskito-*contra* organizations such as "KISAN".

The UN High Commissioner of Refugees estimated that over 5000 made their way back home in 1986, despite strenuous efforts to prevent them from doing so: "In the last year, some 1700 Miskitos have returned to Nicaragua through the UNHCR repatriation program. Moreover, UNHCR representatives estimate that between 3500 and 4000 persons who went into Honduras during the KISAN-induced exodus of Easter 1986 have gone back spontaneously. Returning refugees say that more would have returned by now, but for KISAN's actions in Honduras preventing them from doing so."²⁷⁴

By the end of 1987, the total number of returnees was estimated at 18,000. It is expected that virtually all Miskito exiles will return as word of the autonomy process and the Central America peace initiative penetrates the informational barriers erected around the refugee camps in Honduras.

As of early 1988, however, the CIA was not quite ready to close out its Miskito project. Fourteen leaders from the Atlantic region were each offered \$3000 per month — a very large sum for a Nicaraguan — to join the *contras*. They refused, and one of them later reported that they were told by a CIA agent, "We need to take you all to Washington and have your photos taken with Reagan in order to win new *contra* aid."

At least three clergymen mediating the peace process were targeted for assassination. A plot was also hatched for a Cuban-American CIA operative to kidnap the three-year-old daughter of one of the three meddlesome clergymen; but he was tipped off in time, and managed to send his daughter and pregnant wife back to their home in the United States.²⁷⁵

As with all CIA-*contras* it has been difficult for alienated Miskitos to learn details of the peace process. "Contras who

have taken amnesty report that talking about amnesty among *contra* troops is forbidden, and that listening to the radio is restricted.... Those who mention amnesty 'no longer count' and may wind up with their throats slit."²⁷⁶

Reported abuses

The two pre-eminent human rights organizations that have issued reports on Nicaragua, Amnesty International and Americas Watch, have both issued sharp rebukes to the Reagan administration and its outrageous propaganda. But both have also found the Nicaraguan government wanting in some respects.

The 1986 Amnesty International report cites "prolonged incommunicado detention, denial of fair trials, and harsh prison conditions [and a] pattern of short-term detention as an attempt to intimidate and harass its critics."

The report also objects to short-term detentions under the State of Emergency, but notes that "authorities release most of these prisoners before bringing them to trial and frequently pardon prisoners of conscience convicted in unjust proceedings. Nicaraguans who suffer this form of harassment include opposition leaders, lawyers, and trade unionists. Numerous political detainees have been held incommunicado for periods ranging up to several months.... The organization has, however, welcomed a recent pattern of investigation into alleged

(Continued on page 259)

"The greatest violator of human rights in Nicaragua is neither the Sandinistas nor the contras, but the U.S. government. In order to make the Sandinistas 'say uncle', in order to re-establish unchallenged U.S. control over a region which it regards as its backyard, the U.S. government has sacrificed over 20,000 lives, most of them contras, and caused untold suffering. "

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

'A concerted effort to distort the facts'

*Excerpts from Human Rights in Nicaragua
Americas Watch, February, 1987*

The fact that the government of Nicaragua faces a serious, violent challenge to its stability complicates the effort to make a balanced assessment of its performance in the realm of human rights because, like any government, this government has the right under international law to suspend certain rights as a means to counter that challenge. International law authorizes such suspensions....

Ordinarily, we do not take pains to state the abuses of which a government is not guilty. In the case of Nicaragua, we feel called upon to do so because the Reagan Administration has engaged in a concerted effort to distort the facts....

In this regard, we again note that the government of Nicaragua does not engage in a pattern of violations of the laws of war. Nor does it engage in systematic violations of the right to life or to physical integrity of detainees, which are the clearest cases of non-derogable rights. Nor does it engage in a deliberate pattern of forced disappearances of persons, a practice that would violate those and other non-derogable rights. Some cases of such abuse do take place in Nicaragua, and we include descriptions of them in this report; our information indicates, however, that they do not reflect a governmental policy to commit them or to tolerate them.

There are other violations that the Nicaraguan government does commit as a matter of policy. The rights affected by these policies of the Nicaraguan government are among the rights considered derogable under international law, but in our view the restrictions go beyond what is reasonably required and hence legitimate in time

of emergency. Admittedly, international law concedes to governments a margin of discretion in deciding what limits are necessary....

Due process rights are one area in which we consider that limitations go beyond what is reasonably required... Prisoners held for longer than a few weeks should be held in penitentiary prisons and not in pre-trial detention centers, so as to have access to sunlight, recreation, private visits with relatives, and other benefits not currently available to them.

The government of Nicaragua engages, as a matter of policy, in abusive interrogation tactics against prisoners, including psychological pressure and threats used to secure their confessions. Recently, the government has taken some actions that may put a stop to other condemnable practices such as the use of very small cells, sleep deprivation and food and water deprivation....

Although it is arguably legitimate for a government to create special courts to deal with crimes committed by insurgents during a state of emergency, we continue to believe that the *Tribunales Populares Antisomocistas* fall far short of the requirements of due process that remain in effect even during a state of emergency....

Prison conditions in the penitentiary system have continued to improve in the period covered by this report, and they compare favorably with many prisons visited by members of the Americas Watch in other parts of Latin America... The pre-trial detention facilities remain off-limits to human rights groups....

It may be legitimate, under international law standards, for a government under armed attack to impose limited sanctions against a press organ that represents interests of its enemy. Though the issue is difficult, we feel that the indefinite suspension of *La Prensa* is excessive....

There is no evidence of government efforts to impede the individual exercise of religious preference... We note

'A concerted effort to distort the facts' (cont.)

that regular masses and even public religious demonstrations take place without incident....

By supporting an insurgency that engages in a deliberate pattern of violating fundamental standards of laws of war; by providing that insurgency with training, equipment, direction and public relations advocacy; by invoking human rights arguments to justify its pursuit of other interests and distorting the reality of human rights violations committed by the Nicaraguan government; and by engaging in slanderous attacks on those who oppose those policies within the United States, the Reagan Administration has not only contributed to poisoning the debate in this country, but also rendering a major disservice to the cause of human rights in Nicaragua and elsewhere....

Contra combatants and officers have engaged repeatedly in murder, kidnapping, various forms of brutal mistreatment, and a pattern of military conduct which deliberately endangers civilians. The conduct of war becomes more savage with time, and the conditions thus created in Nicaragua provide a rationale for government restrictions on the exercise of basic rights.

In addition to funding for *contra* activities, we note another aspect of the U.S. policy that merits discussion. It involves promotion of the conflict through rhetoric on human rights....

If anything, the efforts of the Reagan Administration to promote the *contras* do even more damage to the human rights cause than its efforts to demonize the Sandinistas.... At times, the two efforts intersect and become one.

[The State Department justified an attack on a civilian cooperative, in which five young children were killed and five residents aged 13-50 were kidnapped, by

(Continued from page 255)

abuses and prosecution of government personnel accused of committing human rights violations.... Amnesty has concluded, however, that the government has failed to investigate adequately many reported killings and 'disappearances'."

Americas Watch echoes these concerns; but its reports are more detailed, since its focus is on the Western Hemisphere. Americas Watch allows that governments are entitled by international law to modify or suspend civil rights under the threat

'A concerted effort to distort the facts' (cont.)

stating that] "These cooperatives — this was what was attacked in Nicaragua — often have a dual military-economic economic purpose... The inhabitants of the cooperatives are armed and receive regular military training. Unfortunately, due to the intermingling of civilian and military functions, there are sometimes civilian casualties."

The State Department statement would do credit to George Orwell's Ministry of Truth....

In the months preceding Congressional approval of the \$100 million in *contra* aid, the Administration poisoned the debate on human rights in Nicaragua by denouncing bearers of bad news about the *contras*... as dupes of communism, Sandinism, Marxism and anti-Americanism, or as closet advocates of same. The Administration's commitment to its policy could be measured not by its persuasiveness, but by its contempt for debate....

[The Reagan administration] does grave damage to the cause of human rights, itself, making other pronouncements on human rights by the United States suspect. Unfortunately, our government has come to be regarded in many quarters as using the human rights issue to promote other interests than as concerned with human rights for their own sake.

of war, but contends that the government's response has been "disproportionate" to the threat it faces. On the other hand, it concedes that there is no formula available for calculating the exact dimensions of such a threat, or of the appropriate response. In other words, its objections are based on an intuitive sense of proportion, from the perspective of its offices in New York and Washington, D.C.

Anti-Somocista tribunals

Of particular concern to human rights investigators were the special tribunals set up to process war crimes. They were analogous to the special courts used by the British in Ulster, and met the requirements of a 1973 U.N. General Assembly resolution which holds that, "All nations have the right to judge their nationals for war crimes and crimes against humanity."

The government used the tribunals to process the large backlog of cases involving former members of Somoza's *Guardia Nacional*, and offenses related to the CIA-*contra* campaign. The latter were defined as activities which: submitted the nation to foreign domination or impaired its independence and integrity; revealed political or national security secrets; damaged installations, roads, bridges or public works necessary for defense; prevented local authorities from carrying out their public duties; or attacked the government, its organization or members.

That was a pretty wide net, and the stresses of the CIA's terror campaign guaranteed that innocent and relatively harmless people would be caught up in it, especially in areas of intense fighting.

Yet, an early analysis concluded that, "Initial reactions [of the populace] have been supportive of the special tribunals as an effective way of bringing to trial those who have been detained because of activities related to the war in Nicaragua's northern regions.... In Guatemala [by comparison], special tribunals established last July [1982] hold secret pro-

ceedings, can hand down death sentences, and the verdict is delivered by letter or anonymous phone call. There is no death penalty in Nicaragua and the maximum sentence is thirty years. The Nicaraguan tribunals are under civil authorities, the judges' names and backgrounds are public, trial proceedings will be open, and evidence will be available to the public."²⁷⁷

But the horrors of Guatemala could provide little solace to an innocent peasant improperly detained for days, weeks or months on the false testimony of envious neighbors. The risk of such inequities was eliminated in early 1988, when the *Tribunales Populares Anti-Somocistas* were disbanded by the government in its efforts to comply with the Central American peace accord it had signed the preceding August.

Other criticisms of Americas Watch include "abusive interrogation tactics" and what it considers to have been excessive censorship. There is no evidence of physical torture; but the government's refusal of access to one of the two main prisons and to pre-trial detention centers is cause for genuine concern. On the other hand, prison conditions in general have steadily improved (cf. "A dimension of forgiveness", page 66), and abuses by soldiers have been severely punished — in contrast to the U.S. and its client-states.

On balance, this is a remarkably short list of abuses for an impoverished nation under attack by a superpower, especially when contrasted with the unmolested U.S. client-states in the region. Furthermore, Americas Watch has emphasized that the

"There is a difference between being a political opponent within the country, and being a supporter of a group of paid mercenaries, even though they are Nicaraguans, who are outside of Nicaragua and who have no political support within the country.... We have to make the distinction between a political opponent and a counter-revolutionary. The counter-revolutionaries are not allowed. They are simply not allowed in Nicaragua; but if you are a political opponent, you have all the freedom to publicly say what your feelings are."

— President of Moravian Synod²⁷⁸

Reaganites' accusations against Nicaragua could not justify aggression, even if they were based on fact:

"Allegations of human rights abuses have become a major focus of the Administration's campaign to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. Such a concerted campaign to use human rights in justifying military action is without precedent in U.S.-Latin American relations, and its effect is an unprecedented debasement of the human rights cause....

"In Nicaragua, there is no systematic practice of forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings or torture — as has been the case with the 'friendly' armed forces of El Salvador... Nor has the Government practiced elimination of cultural or ethnic groups, as the Administration frequently claims; indeed, in this respect, as in most others, Nicaragua's record is by no means so bad as that of Guatemala, whose government the Administration consistently defends. Moreover, some notable reductions in abuses have occurred in Nicaragua since 1982, despite the pressure caused by escalating external attacks."²⁷⁹

COMPARED TO WHAT?

Although not successful in every particular, the Reaganites' rhetorical onslaught has fulfilled its major objectives. So much attention has been focused on the alleged deficiencies of Nicaragua that they have entered the realm of common knowledge; few governments, including that of the United States, could withstand similar scrutiny.

As it is, the Sandinistas must devote a great deal of time and energy to defending themselves against charges repeatedly disproven, yet endlessly repeated. Those charges are usually presented in a contextual void, as though Daniel Ortega just woke up one morning and said to himself, "Today would be a good day to send a bishop into exile." The treason of reactionary clerics might never have occurred, the CIA-*contras* and their internal front might never have existed.

The effect has been to invent and exaggerate sins of the Sandinistas, while diverting attention from the truly horrifying realities of U.S. terrorists and client-states. It can therefore be instructive to compare Nicaragua with its neighbors in Central America, and also with the United States.

To stun the senses

“The everyday reality of today’s Guatemala is a thing to stun the senses — but only if those senses are exposed to it.”²⁸⁰ That no such exposure has disturbed the tranquility of most U.S. minds is due largely to the apparent disinterest of the White House: As noted previously, if the administration does not choose to acknowledge a problem in another country, it does not exist.

For the people of Guatemala, however, the problem is as thick as blood and as real as a nightmare. Since the CIA replaced an elected government with a military regime in 1954, the country has witnessed an ongoing slaughter of “subversive elements”. What the indigenous people of the countryside have been subjected to has been characterized as genocide. Anyone who tries to help — agricultural adviser, priest, teacher — is also marked for death.

Since the CIA coup, a small guerrilla movement has operated with scant success; but it has offered the pretext for an assault on the entire rural population. A corporal describes standard procedure when the army approaches a village: “They flee from their homes. When they run and go into the mountains, that obliges us to kill them.... They might be guerrillas.”

On those frequent occasions when subversive tendencies have been pre-determined, there is even less restraint: “There was no mercy for anyone; in one house they burned forty people, in three others twenty-five people, and ten in another. Others were tortured, and when they could not get any more information from them, they were finished off with machetes. Angered with others that did not respond in Spanish [many

Guatemalans speak only native dialects], they decapitated them on the streets. Afterward... the soldiers rushed the people gathered at the town's chapel. For that, they used hand grenades, bazookas and machine guns."²⁸¹

This has been a *routine* sort of occurrence in Guatemala.

Because the army is so violently opposed to investigation, it has been difficult to accurately determine total casualties. But estimates of the number slaughtered in the past 20 years run as high as 200,000. As many as 40,000 more have "disappeared". The army itself boasts of destroying over 440 villages; some 500,000 villagers have been herded into "strategic hamlets" like those employed by the U.S. in Vietnam.

This, in a country with a total population of less than eight million.

Any idea of a "free press" is, for the most part, a sick joke; so is land reform. Troublesome priests and nuns are labeled as "terrorists" and dealt with accordingly; likewise, teachers and labor leaders. Relatives of the disappeared formed a "Mutual Support Group" and were promptly abducted, tortured and exterminated.

The unrelenting brutality moved the Carter administration to cut off military aid. The Reaganites restored it, allaying congressional doubts by arranging for a civilian government to be elected in 1985, but the army continues to rule through a parallel structure. Not one soldier or officer has been brought to trial, and the new "president" states openly that he has no control over the military. "Few people question President Cerezo's good intentions," observes a Guatemalan political analyst. "The trouble is that he doesn't have any power."²⁸²

The response of the Reagan administration has been to simply declare that things are getting better all the time, as a result of enlightened U.S. policy. In 1982, Ronald Reagan said that Guatemala had gotten "a bum rap". As assassinations doubled and abductions quadrupled in 1983, an official of the State Department assured readers of the *New York Times* that "we see a trend toward improvement in human rights."²⁸³

"Elliott Abrams dismissed the refugee accounts of massacres as fabrications of 'guerilla sympathizers'; the U. S. embassy in Guatemala tried to slur Amnesty International's reporting on civilian deaths as the product of a 'Communist-backed disinformation plan'.... This was the second major attempt to undermine Amnesty International's credibility.

"Hard as it was on those who tried to report human rights violations, the administration showed no end of indulgence for the conduct of the violators themselves.... This administration's construct of legitimate defensive action implies that a government becomes logically incapable of performing a culpable act. Whatever it might do, the argument goes, it was provoked into doing."

— *Americas Watch*, With Friends Like These

Elliott Abrams, he of the discriminating taste in human suffering (cf. page 171), defended the resumption of military aid to Guatemala on these grounds: "The price of stability in the middle of a guerrilla war is high, but I don't think you can blame that on the government. You blame that on the guerrillas who are fighting the government."²⁸⁴ This tolerant point of view makes for an instructive contrast with Abrams' fulminations against Nicaragua's efforts to cope with the CIA-*contras*.

Shining example

It is widely understood that Guatemala, with its considerable natural resources and its border with Mexico, is the proper focus of U.S. national security interests in Central America. But for a variety of reasons, the Reagan administration has made El Salvador the centerpiece of its policy, and has spent billions of dollars on what it regards as its greatest success in the region. Presumably, then, El Salvador is what the Reaganites' have in mind for Nicaragua.

If so, it is a grim prospect. All those billions of U.S. dollars have done nothing to arrest the accelerating plunge of El Salvador's economy. Nearly sixty-five percent of the rural

population remains landless, while two percent own the best sixty percent of the land. Six families alone control more acreage than the smallest 133,000 farms combined.

Half the children die of malnutrition and disease before reaching age five. Malaria is on the rise, and there have been recent epidemics of typhoid fever and rabies. Sixty percent of the people are illiterate.

The army has declared open season on the rural population, using aerial bombardment to obliterate entire villages in areas of suspected guerrilla activity. Nearly 50,000 of the nation's 4.8 million people have been disposed of by such means, most of them non-combatants.

The disposal of suspect urbanites is the responsibility of the many right-wing death squads, which have close ties to the CIA and include members of the Salvadoran army. There are well-known "body dumps" outside of San Salvador, where friends and relatives of the disappeared can go to seek what's left of their loved ones. Victims include everyone from the lowliest of the low to "subversive" doctors, teachers, nuns and priests — even the head of El Salvador's Catholic Church, Archbishop Oscar Romero.

Romero had displeased the death squads by publicly denouncing them, and by embracing the cause of the nation's impoverished majority. He was shot through the heart while celebrating mass, reportedly by a CIA-*contra* brought in from Honduras for the occasion.²⁸⁵ Peasants have subsequently been

"If the central political act is voting periodically for candidates pre-selected by parties controlled by dominant elites, then democracy is not served. Although, in principle, voting allows people to 'throw the rascals out' in such countries as El Salvador, the real rascals in the military and oligarchy are beyond the reach of the electoral process. Institutions such as political parties and congresses primarily provide an arena in which elites can struggle over secondary issues and seemingly legitimize the overall power arrangements in society."

— Philip Berryman, *Inside Central America*

been slaughtered for no greater offense than displaying a portrait of Romero in their hovels.

The extraordinarily courageous members of a human rights group have been abducted, raped, tortured and killed. A California church group developed evidence that the torture has been supervised by U.S. servicemen, with methods that include "violent beatings, prolonged immersion in water, hooding with a rubber bag coated on the inside with lime, suspension by feet and thumbs tied together behind the victim, electric shock, burning with acid and cigarettes, rape.... A major of the North American army put the apparatus he carried at his belt in [one victim's] back and ears, producing electrical discharges.... This torture lasted about fifteen minutes."

The church group's report, which is specific and detailed, has been ignored by U.S. government officials and news media, as have several others like it.²⁸⁶

Meanwhile, El Salvador's "president" has no more control over the military than does his counterpart in Guatemala. He once tried to order a Christmas truce, and the army responded by bombing a suburb of the capital; the president could feel the unquiet death of his truce through the soles of

"There has been more freedom and less brutality in revolutionary Nicaragua than under any recent United States-backed government in El Salvador.

"I don't understand how they call that government Communist, and say that this government is Christian and democratic', a senior Salvadoran bishop once said. 'They don't shoot priests and workers, do they?'

"In El Salvador, some 40,000 civilians have been killed there in the past four years. Women have been raped. Villages have been plundered. Yet, not one death squad member, not one officer who has carried out the massacres of peasants, not one soldier... has been convicted and sentenced for a human rights crime.

"President Reagan has excoriated Nicaragua as a 'totalitarian dungeon'. What does that make El Salvador?"

— Ray Bonner²⁹¹

his shoes.²⁸⁸ Amnesty International states that “Salvadorans who violate human rights remain virtually immune from prosecution.”²⁸⁹

There is no indication that any of these conditions are likely to change in the foreseeable future.

After visiting El Salvador hospitals and refugee camps in 1984, four doctors from the United States returned with this perspective: “With the passive, and sometimes active, acquiescence of Congress and the American people — after six years of war, 40,000 civilian deaths, one million civilians made refugees, and \$1.7 billion in U.S. aid — has the Reagan administration, in its desperate crusade to ‘save’ El Salvador, fulfilled Tacitus’ centuries-old sarcasm, ‘They made a wasteland and called it peace’?”²⁹⁰

Since then, things have only gotten more “peaceful”.

Counterfeit election

El Salvador’s 1984 elections were portrayed by the White House, and its allies in the news media, as a triumph of democracy — in contrast to the allegedly counterfeit process in Nicaragua some months later. As noted previously, the reverse is true (cf. “Revolution betrayed”, pages 227 ff.).

In El Salvador, the CIA spent several million dollars to ensure that its choice for president won. The agency’s interference was so obvious that U.S. right-wingers — most notably a Neanderthalic senator from North Carolina — protested that *their* favorite, a prominent death squad leader known as “Blowtorch Bob”, had been cheated of the victory he had earned through dedicated terror.

The death squads did manage to scare off all left-wing candidates by threatening to kill them should they dare to show their faces. Having so often demonstrated their murderous competence, it was a threat that was impossible to ignore. Consequently, the candidates most likely to appeal to the masses were not available.

The voting procedures left something to be desired, as well. International observers reported that adults were required to vote; if they didn't, officials could identify them by means of the voting register and "talk" to them later, as often happened in the past. Many had the added inducement of being herded to the polls by the army.

Nor was the voter's choice burdened with excessive secrecy. In sharp distinction to Nicaragua's election, polling booths afforded questionable privacy and the ballots were translucent, so that selections could be seen from the reverse side. But, that wasn't necessary, since the boxes into which voters dropped their ballots were made of transparent plastic.

This is only a partial list of electoral peculiarities. In his comparison of the two elections, Lord Chitnis of Great Britain concluded: "In every relevant aspect, the situation in Nicaragua provided the necessary conditions for all political parties to participate freely. This was not the case in El Salvador. In Nicaragua, the non-contesting opposition groups' presidential candidate, Arturo Cruz... was free to return to his country. He did so, for example, at the start of the campaign and held public meetings without any perceptible fear for his life. In El Salvador, Guillermo Ungo, the leader of the FMLN/FDR, would not have been able to do this...."

"Was there a political choice? In Nicaragua there certainly was. By comparing, for example, the party political platform of the Democratic Conservatives with that of the MAP on the extreme left [in Nicaragua], this seems to me indisputable. In El Salvador, such political choice did not exist."²⁹¹

Totalitarian states

The leader of a nation at war once warned, "I would raise the question as to whether freedom of the press is not essentially freedom to print correct news and freedom to criticize the government on the basis of factual truth. I think there is a big distinction between this and freedom to print untrue news."

Vladimir Lenin? Fidel Castro? Daniel Ortega? Nope: Franklin D. Roosevelt, at the start of World War II.

A comparison of the United States' 200-year history with the infant Sandinista revolution yields a perspective not particularly flattering to the Land of the Free. At the very least, it suggests that if Nicaragua is a totalitarian dungeon, then so is the United States, and that it has been for a very long time.

The Sandinista revolution has been notably innocent of reprisals against its opposition. Apart from those who have signed onto the CIA's destabilization campaign, no one has been imprisoned, killed or deprived of property. In most cases, even open affiliation with the CIA-*contras* goes unpunished.

Such bold opposition was unthinkable during and after the "American" Revolution, as it has come to be called. By most estimates, some 25-30% of the colonial population was of the Loyalist persuasion, and an equivalent proportion adopted a prudent neutrality until it became clear which side was likely to win. Anyone suspected of Loyalist tendencies was closely monitored by local Committees of Safety and Correspondence. Those vigilante groups operated under the legalistic veil of the Test Laws, which prescribed severe penalties for open and suspected loyalty to the British crown.

A history of the period notes that, "The wings of Loyalist freedom seem to have been very closely clipped. The Tory could not vote or hold office. He had no legal redress for his wrongs and, if he had, no Loyalist member of the bar could defend him; he was denied his vocation, and his liberty to speak or write his opinions; he could not travel or trade where he chose, and he must pray and fight for the cause he hated."²⁹²

These measures were strongly supported by the "Founding Fathers". George Washington wrote approvingly of Connecticut laws providing for the arrest of "persons inimical to us", and for the imprisonment of anyone "writing, speaking or acting against" the revolution. "Vigorous measures, and such as at other times would appear extraordinary," wrote the father of his country, "are now become absolutely necessary."²⁹³

(Continued on page 273)

A Loyalists' Declaration of Independence

Published in Rivington's Royal Gazette; New York, 1781

WHEN IN THE COURSE OF HUMAN EVENTS it becomes necessary for men, in order to preserve their lives, liberties and properties, and to secure themselves, and to their posterity, that peace, liberty and safety, to which by the laws of nature and of nature's God they are entitled, to throw off and renounce all allegiance to a government, which under the insidious pretences of securing those inestimable blessings to them, has wholly deprived them of any security of either life, liberty, property, peace or safety....

The history of Congress is a history of continued weakness, inconsistency, violation of the most sacred obligations of all public faith and honour, and of usurpations, all having in direct object the producing of anarchy, civil feuds, and violent injustice, which have rendered us miserable, and must soon establish tyranny over us, and our country.

To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.... They have, by their misconduct, reduced us all to the dangers and distress of actual invasion from without, and to all the horrors of a cruel war within....

They have raised a standing army and sent it into the field... and have actually rendered it independent of the civil power, by making it solely dependent on them.

They have combined with France, the natural and hereditary enemy of our civil constitution, and religious faith, to render us dependant on and subservient to the views of that foreign, ambitious, and despotic monarchy.

They have ruined our trade, and destroyed our credit with all parts of the world.... They have driven many of our people beyond sea, into exile, and have confiscated their estates.... They have destroyed all good

order and government, by plunging us into the factions of democracy, and the ravages of civil war.... They have fined, imprisoned, banished and put to death some of our fellow citizens, for no other cause but their attachment to the English laws and constitution.... They have involved us in an immense debt, foreign as well as internal....

In every stage of these proceedings, they have not been wanting to throw out before us specious excuses for their conduct, as being the result of necessity and tending to the public good.... Our minds have been overwhelmed with apprehensions; and as our sufferings have increased, our tears have flowed in secret. It has been dangerous and even criminal to lament our situation in public....

The unsuspecting confidence which we, with our fellow citizens, reposed in the Congress of 1774, the unanimous applause with which their patriotism and firmness were crowned... at the same time that it gave to Congress the unanimous support of the whole continent, inspired their successors with very different ideas, and emboldened them by degrees to pursue measures directly the reverse of those before adopted.... We find them contending for liberty of speech, and at the same time controlling the press by means of a mob, and persecuting everyone who ventures to hint his disapprobation....

We should fill volumes, were we to recite at large their inconsistency, usurpations, weaknesses and violations of the most sacred obligations.... We have sufficiently shewn that a government thus marked... by the enormity of its excesses, injustice and infamy, is unfit to rule a free people.

(Continued from page 270)

Mob violence was commonplace. The merest hint of Loyalist inclinations could incite Committees of Safety to looting and destruction of property, economic boycotts and embargos, forced relocation to areas controlled by revolutionaries, severe beatings, continual harassment, rape, tarring and feathering, rail-riding, and other diversions.

A chronicler of the times wrote of "chaining men together by the dozens and driving them like herds of cattle into distant provinces, flinging them into loathesome jails, confiscating their estates, shooting them in swamps and woods as suspected Tories, hanging them after a mock trial," and on and on.²⁹⁴

Prisons were grim even by the harsh standards of the day. The most notorious was located at the Simsbury, Connecticut, copper mines. The cells were converted mine shafts more than 120 feet below surface, into which "the prisoners are let down by a windlass into a dismal cavern, through a hole, which answers the purpose of conveying their food and air; as to light, it scarcely reaches them."²⁹⁵

Simsbury's most famous inmate was Benjamin Franklin's son, William, who had served the king as the last colonial governor of New Jersey. His father managed to negotiate his release, but not the return of his substantial estate. He withdrew to London in lifelong bitterness at the rabble in arms that had deposed him.

Many of the dispossessed spent the balance of their lives fiddling at counter-revolution, very nearly succeeding with the War of 1812. Others earned degrees in frustration by attempting to extract compensation for their suffering from a penurious Crown. All told, at least 100,000 loyal subjects of the king went or were chased into exile. About half of the total moved to Canada, where their descendants are still sufficiently numerous to populate sizable gatherings of the United Empire Loyalists.

Acceptable speech

Outrageous hypocrisy is one of the perquisites of power, and nothing has aroused more self-righteous indignation in the United States than the Sandinistas' censorship and suspension of such pro-*contra* media as *La Prensa* and *Radio Catolica*. Emergency restrictions on mass demonstrations are not very favorably regarded, either. But Nicaragua will have to greatly augment its complement of censors, and drastically limit its tolerance of dissent, if it ever hopes to approximate the dismal record of the United States with respect to freedom of expression.

The Constitution's Bill of Rights notwithstanding, government assaults on free speech are as American as the Saturday night special. Just five years after the British retreat from the rebellious colonies, the Alien and Sedition Acts were forced through Congress by the dominant Federalist Party. The Acts empowered the government to imprison anyone who published "scandalous and malicious writing" for up to eighteen months. Several publishers were in fact jailed under these laws; to no one's surprise, all had earned their punishment with articles attacking Federalist policies and personalities.

The U.S. Civil War was marked by heavy censorship on both sides. In the North, major daily newspapers were shut down on the orders of President Lincoln, for printing "inaccurate information" or for questioning government policies. The Secretary of War assumed total control of all telegraph lines, and the dispatches of war correspondents were censored to eliminate bad military news. Lincoln also suspended *habeas corpus*, the venerable Common Law principle which helps to protect individuals from abuses of state power.

Encroachments on civil liberties during World War I were equally, if not more severe. The 1917 Espionage Act prescribed stiff fines and prison terms of up to twenty years for statements that might "interfere with the operation or success of the military or naval forces, or to promote the success" of the enemy.

It was also illegal to counsel disloyalty or refusal of service in the armed services, and the post office was authorized to refuse distribution of publications "advocating or urging treason, insurrection or resistance to the law."

This was followed by the Sedition Act of 1918, which outlawed criticism of the government or its war policies, and any expression of "contempt, scorn, contumely or disrepute" directed at the Constitution or the armed forces.

The results were inevitable. "Federal courts convicted more than 1000 persons of violating the Espionage and Sedition laws, virtually all of them for mere verbal statements. Of these, over 100 received jail terms of ten years or more — none of them for actual spying. The war-time courts sentenced one man to twenty years for distributing literature urging re-election of a congressman who had voted against conscription."²⁹⁶

The most infamous case was that of Eugene Debs, leader of the Socialist Party which at that time was rapidly gaining support. Debs was dealt a prison sentence of ten years for such treasonous remarks as, "It is extremely dangerous to exercise the constitutional right of free speech in a country fighting to make democracy safe in the world."

Debs' imprisonment was just the beginning of a massive nationwide crackdown on the Socialist Party, which never recovered from the persecution it suffered during and after the war.

Another troublesome outfit, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or "Wobblies", was also destroyed on the pretext of military necessity. Nearly the entire Wobbly leadership ended up in prison, some for statements made before the war, and one for the amazing feat of violating the Espionage Act while already in jail.

All this at a time when there was not the remotest threat of invasion.

Defense committees

The Department of Justice sponsored a privately funded vigilante organization called the American Protective League. Its 350,000 members scoured the nation for radicals, subversives, draft evaders, strange-looking foreigners and other threats to democracy. They broke up political and labor meetings, perpetrated patriotic burglaries and wiretaps, ransacked homes and stores belonging to citizens with Germanic names.

Those found guilty of insufficient loyalty were admonished with beatings, tar and feathers (another U.S. tradition), and shaved heads; others were painted all over in yellow, or forced to kneel and kiss the flag. There were at least two lynchings.

Thousands of conscientious objectors were herded into military gulags, where they received beatings and other forms of patriotic abuse. Seventeen conscientious objectors were sentenced to death, and 142 others received life sentences. The entire executive committee of the Jehovah's Witness church was sentenced to prison, because its doctrine forbids killing under any circumstances.

All telephone and telegraph messages were placed under surveillance and censorship. Likewise, the mails; millions of letters were opened and read during the two years of U.S. participation in the war. The mailing permits of 100, mostly foreign-language and socialist, publications were revoked.

The government celebrated the war's end by inciting the first major Red Scare of this century: "When peace came, the repressive measures, instead of being abolished, were used by federal, state and municipal officials... under the guise of protecting the institutions of the U.S. and the American way of life, without carefully defining the latter."²⁹⁷

There followed the infamous "Palmer raids" against aliens and "anarchists", supervised by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. Thousands were summarily detained, and hundreds were exiled under suspicion of saying things the government didn't want the people to hear.

Concentration camps

There was less national debate over U.S. involvement in World War II, once it commenced after the bombing of Pearl Harbor; but there was no shortage of repression.

The most severely injured parties were the 110,000 citizens of Japanese descent — 70,000 of whom were born in the U.S. — who were penned up in concentration camps for the duration of the war. Their offense was the color of their skin and the shape of their eyes; no Germans or Italians suffered a similar fate, even though the lands of their ancestors presented a far greater threat than Japan did.

Official documents released decades later reveal that the government knew that these industrious U.S. citizens presented no security threat. Their imprisonment was apparently ordered out of solicitude for the “morale” — read “bigotry” — of the majority population.

The round-up was so abrupt that the victims were forced to sacrifice much of their property, including hard-won farms, homes and businesses. Their young men became the most



Seattle-King County Historical Society

Army guards transport a family of U.S. citizens from their hard-won farm on Bainbridge Island near Seattle, Washington, to a concentration camp in Idaho.

decorated soldiers of the war, but survivors of the Japanese-American concentration camps speak of a lingering sense of shame and degradation, not unlike victims of rape. Decades later, a paltry compensation measure has been fought at every step by white-skinned patriots, and has still not worked its way through Congress and the courts.

In comparing the treatment of Japanese-Americans during World War II with that of Nicaragua's Miskito Indians, Americas Watch has noted that, "There are, of course, certain analogies between the forcible relocation in Nicaragua and the forcible relocation of the Japanese-Americans during World War II. The differences are: that the United States forcibly relocated only those from one racial group, whereas Nicaragua relocated all the residents in particular areas; the United States acted despite the fact that it was not invaded, whereas Nicaragua acted only after there had been fighting in the affected region; and the United States interned 112,000 Japanese-Americans for the duration of the war, whereas the Miskitos were never interned."²⁹⁸

"Clear and present danger" of free speech

[There is widespread tendency] to compare the conditions in a given country with a non-existent media utopia in the United States....

All nations severely curtail dissent during times of national crisis. During every U.S. war... the government tightly controlled the range of public discussion. Take, for example, World War I. The declaration of war in April, 1917, quickly led to an anti-German hysteria in the U.S. Federal, state and local governments passed numerous laws restricting dissent, and the courts, as a rule, interpreted them as broadly as possible. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of U.S. citizens were prosecuted under these laws for uttering "antiwar" remarks.

The most notorious of these laws was the Federal

(Continued...)

“Clear and present danger” of free speech (cont.)

Espionage Act of 1917. One of the many provisions of the law made interference with military or recruiting activities a crime punishable by up to twenty years in prison, and another made it illegal to mail printed material that violated any other section of the law. By conservative estimates, at least 2000 people were indicted under the law and at least 877 of them were convicted, almost all for what they said or wrote. In addition, more than 100 publications were banned from the mails....

The Espionage Act was specifically upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Schenck vs. United States*. Schenck had been convicted of distributing a circular that opposed the conscription law and called on the public to resist the law in an unspecified way.... Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote for the court:

“The character of every act depends upon the circumstances in which it is done. The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theatre and causing panic.... The question in every case is whether the words are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about the substantive evils that Congress has a right to prevent. It is a question of proximity and degree. When a nation is at war, many things that might be said in times of peace are such a hindrance to its effort that their utterance will not be endured so long as men fight, and that no Court could regard them as protected by any constitutional right.”

Given that the U.S. was a relatively mature and homogenous political system during World War I, and was not particularly threatened by the fighting, the range of public discussion tolerated in Nicaragua during the first five years of the revolution was remarkable.

— *John S. Nichols, Nicaragua: The First Five Years*

Censorship

Another by-product of World War II was the Office of Censorship. "In addition to censoring the newspapers and radio, the Office read millions of letters, checked cables and telegrams, taped telephone calls, and established guidelines for movies. Private letters which painted a gloomy picture of the war were suppressed as bad for morale, and films which played abroad could not show labor disturbances or other signs of unrest.... The American public was 'protected' from disappointing news and, instead, given exaggerated reports favorable to the military officials of the U.S. and its allies, even when these reports were gross distortions of reality.... Even a major story like the dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima was only reported in the barest outline."²⁹⁹

The Post Office banned seventy publications, and the assets of several newspapers were seized by the government on the suspicion that they had been funded by foreign governments. The relatively benign fate of *La Prensa* in Nicaragua makes a striking contrast.

Conscientious objectors got pretty much the same treatment as in World War I. Over 6000 served prison terms. Others were subjected to tar and feathers, beatings, even castration.

Although there were no further prospects of attack after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, martial law was declared in Hawaii. Due process was suspended; radios and newspapers were forbidden to discuss martial law or its effects.

It is thus hardly surprising that the military courts which processed all charges achieved a 99% conviction rate. Questions about this extraordinary legal efficiency were casually impaled by President Roosevelt on the horns of military necessity: "I do not worry about the constitutional question. The whole matter is one of immediate and present war emergency."

As for the "independent" media: "Correspondents went along with the official scheme for reporting the war because they were convinced it was in the national interest to do so. They saw no sharp line of demarcation between the role of the press in war time and that of the government."³⁰⁰

Hunting subversives

World War II also provided a pretext for J. Edgar Hoover to intensify his Federal Bureau of Investigation's obsessive quest for "subversives" — defined by President Roosevelt as all those "opposed to the American way of life" which, of course, was not defined.

For J. Edgar and his ilk, anyone who attained notoriety by calling attention to the deficiencies of U.S. society was likely to be a communist agent or dupe. Thus, "The FBI wrote [in an internal document] that John Steinbeck's writings 'portrayed an extremely sordid and poverty-stricken side of American life', and that they had been reprinted extensively by the Nazis and the Soviet Union.... Documents indicate the FBI was interested in [Truman] Capote because he accompanied a black cast performing 'Porgy and Bess' in the Soviet Union and wrote an account of the tour."³⁰¹

Next to the Communist Conspiracy, there was nothing that aroused more terror in J. Edgar's icy heart than the Afro-American civil rights movement. In fact, he could discern little distinction between the two phenomena. An inveterate racist, Hoover appears to have sincerely believed that the darkies would have been content to remain in their place if a bunch of "outside agitators" hadn't gone and got 'em all riled up.

Accordingly, he devoted much of the FBI's resources to spying on and intimidating such genteel organizations as the Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which were so circumspect in their conduct that angry young blacks would later come to denounce them as refuges for "Uncle Toms".

But they looked like trouble to the paranoid overseer of the FBI, and so did a great many other U.S. citizens. The editorial stance and subscription lists of *The Nation* magazine, founded during the Civil War, were subjected to sporadic surveillance for most of the 20th century on the grounds of "leftist" inclinations. Thousands of warrantless wiretaps and burglaries have been conducted in honor of national security. Some

130,000 pieces of personal mail were opened and photocopied between the years 1940-66.

Job security and family harmony are frequently threatened by visits of FBI agents to homes and workplaces, where they have been known to dispense compromising gossip about suspected subversives. The bureau is not above forging letters and sending anonymous tips in pursuit of its aims. The suicide of actress Jean Seberg has been attributed, at least in part, to an intensive FBI smear campaign she brought upon herself by forcefully denouncing the Vietnam War. Over the years, untold thousands of others have received similar, if less widely publicized, treatment on behalf of the American Way of Life.

Red Scare III

The second great panic over communism in this century occurred during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The third began shortly after World War II, with the "Iron Curtain" speech of Winston Churchill and the antics of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) which provided the first national forum for Richard Nixon's inquisitorial talents.

The HUAC witch-hunt steadily intensified from 1946 onward, and its malign example inspired the mutation presided over by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s.

By the time the nation's third major Red Scare was ostensibly over, scores of U.S. citizens had been imprisoned for refusing to subject their friends and associates to the inquisition, thousands had lost their jobs, tens of thousands had been harassed and intimidated at home and at work, and millions upon millions had been infected with a dread of "communist tendencies".

It was an exercise in ideological terror that intimidated an entire nation, with nightmare consequences still being acted out today — primarily with the lives of impoverished foreigners who have never lifted a finger against the Home of the Brave.

The crusade against communism meandered all over the globe, and eventually stumbled into Vietnam. After preventing the 1956 elections mandated by international treaty, the U.S. plunged that war-ravished nation into yet another ordeal, of such pointless savagery that the world recoiled in horror and disgust. The comparison with the policies of Hitler's Germany was obvious, and frequently noted; the Nixon administration broke off diplomatic relations with Sweden after Prime Minister Olof Palme said it out loud.

As opposition mounted at home — in direct proportion to white-skinned middle- and upper-class casualties — thousands of young men were sent to prison and all its horrors for draft resistance, while thousands more became refugees in Canada and other countries. There were massive demonstrations against the war, and mass jailings. Protests at the Democratic Party's 1968 convention in Chicago were brutally suppressed; a subsequent official inquiry characterized the chaos as a "police riot".

At Kent State University, unarmed students were killed and crippled by gunfire from National Guardsmen. President Nixon gloated that the dead and wounded "bums" deserved what they got. The federal and Ohio state governments deflected all efforts to bring those responsible to account.

A massive program of spying, burglary, harassment and intimidation was carried out against peace activists by the CIA, the FBI, the Army and other agencies at all levels of government.

In direct violation of its charter, the CIA developed at least 10,000 files on anti-war activists. Agents were assigned to follow and photograph suspected peaceniks, including several congressmen, and a network of agency spies penetrated anti-war groups. There were illegal break-ins, wiretaps, and interceptions of personal mail. The agency trained and financed its own goon squads to beat up anti-war protesters, attack "leftist" bookstores, and perform such other chores as their masters deemed necessary for the preservation of liberty.³⁰²

The CIA's domestic, hence illegal, "counter-intelligence" program involved spying on and disrupting the 1972 campaign

of the Democratic Party's challenger to President Nixon's re-election. That led to the electronic surveillance and burglary of Democratic offices and, eventually, to Nixon's narrow escape from impeachment.

Uppity preacher

For J. Edgar Hoover, the Vietnam War presented a perfect opportunity to fill more filing cabinets and computer tapes with intimations of subversion. Anti-war protests were assumed to be the work of commie agitators and their naive "dupes".

Files stolen by peace activists from the FBI's office in Media, Pennsylvania, gave the public its first documented glimpse of just how extensive, arbitrary and moronic the bureau's records might be. The daily movements of a Boy Scout leader in Idaho were followed for over a decade, because he had once taken his troop for a ride on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. A 16-year-old girl in New Jersey became the object of a criminal investigation, because she had requested some information from the Socialist Workers Party as part of a high school assignment.³⁰³

Protests against the Vietnam War intersected with the FBI's long-standing interest in the Afro-American civil rights movement, which reached its zenith at roughly the same historical moment. More powerfully than any other public figure, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., articulated the view that U.S. oppression of Third World peoples abroad was an extension of discrimination against blacks and other minorities at home. This kind of talk, and its galvanizing effect on a large and increasingly restless portion of the U.S. public, made King an arch-villain in the eyes of Hoover, who set out to discredit the uppity preacher.

King and his associates were placed under continuous surveillance, authorized and unauthorized. Homes, offices and hotel rooms were wired for sound and phones were tapped. The bugging continued for at least three years, and over 5000 conversations were taped. "The surveillance was

massive and complete," later recalled a disaffected FBI agent. "He couldn't wiggle. They had him."

But it didn't seem to yield much strange fruit. Not one shred of incriminating evidence was developed from the costly electronic undertaking.

Hoover did manage to get some extra-marital sexual encounters down on tape. He used them to besmirch King's reputation and disrupt his family life. Bureau agents passed along tales of King's sexual adventures to his white liberal allies, in hopes that they would withdraw their support. An audio tape of King's hotel-room sex life was sent anonymously to his wife.

Efforts were "routinely" made to prevent King from receiving public tributes, such as honorary university degrees; FBI agents tried to discourage university officials from granting such honors by passing along tales of King's sex life, and by charging that he was skimming off funds from the civil rights movement for deposit in a secret Swiss bank account. Similar methods were used to discourage Atlanta community leaders from attending a banquet in celebration of King's Nobel Peace Prize. An agent was assigned the task of obtaining handwriting samples of King's aides so that incriminating documents could be contrived over their forged signatures (a venerable FBI technique).

"There was a consistent practice of anonymous telephone calls, sometimes to make false fire alarm reports at locations where Dr. King was to speak, and in other instances to friends and associates of Dr. King, trying to sow distrust among them." And on and on and on.... The FBI's persecution of King persisted until the civil rights leader was assassinated.³⁰⁴

Crimes of war

The Vietnam War was the first in U.S. history that was not subjected to heavy military censorship. As a result, the folks back home learned from the nightly news that war is, indeed, hell. It also came to light, eventually, that U.S. warriors are no more civilized than those of other nations.

The My Lai massacre, in which U.S. troops slaughtered two villages of unarmed peasants on suspicion of supporting the enemy, was only the most notorious episode of a general pattern. Rape, torture and gratuitous slaughter were standard operating procedure, openly tolerated and often practiced by officers.

At a seminar conducted by Vietnam veterans toward the end of the war, an Army Special Forces sergeant drew these conclusions: "We find that in 1963 we were displacing population, we were murdering prisoners, we were turning prisoners over to somebody else to be tortured. We were committing murder then, and in 1970 we find nothing has changed. Every law of land warfare has been violated. It has been done systematically, deliberately and continuously. It has been done with the full knowledge of those who, in fact, make policy for this country.

"In Vietnam, we have a situation where never has there been such a disparity of power since the days when Mussolini and Count Ciano went in to Abyssinia to slaughter the spear-carrying troops of Haile Selassie.... We have used an air force against a country that has none. We have used a navy against a country that has none.... Our country has set out very systematically to kill whatever number of people is necessary in Vietnam to stop them from resisting whatever it is we are trying to impose on that country.³⁰⁵

Vietnam was not the first Asian country to be afflicted by the American way of death. The subjugation of the Philippines by the U.S. Marines during the Spanish-American War was a thing of such prodigious barbarity that historians refer to it as "America's first Vietnam".

As for post-war Vietnam, it continues to struggle with the legions of war casualties, the land saturated with herbicides and other poisons, the residual arsenal of booby traps and unexploded bombs. For the Vietnamese, the war goes on, and will continue to do so for generations to come.³⁰⁶

'They just blew all the kids away'

*Testimony from The Winter Soldier Investigation
conducted by Vietnam Veterans against the War*

"There were some Vietnamese children at the gateway of the village, and they gave the old finger gesture at us. It was understandable that they picked this up from the GIs there.... The guys got up, including the lieutenants, and just blew all the kids away."

"They didn't find any enemy, but they found a woman with bandages.... A former major [now working with USAID] ripped her clothes off, and took a knife and cut from her vagina almost all the way up, just about to her breasts, and pulled her organs out, completely out of her cavity, and threw them out. Then he stooped over and commenced to peel every bit of skin off her body, and left her there as a sign for something or other."

"A Marine had just been killed. He had been hit by a sniper, and the entire battalion, in revenge, destroyed two entire villages, wiping out everything living — and that was men, women and children."

"A woman was shot by one of our snipers [and] was asking for water. And the lieutenant ripped off her clothes, they stabbed her in both breasts and shoved an entrenching tool up her vagina. Then they took that out and used a tree limb, and then she was shot."

"The major I worked for had a fantastic capability of staking prisoners, utilizing a knife that was extremely sharp, and sort of filleting them like a fish. You know, trying to check out how much bacon he could make of a Vietnamese body to get information."

"They raped the girl and, then, the last man to make love to her shot her."

American genocide

Of all the accusations leveled at Nicaragua by the Reaganites, certainly none is more preposterous than that it has been carrying out a policy of “genocide” against its indigenous population. Even if that were true, the United States is one of the last nations qualified to preach on the subject of native rights.

The genocide of American Indians has been so thoroughly documented that there is no need to detail it here. Suffice it to recall Chief Sitting Bull’s bitter catechism: “What treaty that the whites have kept has the red man broken? Not one. What treaty that the white man ever made with us have they kept? Not one.” And the bitter epitaph of a Yuma Indian woman: “We know that when you come, we die.”³⁰⁷

The other great domestic sin of U.S. history is, of course, slavery. More than a century after its formal structures were officially dismantled, the U.S. still has not come to grips with the consequences of that grotesque institution or the system of “Jim Crow” repression which succeeded it. The often brutal subjugation of the Afro-American population was not significantly challenged until the 1950s — just one generation ago — and the human destruction left in its wake is a long, long way from being remedied. On the contrary, there remain powerful reactionary forces, currently represented by the Reagan administration, that are resisting the modest gains that Afro-Americans have made at enormous sacrifice.

“Evil places”

Since Nicaragua lacks a similar history of genocide and slavery, it is not possible to draw a comparison. Both countries have prisons, however, and they provide an instructive contrast. Nicaragua’s prisons are among the most progressive in the Third World; as noted previously, the government has been credited by human rights organizations with a genuine effort to improve conditions.

In the category of leading industrial nations, on the other hand, U.S. prisons are among the most appalling. They are

certainly no strangers to political prisoners, and they have earned a reputation for inhuman brutality. The most dreadful are the large state prisons, especially those in the South. Overcrowding, beatings, killings, sexual enslavement, etc. are taken for granted, and only rarely impeded by state officials.

The internal life of most U.S. jails and prisons is regulated not by guards, but by the strongest and most vicious criminals. The prototype is Arkansas State Prison, where in 1968 an idealistic new warden, Tom Murton, tried to reform a system dominated by “trusty” inmates. Trusties were authorized to maintain order by any means they saw fit; that turned out to include frequent beatings, torture by such means as electric shock, and murder.

When Murton began to dig up old skeletons (both literally and figuratively) and to curb the abuses of the trusties, he was fired. Things soon returned to normal.³⁰⁸

Routine rape

The situation in Arkansas was far from unique. Nearly identical conditions have subsequently been reported in several other states, with nearly identical results.³⁰⁹

Seen from the perspective of its most defenseless victims, the method of the U.S. “justice” system is to lock up the most vicious people it can capture, then send them a continuous supply of “fresh meat” in the form of young men and women.

“No one seemed to be aware of the bestiality, cruelty and inhumanity that had gone on [at the state prison]. They were like the townspeople at Dachau who didn’t want to find out what caused the constant greasy smoke from the concentration-camp chimneys.... They still don’t, to this day — and that’s the whole problem in Arkansas. With a few rare exceptions, people refuse to acknowledge that their prisons are evil places, worse even than concentration camps, because they exist in a civilized country.”

— Tom Murton, deposed warden of Arkansas State Prison³¹⁰

Prison rape is so taken for granted that police use the threat of it to inspire co-operation from crime suspects, prosecutors employ it as leverage for plea bargaining, and judges have been known to cite it during sentencing as a sort of unofficial extra penalty.

Several states have adopted "scared straight" programs, in which young petty offenders are given a carefully supervised taste of prison life. The idea is to frighten the young men from pursuing careers as professional criminals. The certainty of rape in prison is a prominent theme of these programs, as illustrated by this excerpt from an account of the Georgia version: "The lieutenant picked out the smallest and made him stand at attention.... 'Do you know how long you'd last over there with the big boys?,' he roared, his mouth inches from the wide eyes of the pale young face. 'You ever been raped by a man? 'Cause that's what's going to happen to you in prison!'"³¹¹

It happens not only in prisons, nor only to perpetrators of serious crimes. Rape and other forms of assault are routine events in municipal and county jails, and they can be the consequence of nothing more heinous than a failure to pay a traffic fine or participating in a political protest. It is not unknown for young men to be raped as they are being transported from jail to a court proceeding, and back again.

This is partly the result of jail staffs that are deficient in both quantity and quality. The public may say it wants a just and efficient prison system, but has never betrayed much interest in paying for it. There is ample evidence, however, that the prevalence of rape is the result of deliberate, if unstated, policies. Rape performs several related functions: it tends to divert the hostile energies of the most violent prisoners from guards to weaker prisoners; it helps guards to maintain a psychological distance between themselves and the inmate population, by repeatedly demonstrating that prisoners are "a bunch of animals"; it nevertheless offers a vicarious release of latent homosexual interest; and it is a means to inflict extra-judicial punishment on prisoners whom guards especially dislike, e.g. "hippies" and "peaceniks".

Whatever their motives, officers of the courts know full well that when they send a young man off to jail or prison, he is very likely to be beaten and raped. As though to lubricate this official duty, there has evolved an exculpating bromide, yet another equivalent of the old favorite, "I was only doing my job." The standard cliché on prison rape is, "That's the price they pay for breaking the law."

And they do pay. One graduate of the New York state prison system summarized a common experience when he recalled, "I was in prison for three years, and I spent that entire time with one cock up my ass and another one in my mouth."

Sexual slavery

It is estimated that some 26,000 men are raped every day in U.S. jails and prisons. This does not include boys raped in reformatories, and that total may be even greater.³¹²

Many endure a condition of virtual slavery, forced by their convict masters to sell their bodies in exchange for money, drugs, cigarettes and other commodities. They may be required to shave off all their body hair and wear lipstick in order to enhance their image as feminine receptacles. Apart from the sexual gratification they are forced to provide, their purpose is to serve as objects of domination and humiliation. By one account, "Our prison population includes an estimated 175,000 Americans in some state of sexual slavery."³¹³

There is very little that the victim can do about it. Prisoners spend much more time in the company of each other than under direct supervision by guards. The more dominant inmates rule the cell block, and rape is an integral part of the prison economy. To "snitch" on an attacker is to sign one's death warrant. There is nowhere to turn.

The ultimate consequences of all this are not very well understood. Despite its prevalence, prison rape is an ugly reality that dare not speak its name in public. Cultural myths and expectations of masculine sexuality being what they are, the vast majority of victims would rather suffer their degradation in silence than broadcast it to the world.

Suicide and self-esteem

But there can be little doubt that it can have a devastating impact on self esteem. A physician who has dealt with the problem says that, "Male victims of rape in jail generally suffer a longer and deeper trauma than the female rape victims outside prison. The male inmate victim... must submit, escape or commit suicide. Once he submits, his masculinity has been devalued, he invites attacks from other prisoners, and he is locked into a 'no win' situation because, if he complains to the prison authorities, he is immediately branded a squealer and subjected to further humiliation and debasement. I would guess that for every one reported in-jail rape, ten go unreported."³¹⁴

It is not surprising, then, that prison inmates resort to suicide at a frequency up to twenty times greater than the national average. For those who survive and get out, the suppressed rage they bring with them may be released on the general public, especially women.

Another consequence of prison rape is the spread of venereal disease, which increasingly carries a death penalty authorized by no court. It may be assumed that in the next few decades, thousands of boys and men will be injected with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases as a direct result of their incarceration. Of course, "that's what they get for breaking the law".

Whatever the purely physical consequences, the psychological scars are very likely to last a lifetime. "I have nightmares about it," says an 18-year-old victim, who was briefly jailed in the nation's capital for a minor crime of which he was later acquitted. "It makes you lose your mind."³¹⁵

Big Uncle is watching

By any measure, the Reagan administration is one of the most corrupt in U.S. history. Over 200 Reaganite appointees have been investigated, and several have already been convicted. This appears to be the continuation of a venerable Republican

Party tradition: One historian of White House malfeasance calculates that, "If we're talking about financial corruption, 90% of it would be on the Republican side, and 10% on the Democratic."³¹⁶

By another assessment, "Ronald Reagan has presided over a wider range of official misdeeds than any other president in our history."³¹⁷

Any catalog of those misdeeds would have to give prominence to the administration's pervasive disregard of civil liberties. One of Ronald Reagan's first acts as president was to grant full pardons to two FBI agents convicted of numerous unauthorized burglaries in pursuit of "radicals" during the 1970s.

The Reaganites' commitment to freedom of the press in Latin America may be inferred from a 1985 raid in Puerto Rico, the U.S. protectorate and seat of an independence movement which predates the Spanish-American War. Without bothering to notify the island's governor or police, the FBI, the Attorney General and U.S. military units confiscated a left-wing journal's production equipment, and arrested a daily newspaper reporter. Disguised as a round-up of terrorists, the raid was clearly "an attack on the movement and the concept of independence, and not anything else."³¹⁸

On the mainland, the trend toward protecting the public from information that might embarrass the government has been greatly accelerated. Entire realms of information have been "classified" out of sight. In 1986 "the government developed a new category of 'sensitive information' to further restrict public access to a broad range of unclassified data. This makes possible an extraordinary government censoring apparatus that could restrict access to even non-government commercial data bases, censor the information they contain, and develop programs designed to reveal who is using a data base and what data they are calling up."³¹⁹

The FBI has been asking the nation's librarians to spy and report on their patrons' reading habits. Reading materials have been infected by CIA/Defense Department program

which deliberately releases misleading, incomplete and false information; this is somehow supposed to prevent other nations from acquiring news of U.S. technological advances.

Expanding on a gag order already applied to former CIA agents, the Reaganites instructed their president to sign a 1983 executive order which prevents 127,500 federal employees from making "sensitive" information available to the public for the rest of their lives. Those suspected of violating the directive may be subjected to lie detector tests; anyone who refuses is subject to "adverse consequences". The effect of this executive order is to give the administration "total control... preventing all of those in government most qualified to contradict official views and disprove official statements from disclosing any information which might do so."³²⁰

An amendment to the perversely named Privacy Act authorizes the detailed scrutiny of any citizen "suspected of being in the employ of a foreign power". For that vague purpose, the FBI now has unlimited access to the financial records and telephone logs of anyone on whom its arbitrary eye alights. There is no provision for monitoring the agency's use of its powerful new tool.³²¹

KGB peaceniks

The ever-unpopular "peace activists" are certain to remain prominent subjects of FBI curiosity. There are warehouses of files on these suspicious characters. They include Physicians for Social Responsibility, recipients of the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize, who have been under investigation since at least 1967. According to an assistant director of the agency, "The FBI was interested in determining whether or not the physicians' group was a Soviet front." Elucidates another official, "The FBI would be remiss if we didn't periodically check on the KGB and the peace movement."³²²

Congress has always been eager to assist in such projects. Toward the end of the Vietnam War, a congressional committee published a list of potentially dangerous "radical speakers" at colleges and universities. They included such

terrifying personalities as Dr. Benjamin Spock, the noted pediatrician, Rev. John C. Bennett, former president of the Union Theological Seminary, poet John Ciardi, criminologist Jerome Skolnick, and Nobel laureate Linus Pauling.³²³

One of the most far-reaching efforts of Congress to protect the nation from dangerous ideas was passage of the McCarran-Walter Act in 1952. It provided for the denial of entry visas to any foreigner whose "past, current or expected beliefs, statements or associations" suggested the possibility of leftist tendencies. Among those who have been honored by denial of entry under the act are: Pierre Trudeau in his wayward youth, i.e. before he became Prime Minister of Canada; Hortensia, widow of Salvador Allende; and authors Graham Greene, Farley Mowat, Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.³²⁴

Other potential dupes of the KGB were born here, and no one has found a way to get rid of them yet. This category of suspect includes two Roman Catholic Bishops, Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle and Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit, who have been memorialized with FBI files containing over 165 pages. Hunthausen has been active in the anti-nuclear movement. Gumbleton is a leading critic of the administration's Central America policy.

As the foregoing indicates, the Reaganites have been consistently hostile to U.S. clerics who dare to question administration policies. The prevailing attitude was clearly stated by a high-ranking State Department official: "Religious persons should not use the credibility they enjoy to market their personal philosophical and political beliefs."³²⁵ Needless to say, the State Department has not seen fit to apply this standard of comely reticence to Cardinal Obando and other pro-*contra* theologians of Nicaragua's Roman Catholic hierarchy.

Disaster planning

The Federal Emergency Management Agency was established in 1978 to co-ordinate federal responses to natural disasters and nuclear wars. The Reagan administration has expanded that concept to include any major outbreak of public opposition to its policies in Central America and elsewhere.

Plans drafted by an official of the National Security Agency in 1984 call for the imposition of martial law "in the event of nuclear war, widespread internal dissent, or national opposition to a U.S. military invasion abroad." It has been reported that FEMA has already received from the FBI a list of at least 12,000 citizens to be rounded up in case of trouble.³²⁶

A former CIA agent explains what that could mean: "If your name or organization is put on this list, they could kick down your door and haul you away or kill you, without any due process of law, and search warrants, and trial by jury and all of that... The special action teams that will do the preemptive striking have already been created and trained in the Defense Department. They're building detention centers; there were eight kept in mothballs under the McLaren Act after World War II to detain aliens and dissidents in the next war.... They're building ten more...

"They wanted to do what President Reagan said many times, when he was governor [of California]. If he had been president, he said, during the Vietnam War, it would have been conducted differently, and the outcome would have been different. The dissidents wouldn't have been able to take to the streets and do the things they did. So, he's getting himself some laws, so that when he puts his troops in Nicaragua, he can take charge of the American people, and put them in jail and kick in their doors and kill them, if they don't like what he's doing."³²⁷

So far, there has been no invasion of Nicaragua and no round-up of dissidents for the waiting concentration camps. But other, less direct, methods have already been brought to bear on troublemakers. A "retired" CIA agent was assigned to dig up some dirt on John Kerry, the Vietnam veteran and junior senator from Massachusetts who has been annoyingly persistent in his pursuit of the CIA-*contras*' drug smuggling operation and other scandals.

Representative Michael Barnes of Maryland was singled out for special mistreatment during the 1986 election campaign, for two reasons: he had become an effective leader of

House opposition to the CIA-*contras*; and most of his colleagues lived within broadcast range of his district, and were therefore exposed almost daily to the well-financed attack against him. What they witnessed was one of the most vicious political hatchet jobs in recent memory, carried out by a right-wing organization at White House direction and, very likely, with funds generated by the illegal operations set up by the Reaganites for such purposes.

In a series of ridiculous, but apparently effective full-page newspaper ads and TV spots, Barnes was vilified as a dupe of the communists, and graphically associated with such arch-enemies of the U.S. as Muammar Khadaffi and Fidel Castro. Barnes was defeated, and his fate made a deep impression on the stout hearts of Congress.³²⁸

Mysterious burglaries

Fame and power are not prerequisites for such attentions from the Reaganites. After testifying about CIA-*contra* drug running, human rights abuses, and financial corruption, a former CIA mercenary was accused of threatening the life of the president. The phony accusation was ordered by an official of the president's National Security Council, and it qualified the tattletale for investigation and harassment by the FBI.

Among other things, his personal papers were searched. Those papers happened to be filed at the offices of a private research group headed by the Carter administration's ambassador to El Salvador, a scathing critic of Reaganite policy in Central America. His is just one of 60 groups opposing administration policy which have experienced mysterious burglaries of their offices. Typically, nothing of value to a thief has been taken, but membership lists and other papers have been stolen or disturbed. It is a loud echo of the Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) aimed at the Vietnam peace movement by the FBI and CIA.³²⁹

So much of the mail between Nicaragua and the United States has been opened, delayed and "lost" that the Interna-

tional Postal Union has adopted special measures to increase chances of unmolested delivery.

U.S. citizens returning from Nicaragua are searched and questioned at a disproportionate rate by customs officials alerted to their subversive potential.

Nursing suspicion

A typical case is that of the nurse who donated eight months of her services to Nicaraguan hospitals. Upon returning to the land of the free, customs officials seized her address book, reading materials and personal notes; they also read personal letters she was carrying to U.S. citizens. The explanation: "Anything against the government, our government, is subversive."

That description apparently applied to two books, *Sandinino's Daughters* and *Women, Resistance and the Revolution*. The inspector explained that books about "revolutionary and female leaders in a revolutionary context, leaders fighting for causes" were potentially dangerous.³³⁰

"Every intelligence agency must at some point become a ministry of propaganda. It has to revive and freshen the fears that nourish the very life of the agency.... The classic example is, of course, Hoover's FBI. Hoover would regularly insist that the Reds were getting stronger and stronger...."

"The trick was to keep alive and renew mass fear of Communism, but at the same time to reassure the frightened citizenry that the Bureau had the subversives well in hand.... We have been victims, then, of deliberate, institutionalized manipulation and propaganda for a very long time...."

"I am doubtful about the possibility that Congress will do anything about this intelligence structure. Intelligence agencies survive through what I call the 'Barbarossa syndrome'. When things get bad, they retire to the cave and wait for conditions to improve. Then they emerge and continue their business at the old stand. "

— Frank Donner³³⁰

To combat such dangers, the FBI has continued a venerable tradition by paying agents to infiltrate “subversive” groups. A naturalized citizen from El Salvador has testified that the FBI paid him and others to collect information on hundreds of “liberal” groups from 1981-84, in a program ordered by the President’s National Security Council.

The surveillance program first targeted the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), and was soon expanded to ensnare hundreds of organizations, including the National Council of Churches, the Maryknoll Sisters, the United Automobile Workers, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, OxFam America, Amnesty International, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Sisters of Mercy.

One product of the extensive spying project was a “terrorist photo album” which included the Bishop of Cuernavaca in Mexico, a former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador, numerous priests and nuns, and two U.S. senators.

The program may also have been used to seal the fates of refugees picked up in the U.S. for deportation back to El Salvador. The FBI exchanged information on those unfortunates with El Salvador’s murderous National Guard; the agent who turned them in “is tormented by the possibility that he may have fingered people who have since died or disappeared”.³³²

At home, “FBI agents investigated nuns, union members, and college students; checked up on church forums and Knights of Columbus dinners; photographed protesters at peaceful rallies; and distributed what they deemed offending articles from student newspapers and People magazine.”

Wiretaps were placed on peace activists, and right-wing groups were asked to report on “leftist and liberal activists”. Thousands of demonstrators were photographed, as were the license-plate numbers of citizens attending meetings. This information was distributed to other government agencies, and added to the FBI’s bulging files.³³³

This sort of institutional abuse was supposed to have been outlawed by Congress after the scandals of the Nixon admini-

stration. But the FBI, CIA, DIA, Army and other government spookeries have finessed the restrictions by intoning the “national security” password — i.e. suspicious individuals and groups must be investigated because they might be fronts for or dupes of A Foreign Power.

Neutrality Act

That’s how this most recent mass surveillance of peaceniks was rationalized by the FBI Director who ordered it. William Webster, who has since moved on to the CIA, said that it all began when the Bureau received a tip that CISPES might be violating the U.S. Neutrality Act, by providing military assistance to Salvadoran guerillas. (Apparently, the FBI has not received similar tips on the hundreds of groups and individuals who have openly acknowledged violating the Neutrality Act in support of the CIA-*contras* in Nicaragua.) The thousands of other individuals and groups caught up in the investigation, he soothed, were all somehow connected with CISPES.

The plausibility of such bland assertions is somewhat compromised by FBI documents that have since come to light. One sounds the alarm that, “It is imperative at this time to formulate some plan of action against CISPES and, specifically, against individuals who defiantly display their contempt for the U.S. government by making speeches and propagandizing their cause.”³³⁴ The “plan of action” continued for years after it became evident that CISPES was not violating the Neutrality Act.

In fact, the crusade against opponents of the Reaganites’ Central American policy was so blatantly political that several FBI field agents balked at participating in it.

The head of the Denver office went so far as to admonish his superiors that, “In spite of attempts by the bureau to clarify guidelines and goals for this investigation, the field is still not sure of how much seemingly legitimate political activity can be monitored.”³³⁵

In a rare display of integrity, a 21-year veteran of the FBI refused to investigate two Chicago peace groups on the grounds that such action would violate constitutional protections: "I believe that in the past, members of our government have used the FBI to quell dissent, sometimes where the dissent was warranted. I feel history will judge this to be another such instance." He was immediately fired, and stripped of his pension.³³⁶

A principal target of the Reagan administration's domestic spy effort has been the sanctuary movement. Operated primarily by mainline churches and other religious groups, this modern equivalent of the slavery era's Underground Railway provides clandestine shelter to Latin America refugees. Most have fled from the horrors of Guatemala and El Salvador, and have ample reason to fear for their lives if they return.

Under U.S. law, they qualify for status as political refugees. But since the Reaganites have invested so much political capital in the proposition that the refugees' homelands are models of democratic virtue, very few of them have been permitted to remain legally in the United States.

Those who provide sanctuary are, therefore, obnoxious to the current administration. A series of tenacious federal prosecutions of sanctuary workers has yielded several convictions. One of those convicted has been adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience.

*Beneath a portrait of martyred
Luisa Amanda Espinoza,
indignant inmates of the
"totalitarian dungeon"
protest against CIA-
contra aggression.*



Jaime Perozo

Ronald the Vigilant

The foregoing summary merely scratches the surface of a lengthy tradition of repression and brutality in the United States. But it should serve to demonstrate that even a relatively “advanced” nation can be made to appear irredeemably wicked by focusing on the most negative aspects of its past and present. That method is, of course, the anti-intellectual basis of the Reaganites’ preposterous moral arrogance toward Nicaragua.

Some abuses of human rights and civil liberties in the U.S. occurred long ago, some within memory of the living, and some persist to this day. It seems likely that many will continue well into the future.

As though to dispel any doubts, the Leader of the Free World recently confided to his favorite newspaper, the Moon empire’s *Washington Times*, that his countrymen have lately relaxed their vigilance against subversion, most likely as a result of growing commie influence in Congress and the mass media: “There is a disinformation, we know, worldwide,” explained President Reagan, “and that disinformation is very sophisticated and very successful, including with a great many in the media and the press in America...”

“Remember, there was once a Congress in which they had a committee that would investigate even one of their own members if it was believed that that person had communist involvement or communist leanings.

“Well, they’ve done away with those committees. That shows the success of what the Soviets were able to do in this country with making it unfashionable to be anti-communist.”³³⁷

Actor Ronald Reagan’s career as an ardent anti-communist, which eventually carried him to the White House, began in earnest during the great red-scare that replaced World War II as a source of external enemies.



COMPLEXITIES OF NICARAGUAN SOCIETY

White House propaganda has remained true to its numerous antecedents by focusing solely on the shortcomings of the Sandinistas, while ignoring their many achievements and clearly honorable intentions. It has deliberately oversimplified the complex social reality of Nicaragua, hacking it into false dichotomies such as church vs. state, freedom vs. repression, democracy vs. totalitarianism — in short, good vs. evil.

Ironically, the word from the White House on Nicaragua resembles nothing so much as the impression one gets of the United States from a daily reading of *Pravda*. It appears that the two superpowers have much in common, after all.

The following summary attempts to outline major interests and organizations in Nicaragua. Obviously, there is a great deal of overlap among categories; a Catholic may also belong to a labor union, a political party, etc. At best, this outline can only suggest the range of interests, and not their distribution among the population; Nicaragua lacks an effective statistical apparatus, and remains comparatively innocent of opinion polling. Most of the issues touched on here are discussed in greater detail elsewhere in these pages.

Political parties

The national election of 1984 remains the best available index of political affiliation. The FSLN received 67 percent of the votes in an election certified by numerous international observers — including many from NATO allies of the United States — as comparatively honest and efficient, and as having offered a broad range of political choices. Approximately 70 percent of eligible voters participated, which compares favorably with the 53 percent that turned out for the 1984 U.S. election. Thus, Daniel Ortega's "mandate" from eligible voters is proportionately twice that of Ronald Reagan's.

There is little doubt, however, that popular support for the Sandinistas has declined since 1984, partly from the disappointment which inevitably overtakes the inflated hopes that greet all revolutions. But it is the destruction and unending hardship of the CIA destabilization campaign which probably accounts for most of the attrition. Exactly how much support it has cost the Sandinistas probably won't be known until the national elections scheduled for 1990.

In the meantime, there are many indications of continued faith in the revolution. A Jesuit priest from the United States reported in 1987 that, "Eighty percent of the people may be complaining about rising prices, growing shortages, maddeningly inadequate transportation, and so on. But according to studies done by the Sociology Department at the Jesuits' Central American University, the majority of the people see these problems as attributable to the war, the economic embargo, the drop in prices for Nicaragua's exports, and other causes beyond the control of the government... which still has the support of the majority. That is clear in our studies, and also in our experience with local-level Christian communities, which can mobilize thousands of Nicaraguans in public expressions of support for their government and rejection of U.S. aggression."³³⁸

As a result of the 1984 vote, the FSLN holds 61 of the National Assembly's 96 seats. Two seats are held by each of the three "leftist" parties — Socialist, Communist, and Marxist-Leninist. They represent small constituencies of workers and peasants, with a combined vote-share of less than four percent. Their general critique of the government is that it has sold out the revolution to "bourgeois interests" with, among other things, controls on wages and strikes, and a land reform program which they regard as inadequate to the needs of the peasantry.

The elected center-right bloc also consists of three parties, but their positions are much less homogeneous than those of the left. The largest is the Conservative Democratic Party with fourteen seats, followed by the Independent Liberals with nine, and the Popular Social Christians with six.

The Conservative Democrats have asserted that the land reform program has unnecessarily promoted class conflict, and have called for greater privatization of the economy. It is strongly opposed to "U.S. aggression against Nicaragua".

The Independent Liberals have been in a state of confusion since the U.S. instructed its presidential candidate to withdraw from the 1984 election process; he was removed as party leader in late 1987. The party's right wing has called for a U.S. invasion, while its center-left opposes CIA-*contra* aid. The factional conflict had still not been resolved as of early 1988, and the party's program remained in dispute.

The Popular Social Christians support the revolution, but have called for greater worker control through co-operatives, and a larger role in the economy for private enterprise.

Between them, the center-right bloc accounted for 29% of the 1984 votes. Although they attracted some urban and rural workers, their main strength comes from professionals, farmers and business people with small-to-modest resources.

So much for the elected opposition which, as far as the U.S. is concerned, does not exist. These parties, which tested their popularity in the 1984 election, have been almost completely ignored by mainstream U.S. news media. On those rare occasions when they are mentioned, it is usually to be dismissed as the "pro-Sandinista opposition", or some such formulation.

One of the Reaganites' most impressive marketing triumphs has been to establish the *Coordinadora Democratica* as the true political opposition. That was the name given to the three parties that followed U.S. instructions to withdraw from the 1984 election in order to discredit the outcome. In reality, as they well understood, the only thing against them was the vast majority of the voting public. Since they had no hope of earning political influence, their masters in the White House elected to use them as an instrument of propaganda, and the U.S. news media have co-operated at every step.

The *Coordinadora* represents the wealthiest, most reactionary landowners and business interests. It is essentially the political front of COSEP and the CIA-*contras*. One indication of

its popularity is the turnout at the August, 1987, open house for its new Managua headquarters — about 200 people showed up. They tried again a few months later, with a rally attended by a contingent of right-wing U.S. congressman; that was a relative triumph, attracting some 500 people.

An instructive comparison is provided by the June, 1986, re-enactment of the FSLN's tactical retreat from Managua to Masaya during the final stages of the insurrection in 1979. For that far more arduous celebration, 50,000 people joined in the 20-mile overnight march. A November 1987 Sandinista rally in Managua drew over 100,000.

Of course, such details hold little or no interest for the U.S. mainstream press, which has preferred instead to concentrate on the fiery rhetoric of *Coordinadora* leaders. Their ravings have been both augmented and complicated since the August 1987 Central America peace initiative touched off a chaotic re-shuffling of political alliances. By early 1988, there were at least fourteen political parties jockeying for advantage in the fluid aftermath of the peace agreement. It has resulted in some odd contortions; the Communist Party, for instance, wound up in the same political bed as the extremely right-wing *Coordinadora*.

But these maneuvers have greatly enhanced the elected opposition's prestige in the United States. Now that they are associated with the *Coordinadora* and other unrepresentative bodies, the White House and the mainstream press treat them as champions of democracy.

Oblivious to their disharmonies and slender constituencies, U.S. news media refer approvingly to the "fourteen opposition parties" as though their mere aggregation somehow confers legitimacy. After all, the Sandinistas have only one party, but the opposition has *fourteen*. This somehow suggests to the mainstream press that the splintered opposition must therefore represent the true will of the people.

More discerning observers are not so sure. According to information provided by a Jesuit research institute, "Since the Central American peace initiative, none of the opposition

party rallies has drawn more than 3000 people, and most have drawn less than 2000, even though the parties have bussed people in from other cities." Adds a former CIA-*contra* leader who returned to Nicaragua under amnesty in late 1987, "You know, the other parties [all those opposed to the FSLN] can't even fill two blocks.... They are minority parties, parties in name only; they don't have a constituency."³³⁹

Churches

Nicaragua is approximately 85 percent Roman Catholic, with the balance of the population distributed among some fifty Protestant denominations. Jews number less than one hundred. Agnostics and atheists are not much in evidence.

The Catholic Church has been sharply divided on the question of support for the Sandinista revolution. Members of the "popular church", including many priests and nuns, allied themselves with the FSLN during the insurrection.

"A priest says the Sandinistas who control Nicaragua are trying to crush the Church; a nun says she found God in the revolution. One industrialist says the government stifles free enterprise, another claims the revolution has been good for business.... The cast of characters might be from one of those Renaissance canvases that seem to include everyone in Florence. The Jinotega coffee grower who pays the state more taxes than it requires because he wants the country strong for the anticipated U.S. invasion. The union organizer from Rivas, giving the revolution credit for rescuing Nicaragua from serfdom. The banana plantation owner who sees in the revolution the death of democracy. The chemical executive who sees the Sandinistas as Nicaragua's determined greenhorn saviors.... The textile worker whose misery under the old regime has been transformed into something beyond hope; he talks of a revolutionary sunrise that gives him and his family anticipations as fond as their memories are bitter."

— Peter Davis³⁴⁰

Their support, which is based on the precepts of liberation theology, remains very strong. There is a great deal of overlap between the popular church and other revolutionary organizations, particularly the Sandinista Defense Committees.

The church hierarchy, led by Cardinal Obando, has been opposed to the Sandinista government from the start. Obando says his opposition is aimed at the "totalitarian tendencies" which he and other members of the pro-*contra* opposition discern. His critics in the popular church argue, however, that Obando is locked in reactionary commitment to Nicaragua's traditional elites, and that he resents losing the greater influence he enjoyed during the Somoza years.

Whatever his motives, Obando and the majority of his bishops have harshly criticized many aspects of the Sandinista revolution, while finding nothing to commend it. They have also associated themselves openly with the CIA-*contras*, whose well-documented brutality they have refused to acknowledge, even going so far as to blame it on the Sandinistas.

Although statistics on the schism in the church are non-existent, it is evident that large portions of the middle and upper classes have cast their fate with the cardinal. Many of the nation's poor also gravitate to the hierarchy out of devout tradition and an ingrained suspicion of anything labeled "communist". Doubtless there are many who remain neutral, siding neither with the hierarchy nor the popular church.

But there are clear indications that a majority subscribes to the philosophy of the popular church. There is widespread loathing of the CIA-*contras*, whose cause the hierarchy supports, and the cardinal's denunciations of military conscription have been ignored by the 80 percent of draft-age youths who have chosen to submit to it.

As for the priests, "Most of them are with us", states Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto of his clerical colleagues. His faith is bolstered by the fact that all but a handful of Nicaragua's 75 Jesuits, the largest contingent of priests from any single order, have been actively supporting the revolution.

Support for the revolution is also strong among Protestant denominations. Most of them are represented in CEPAD, the Evangelical Committee for Aid to Development in Nicaragua, which has repeatedly testified to the revolution's climate of religious freedom and its genuine efforts to assist the most disadvantaged.

The major exception to Protestant support for the revolution has been the Moravian Church, which has been accorded a significance far in excess of its reach due to the CIA's success in focusing international attention on the Miskito Indians. Early conflicts between the government and the Miskitos led some Moravian ministers to denounce the Sandinistas. But that criticism has diminished as relations have improved in recent years; progress toward regional autonomy has converted many former Moravian critics into supporters.

Protestants in general have benefited from the Catholic Church's loss of quasi-official status, which may be another source of Cardinal Obando's displeasure. Membership in Protestant churches has grown by nearly 500% since 1979.

Labor unions

Approximately 88% of organized labor supports the government. The principal associations:

- Sandinista Workers Confederation, with a broad base in manufacturing, construction, transport, and commerce; 112,700 members.
- Association of Farm Workers; 43,000
- General Confederation of Labor – Independent; 17,200
- Confederation for Action and Trade Unity; 2000
- Nicaraguan Health Workers Federation; 19,000
- National Union of Public Employees; 45,000.

Only two labor organizations have consistently opposed the government. The Nicaraguan Workers Confederation has a

“The trade union movement in Nicaragua is young, dynamic and expanding. An appropriate analogy is to the early organizing drives of the CIO during the 1930s. Nicaraguan workers eagerly joined trade unions in large numbers during the revolution. Under these circumstances of rapid growth, rivalry between competing unions is intense and, at times, violent....

“The relationship between the two largest pro-Sandinista unions, the Sandinista Workers Confederation (CST) and the Association of Farm Workers (ATC), and the government is not unlike that of the AFL-CIO and the Democratic Party.... Both the CST and the ATC opposed the government’s suspension of the right to strike. Yet, they accepted these restrictions as the necessary cost of fighting the war against the contras. Their attitudes were not dissimilar to those of the AFL-CIO in its acquiescence to the U.S. government’s request in World War II not to engage in strikes in order to assist the war effort.”

— Report of U.S. labor lawyers³⁴²

small base in manufacturing, agriculture and commerce; it had 2700 members in 1984.

The Confederation of Trade Union Unity (CUS) was permitted to organize in many Somoza-owned businesses. It is now closely affiliated with the pro-*contra* business organization, COSEP, and has close links to the “AFL-CIA”; its membership in 1984 was 1700. Because or in spite of the fact that CUS represents less than one percent of organized labor and is associated with the CIA-*contras*, the U.S. mainstream press refers to it as the only legitimate union association in Nicaragua.³⁴¹

Mass media

There are three main daily newspapers. *Barricada* is the official Sandinista newspaper; its editor is Carlos Chamorro, son of the murdered patriarch and former editor of *La Prensa*, Pedro Joaquin Chamorro. *La Prensa* is now fronted by Pedro’s widow, Violetta, with funding and direction from the United

States; it is associated with COSEP and the CIA-*contras*. *El Nuevo Diario* was founded as a co-operative by over 80 percent of the staff who worked at *La Prensa* until it was taken over by the CIA. *El Nuevo Diario* is edited by Pedro Joaquín's brother, Xavier Chamorro, and supports government policies. But it frequently criticizes incompetence and corruption; the relationship is analogous to that of the *New York Times* with the U.S. government.

Probably more important to the majority of the population, with its marginal literacy, are the many radio stations. Approximately 45 broadcast from within Nicaragua, and many others from Costa Rica and Honduras. The latter include the powerful Voice of America and numerous CIA-*contra* stations that emit a steady stream of anti-Sandinista propaganda.

Anti-Sandinista messages are also a staple of *Radio Católica*, operated by the church hierarchy, which refuses access to members of the popular church. Some fifteen local stations are organized into a network similar to the U.S. National Public Radio system. The Sandinistas have two stations at their disposal, and there are about 25 independents.

Observers have noted that censorship of radio broadcasts is less thorough than that applied to newspapers, and that all political viewpoints — short of open encouragement of the CIA-*contras* — have ample opportunity to be heard.

Business organizations

The most influential *outside* the country is the Higher Council of Economic Enterprise (COSEP). Its influence derives not from its numbers or its contribution to Nicaraguan society, but rather from its usefulness to the CIA. It functions as an internal front of the CIA-*contras* and as a reliable source of anti-Sandinista quotes for the U.S. mainstream press.

Most of the largest plantation owners are represented by the National Union of Agricultural Producers, which is very annoyed with Sandinista land reform policies. It has about 4000 members, many of whom also belong to COSEP.

“Well over half of the economy is in private hands. Big businesses, some amazingly big, continue to thrive in spite of all the problems. One example is the Pellas family. They are the largest sugar cane growers in Central America... [They] produce some 90% of the rum and close to half the beer consumed in the country, are one of the main machinery importers, used to be the dealers for General Motors (no GM cars can be imported under the U.S. trade embargo) and, as Toyota dealers, handle most of the cars being imported now.... As long as they obey the laws and don’t overtly work against the revolution, it doesn’t seem to matter how rich they are.”

— U.S. teacher living in Nicaragua³⁴³

The National Union of Farmers and Cattlemen has about 124,000 members, representing 60 percent of the nation’s total production. It supports Sandinista agricultural and land reform policies, and is therefore seldom mentioned by U.S. news media.

Mass organizations

Voluntary organizations of workers, professionals, students, women, neighborhood residents, etc. have been the principal vehicles of grassroots democracy since the first days of the revolution. Although not formally affiliated with the FSLN, they provide vital channels of communication with the government — in much the same way that, say, the World Anti-Communist League communes with the Reagan administration.

By far the most important organizations are the Sandinista Defense Committees which provide vital security and social services to 15,000 neighborhoods. Nearly one-quarter of the populace participates in these committees; about 60 percent of the members are women.

Women and their needs are the *raison d’être* of the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Women’s Association (AMNLAE) which has about 85,000 members. It lobbies for improvements in the

living and working conditions of women, and has also been instrumental in the success of national health and education programs.

Other organizations include: the Sandinista Youth Organization, whose 35,000 members have donated substantial free labor to education, health and agricultural projects; the Union of Nicaraguan Journalists; Popular Education Collectives; the National Association of Nicaraguan Teachers; Centers of Popular Culture; Sandinista Popular Militias; Revolutionary Christian Students; National Association of Engineers and Architects; and the Mothers of the Martyrs and Heroes.

OBSTRUCTING INJUSTICE

THE WHITE HOUSE and its quasi-official press have succeeded in demonizing the Sandinistas, but that has not translated into a corollary enthusiasm for Ronald Reagan's favorite terrorists. With a few transitory exceptions, public opinion polls over the past five years have disclosed widespread opposition to U.S. support of the CIA-*contras*. The proportions have consistently been in the vicinity of 60% opposed, 30% in favor and 10% undecided. This, despite the fact that a majority of respondents have succumbed to the drumbeat of accusations that Nicaragua represents a communist threat to its Central American neighbors, and will probably allow the Soviet Union to establish military bases on its territory.

However, a great deal of the opposition to the CIA-*contras* is based on the hard rock of perceived self-interest, not on any qualms about the devastation of Nicaragua. For many, the prospect of becoming involved in another deadly fiasco like Vietnam arouses an inhibiting anxiety. This can be inferred from responses to the question, "Would you favor intervention in Central America if it did not result in another Vietnam?" That formulation draws a favorable response of 67%.³⁴⁴

Something quite similar actually occurred in reaction to the 1983 invasion of Grenada. Surveyed beforehand, a large majority of the U.S. populace opposed armed intervention. But after the deed was done, with comparatively few U.S. casualties to cast a pall over the proceedings, a grateful nation conferred its overwhelming approval.

The interests and wishes of the people of Grenada — whoever *they* might be — had little or nothing to do with it. Nor did it seem to matter in the least that the administration's rationale for its unprovoked aggression was soon demonstrated to be a tissue of lies.

As with most international issues, voting behavior and opinion poll data clearly indicate that a majority of U.S. citizens know little and care less about what kind of bloody mess their government makes in Nicaragua — as long as it doesn't splatter on them. But significant elements of the populace are intensely involved.

On the one hand are the ardent anti-communists whose fear and hate form the political base of the Reaganites' Central America policy. They include fundamentalist churches, right-wing organizations and many individuals of great wealth. Their violent passions find an outlet in the network set up by the White House to co-ordinate illegal private funding of the CIA-*contras* (cf. pages 108-114).

Opposing that unholy alliance is a broad spectrum of groups and individuals. Although not nearly as large or as loud as the anti-Vietnam War movement — after all, there are as yet no rafts of middle-class white kids drifting home from Central America in bodybags — the loose coalition supporting Nicaragua in its struggle against the Reaganites has nevertheless achieved some notable results.

First and foremost, it has impeded the long-planned U.S. invasion of Nicaragua, which almost certainly would have been ordered by now were it not for an articulate and energetic opposition.

Among the most effective opponents are the mainline churches, including the Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, United Church of Christ, American Baptists and others. Even the U.S. Catholic Conference, while siding with its reactionary colleagues of the Nicaraguan hierarchy, has joined in the general chorus of disapproval. All have issued strongly worded denunciations of the CIA-*contras* and most other aspects of U.S. policy in Central America. Hundreds of individual congregations have established sister-church relationships with counterparts in Nicaragua.

The Leader of the Free World has even been rebuked by the church he attended as a youth, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). A petition circulated by the Disciples Peace Fellowship at the 1987 General Assembly asked Ronald

Reagan “how our Christian faith can justify your actions as President.... You have claimed national security reasons for withholding the rights of other countries to self-determination. You have continued to urge Congress to vote aid to the Contras, even when such aid threatens the Central American Peace Plan.... You have often favored violent solutions to world problems instead of leading our nation toward trust in diplomacy and negotiations: i.e. Grenada, Libya, the Persian Gulf, Nicaragua.

“It is incumbent upon you as a fellow Christian to listen to the message of the Church, instead of depending upon advice from the Pentagon and the merchants of war material.”

Confronting the lies

In 1986 over 200 national religious leaders initiated a major educational and lobbying campaign that attracted considerable attention with a dramatic demonstration on the steps of Congress, and an angry proclamation:

“A scaffold of deception is being constructed around Nicaragua. Exaggeration, misinformation, and outright falsehood form the heart of the Reagan administration’s case against Nicaragua.... The administration has been deceiving the public in its quest for military and so-called humanitarian aid to the contras. Most notably, it has been covering up credible reports that the contras are systematically committing human rights atrocities against innocent civilians...

“We call upon the U.S. government to cease its promotion of fear and hatred and to cease its funding of the contra war against Nicaragua. We call upon the media to critically examine the unsubstantiated assertions made by the U.S. government regarding Nicaragua....

“We call upon all persons of faith and conscience in the U.S. to look at the effects of current U.S. policy in Nicaragua and all of Central America, and to join with us in saying to the government of the United States, IN THE NAME OF GOD, STOP THE LIES, STOP THE KILLING!”

Pretty strong stuff for the normally prudent souls of the mainline denominations, which have aimed the same kind of criticism at the arms race and other pet projects of the Reaganites. So worrisome is this trend toward rampant pacifism that one high-ranking general warned an audience of his peers at the National War College that, "The greatest challenge to all that we do now comes from within the churches. A whole new way of thinking is developing in the churches, and we have to know how to deal with it."³⁴⁵

The general might have mentioned a sizable contingent of the nation's war veterans in the same breath. Most of those active in the Nicaragua solidarity movement first learned to distrust their government in Vietnam, but veterans of World War II, the Korean War, Grenada — even the recent war games in Honduras — are also represented.

The resurgence of veterans' anti-war sentiment is all the more remarkable for having survived the Reagan administration's sadly effective campaign to repackage the Vietnam disaster as a "noble, selfless enterprise" (*pace* Richard Nixon). Many of those who did the fighting have a far different recollection, and are determined to apply their experience to current events.

That determination was most dramatically brought to national attention in 1986, when four Vietnam vets publicly renounced their decorations, including a Medal of Honor, and commenced a "Fast for Life" on the Capitol steps in protest against the CIA-*contras*. The fast continued for 47 days, and stimulated a series of parallel activities all over the world — peace vigils, civil disobedience actions, sympathy fasts, etc.

The four leaders received 10,000 letters of encouragement, many from fellow Vietnam vets who contributed an additional 88 defiled decorations; other notes of encouragement came from as far away as Ireland, France and Britain's House of Commons.

Veterans have established a permanent presence in Nicaragua. Two members of Vietnam Vets against the War based in Managua broadcast a weekly radio program about life in Nicaragua to GIs stationed in Honduras. The Veterans Peace Action Team has made plans to interpose a corps of unarmed

vets between the CIA-*contras* and Nicaraguan civilians. There are also plans to send a truck convoy with 4000 tons of grain and other supplies via the Pan American Highway in mid-1988, after a public information tour through the U.S.

Veteran casualty

Speeches of friendship and solidarity by U.S. veterans have become a staple of such national celebrations as the revolution's anniversary on the 19th of July. They include Brian Willson, who spoke on the occasion of the FSLN's 25th anniversary in November of 1986. One of the four vets who led the above-mentioned "Fast for Life", Willson told his audience of 250,000 celebrants: "Our fast was inspired by the Nicaraguan people... who present the dramatic case of a Third World nation rising up against the most powerful superpower on the face of the earth. Your revolutionary process belongs to all peoples of faith and conscience throughout the world. Therefore, it is extremely important that you survive, not only for your own good but also for the good of the people of the United States."³⁴⁶

Less than a year later, Willson lost both of his legs to a U.S. supply train in California when it ran over him during a demonstration against military shipments to the CIA-*contras*. After recuperating, Willson visited Congress on his new artificial legs in hopes of explaining to a House Armed Services subcommittee why he risked life and limb on behalf of Nicaragua.

The sub-committee voted 10-4 to disallow his testimony, moving Rep. Barbara Boxer of California to protest, "I was totally shocked. This was undemocratic. I had never heard of not letting a witness put his statement on the record. I found it absolutely shameful. During the Iran-*contra* hearings, Oliver North had the option of going on *ad nauseum* about why he did what he did [cf. "The Builder & The Destroyer", page 345]. No one stopped him. He had his full say. Laws were broken. But here was Brian Willson, and Congress muzzled him. It was horrible and crazy. We'll lose democracy that way."³⁴⁷

Willson was subsequently sued for damages by the train crew, for the “humiliation, embarrassment and emotional distress” he inflicted on them by choosing their train to cut off his legs. Despite all this, he has continued his struggle against the Reaganites, along with numerous veteran associates.

Local disagreements

Widespread opposition to the CIA-*contra* program has been expressed at all levels of government, provoking Reaganites to bitter cracks about such-and-such being “the only town in the U.S. with a foreign policy”.

But there is more than one. The mayor and council of Seattle have persisted in their support of a sister city relationship with Managua, despite many loud complaints. Near the opposite coast, the Board of Aldermen in Burlington, Vermont, sent a letter to Congress in July of 1986 objecting to funding of the CIA-*contras*: “In essence, the U.S. Congress has declared war



In one of numerous protests mounted in major U. S. cities, signers of the Pledge of Resistance block midday traffic in front of Seattle's Federal Building. Thousands have endured arrest and other discomforts to register their disapproval of the Reagan administration's assault on Nicaragua.

against the people of Nicaragua — a war which will result in the continued killing of and injury to thousands of innocent children, women and men. On the very date of the Board's action, the International Court of Justice (World Court) declared the United States government's actions to be illegal under international law. In view of these facts, and in view of the opposition to present U.S. policy by many of the residents of Burlington, [we] wish to protest this vote of Congress in the strongest terms possible."

In Wisconsin, the White House confronted an entire state agitating against it. "Some 70 organizations in the Badger State are devoted to seeing to it that the people of Nicaragua get cows, computers, diapers, blackboards, fire-fighting equipment, medicine, schoolbooks, wheelchairs and sewing machines.... In 1986, Wisconsin raised \$1 million in goods and another million in cash for the country that has been its sister

"When I went to Nicaragua in 1986, I expected to find a situation like East Germany, which I had visited years before. After all, we had heard so much about the 'Marxist-Leninist dictatorship' in Nicaragua.

"What I found was something very different. There were soldiers in evidence, as in East Germany. But, there, the similarity ended. These soldiers mixed freely with the people. Their manner was relaxed and friendly, and civilians displayed not the slightest fear of them.

"I was free to go wherever I chose, without supervision. Everywhere, I found people speaking openly and freely — often quite critically of the government. But whenever I asked critics if they would prefer the contras to take over the country, they looked at me as though I were crazy. That was clearly unthinkable.

"The contrast with East Germany could not have been greater. It is obvious, to me at least, that Nicaragua is a free country, and that the people mean to keep it that way."

— Kim Esterberg, real estate appraiser, Bainbridge Island, WA

state since 1963. Next year it is going for \$2 million.... Several prominent lawyers are helping the Nicaraguans draft a new constitution.... A steady stream of utterly respectable Wisconsinites — bishops, union leaders, state legislators — go down to see for themselves what the president calls a ‘terrorist base’... [Former governor] Anthony Earl is a member of the Wisconsin Coordinating Committee on Nicaragua, which was founded in 1984 to create a united front against the president’s belligerence.”³⁴⁸

By 1986, a handful of state governors had refused to permit their National Guard units to be used for the imperial war games in Central America, and several others were facing strong citizen pressure to follow suit. The administration was not amused; an Assistant Secretary of Defense complained: “The governors’ authority has become a vehicle to debate or influence foreign policy. This is no longer a case of a few isolated instances. It is a demonstrated way for dissent groups, state legislators, and state governments to seize a forum to debate foreign policy.”³⁴⁹

Ever antagonistic toward any debate on foreign policy which it does not control, the White House responded by submitting legislation that eliminates governors’ authority to veto the deployment of National Guard units. It was passed in 1987, by the same Congress that approved \$127 million in direct aid to the CIA-*contras*.

But that maneuver has not entirely settled the question. The law is being appealed in federal courts, and citizen groups in several states have organized petitions and referenda in opposition to CIA-*contra* aid.

The mayor, unglued

A vital ingredient in the ongoing debate is the testimony of the approximately 70,000 U.S. citizens who have visited Nicaragua since the revolution’s victory in 1979. Some were Reaganites on superficial “fact-finding” missions to Managua to get their anti-Sandinista tickets punched by the pro-*contra*

opposition. But most were more or less pre-sold on the Sandinista revolution and/or repelled by the CIA-*contras*. Their purpose was to demonstrate support, often concretely by participating in engineering projects, health care programs, coffee-picking and construction brigades, etc.

Scattered among the pilgrims were quite a few sceptics, stimulated or prodded into seeing for themselves what a totalitarian dungeon looks like. Many were leading citizens of their communities — town councilmen, doctors, judges, etc. Almost universally, they were staggered by the enormous discrepancy between the rabid rhetoric of the White House and the evidence of their own eyes and ears.

One of these was Mayor Brent Shirley of Port Townsend, a coastal town in the state of Washington. He was challenged to visit Jalapa after a citizen's group had engineered its designation as Port Townsend's sister city: "I went down there as a staunch supporter of Reagan, and really as a conservative," he later recalled. "I went down there with open eyes, and I came back completely surprised at what I saw.... My associates kid me about my 'conversion'.... I saw President Reagan on TV addressing the Nicaragua question. I became unglued. What he was saying didn't match anything I saw. Not anything!"³⁵⁰

Labor unrest

The largest single expression of public displeasure with Reagan foreign policy to date was the April 1987 "March for Peace and Justice in Central America and South Africa", enacted concurrently in San Francisco and Washington, D.C. Reminiscent of the giant civil rights and Vietnam rallies of the 1970s, the march attracted several hundred thousand demonstrators. It was especially noteworthy for the extensive involvement of labor and religious leaders.

The event widened a rift in the AFL-CIO over its reflexive support for Cold War theory and practice. The federation's president, Lane Kirkland, who had served compliantly on the

Kissinger Commission (cf. pages 206 ff.), formally directed all state and local councils of his domain to shun the march, painting his errant colleagues with the subtle brush of “Marxist-Leninism”.

Kirkland’s directive was ignored, as prefigured by the federation’s most recent national convention, at which a foreign policy question ignited an open debate for the first time ever. The controversy was over a proposal by a broad range of unions to condemn U.S. support of the CIA-*contras*. It was narrowly defeated, but the convention did call for negotiations in Central America instead of military intervention — a significant departure from past practice.

By 1987, over half of the federation’s membership belonged to unions formally opposed to the CIA-*contras*. “Even more remarkable, lobbyists for a dozen major unions, including five of the six largest in the AFL-CIO, are making their opposition known to Congressional figures who are considered swing votes on contra aid.”³⁵¹

The general attitude of anti-*contra* labor is conveyed in a 1986 letter from the Puget Sound District Council of the International Longshoremen’s & Warehousemen’s Union to its representatives in Congress:

“The *contras*, led by former Somocistas, represent no democratic principle, and can contribute nothing in the way of reform to Nicaragua. Their ongoing record of murder, torture and pillage — confirmed by an increasing number of reliable sources — has from the beginning only strengthened the resolve of the Nicaraguan people and their government to defeat them at all costs.... It is also clear that, whatever its deficiencies, the Nicaraguan government has the support of the country and is committed to improving the lives of its working people.... We do not want our tax dollars to be diverted into bloody foreign adventures that only victimize our fellow workers, and increase the likelihood of U.S. forces becoming involved.”

Material assistance

In addition to lobbying against the CIA-*contras* and testifying on behalf of Nicaragua, the U.S. solidarity movement has provided a substantial quantity of material assistance. Thousands of volunteer organizations, ranging in scope from local church congregations to national relief agencies, have contributed hundreds of millions of dollars in goods and services.

One of the first to organize was the Nicaragua Network. Founded in 1979, it has functioned as a national clearing house of information, and has sponsored numerous tours between the two countries. The latter include a steady stream of work brigades to help with reforestation, coffee and cotton harvests, construction projects, etc.

The *brigadistas* represent a wide range of ages and backgrounds — lawyers and truck drivers, students and stockbrokers, carpenters and doctors, etc. Their presence has been credited with inhibiting terrorist attacks in many cases; CIA public relations would suffer if too many U.S. civilians were to be wounded or killed. Their personal testimony to the folks back home, often through the media of community newspapers and local broadcast channels, has been a critical factor in building opposition to the CIA-*contras*.

Other vital sources of information and assistance are the 80-plus sister city organizations that have thus far been established. Hardly a major Nicaraguan town remains that does not have an ongoing relationship with a U.S. counterpart, and the benefits can be substantial: school buildings, childcare centers, sanitation systems, agricultural plants, medical clinics, ambulances, electrical systems, recreational complexes, mountains of clothing and school supplies, and more.

As with the work brigades, the first-hand knowledge that emerges from such a relationship acts as an antidote to White House propaganda. Comparatively apolitical in their approach, sister cities provide a vehicle for enlisting the energies of U.S. citizens who may not be ready to directly challenge their government, but are willing to assist a struggling people. The associated learning process often has a radicalizing effect.

Among the more active of the established national relief agencies are Church World Service, Catholic Relief Services, the Mennonite Central Committee and the American Friends Service Committee. In addition to these, there are several agencies that focus entirely on assistance to Nicaragua. They include: Bikes not Bombs, which seeks to alleviate transportation problems by producing and repairing bicycles; Architects and Planners in Support of Nicaragua, which organizes construction brigades and trains Nicaraguans in building techniques; and TecNica, which co-ordinates contributions of technical assistance from U.S. computer experts, engineers, etc. Ben Linder, the first U.S. civilian murdered by the CIA-*contras*, was an electrical engineer.

Since 1985 The Quixote Center, a Catholic-based organization, has tried to keep track of the total value of material assistance sent by U.S. citizens to Nicaragua. Headed by a Jesuit priest, its sponsors include Catholic Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit and Rev. Joseph Lowery of the Southern Baptist Leadership Conference. Over 2500 organizations and many thousands of individuals have participated in The Quixote Center's national campaign entitled Quest for Peace, conceived as a challenge to congressional funding of the CIA-*contras*.

In fiscal year 1986, the Quest accumulated more than enough in donated goods and services to offset the \$27 million voted by Congress to fund the CIA-*contras* for the same period. The following year's \$100 million in guns and bullets was likewise matched by peaceful contributions. For 1988, it has set goals of another \$100 million in goods and services, and \$2 million in cash to initiate a long-term reconstruction effort.

Notes Bishop Gumbleton: "The Quest for Peace is a good example of the kind of non-military solutions our country should be seeking in Central America. It is a concrete way to offer our hand in peace to people who are being battered and killed by the violent policies of our government."

(Continued on page 327)

Ben Linder's Murdered Dream

"My son was brutally murdered for bringing electricity to a few poor people in northern Nicaragua. He was murdered because he had a dream, and because he had the courage to make that dream come true. Not many of us can say that.

"What was that dream? To make it possible for the peasants to have a light bulb in their homes so their day doesn't have to end at six o'clock, when it gets dark... to get clean drinking water to them so that their children don't have to die of diarrhea in the first years of their lives... to raise them out of poverty so they can raise their children with hope for their future.

"The plant in El Cua is the only one of its kind in Nicaragua. It is a tiny little plant, in a tiny village, in a tiny little country. But it is such a threat to the security of the United States that our government orders it destroyed



Ben Linder, at left, lays out small hydroelectric dam at the site where he was butchered by CIA-contras shortly after this photo was taken.

(Continued from page 325)

Not included in the Quest for Peace tally are the various expenses associated with educational and lobbying activities within the U.S. — printing and telephone bills, transportation, salaries of paid lobbyists, office rent, legal and accounting fees, etc. It is impossible to calculate the total cost, but the printing bill, alone, probably runs into the millions of dollars. (See Appendix for a selection of information and solidarity resources concerning Nicaragua.)

They are not amused

The Reaganites, needless to say, are not amused by all this talk and action. Solidarity groups have been accused of providing secret military aid to Nicaragua: “We think they are raising money under false pretenses,” complained an officer of the right-wing Council for Inter-American Security. “They are actively working with foreign communist governments

Ben Linder’s Murdered Dream (cont.)

and orders its builders murdered along with thousands of Nicaraguans who also want to convert their dreams into reality.

“We have been overwhelmed by the love and respect of the people of Nicaragua for Ben, for us, for the people of the United States. We understand why he came here, and we now understand even better why he stayed. The freedom in this country has no equal that I know of. Ben told me the first year that he was here, and this is a quote: ‘It’s a wonderful feeling to work in a country where the government’s first concern is for its people, for all its people.’ I am grateful that he had his three-and-a-half years in Nicaragua.”

— Elisabeth Linder, speaking at son’s funeral in Nicaragua

or insurgencies, and coordinating political activities with them in the United States.”³⁵²

Similar noises have been made by administration officials. More pointed disapproval has taken the form of extensive surveillance and numerous burglaries of churches and other suspect organizations (cf. “Mysterious burglaries”, page 297).

Nor has the administration ignored any opportunity to impede relief efforts. Quest for Peace has been continuously harassed by the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (which oversees the Reaganite trade embargo), the Customs Service and the Internal Revenue Service.

After five months’ deliberation in 1986, the State Department refused Oxfam America an export license for \$41,000



Jaime Perozo

Since the invasion of Grenada in 1983, partly justified as an effort to “safeguard American lives”, citizens of the United States living and working in Nicaragua have gathered in front of their country’s embassy every Thursday morning. Usually joined by visitors from all over the world, they demonstrate their opposition to the U. S. assault on Nicaragua, and attempt to give formal notice that their “safety” may not be used as the pretext for another invasion. The ambassador invariably refuses to meet with them.

worth of farm supplies for Nicaraguan peasants, asserting that "such transactions are inconsistent with current U.S. foreign policy". But that same foreign policy empowered the State Department to grant the U.S. Council for World Freedom (affiliate of the World Anti-Communist League) a license to send the CIA-*contras* a helicopter after a review period of only four days.³⁵³

The solidarity movement has nevertheless persisted in its efforts, so much so that the administration has toyed with the idea of barring all travel and aid to Nicaragua. But the movement has grown so wide and deep, and has enlisted so many respectable citizens, that such a step is unlikely. The fallout from the Iran/Contragate scandal has also had a restraining effect (cf. pages 106 ff). Clamping down on genuine humanitarian aid might even prod a tremulous Congress to protest.

THE IMBALANCE OF POWER

According to the theory of "checks and balances" embedded in the U.S. Constitution, it is not possible for the administration to attack another country without the express consent of Congress. Appropriately enough, for a land where malevolent fundamentalists pose successfully as Christians and a trained symbolton like Ronald Reagan is permitted to play president, no one has violated the Constitution more systematically than the New Right zealots who pretend to be its most loyal defenders.

The clandestine apparatus of the "national security state" that has mushroomed since the onset of the Cold War provides the perfect vehicle for conducting presidential wars with little or no interference from Congress. As long as a presidential war remains comparatively small and/or secret, and does not endanger too many respectable U.S. lives, it has little to fear from Congress or the general public. But if it becomes embarrassingly obvious or threatens to involve the nation in a Vietnam-style disaster, complications may arise.

That's what has happened in the case of Nicaragua, which has confounded the Reaganites with its maddening resistance. All that swaggering nonsense about a resurgent *Guardia Nacional* gobbling its 1983 Christmas dinner in the homely comfort of Managua has dissolved into a long season of military defeat and domestic discord.

The role of Congress in all this has been to conduct the official public debate on the wisdom of allocating funds to the *contra* component of the CIA's multi-faceted destabilization campaign. Before the Iran/Contragate scandal inflicted its political damage on the White House in 1987, the money was not terribly significant. As noted previously, the few hundred million dollars voted by Congress amounted to little more than small change in comparison with the much tidier sums carved out of the federal budget and solicited from kindred spirits (cf. pages 104-123).

Congressional consent was desired by the administration primarily for the shroud of legitimacy it could drape over a pre-ordained policy. With a few exceptions and displays of just enough resistance to keep things interesting, Congress played its part. In doing so, it once again highlighted several basic features of the Cold War, as practiced within the confines of the United States:

- the persistence of mindless anti-communism as a force for evil, both at home and abroad
- the power granted presidents to wedge all foreign policy debates into the paranoid framework of mindless anti-communism
- the power granted presidents to entangle the entire nation in their military adventures, and keep it there with warnings about the dire consequences of "lost prestige" should those adventures be abandoned.

Equipped with these levers of political influence, the Reaganites have applied "the art of compromise" to shift the ponderous weight of Congress toward the destruction of Nicaragua. A political scientist has summarized the process:

“Back in 1981, few members [of Congress] would have seriously considered a request for millions to aid an exile army whose aim was the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government. That’s exactly why the administration used covert channels to first establish the *contra* force.

“In each of the succeeding compromises, Congress sought to restrain or control administration intentions. But, slowly, Congress itself became ensnared in the administration’s *contra* web. Now many in Congress are reluctant to cut aid and take administration blame for ‘losing’ Nicaragua....

“The president has skillfully tailored and packaged compromises to incrementally nickel-and-dime hundreds of millions of dollars out of Congress, and was willing to lie, break the law and circumvent Congress to get more.

“He has used compromises to woo swing voters to sustain a force over which Congress has had no control, and then broken his compromise commitments, pursuing instead his central goal of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government.

“He has used compromise to sink the hook of commitment deeper into the jaws of undecided members of Congress, to make it even more difficult to oppose him on the next vote.”³⁵⁴

Public ritual

The resulting shift in perspective was so complete and so bizarre that congressional “moderates” came to be numbered among the staunchest defenders of the CIA-*contras*. In early 1988, Republican Senator Daniel Evans of Washington reversed his long-standing opposition to terrorist funding, after deciding that the Nicaraguan government was not sufficiently “sincere” in its dealings with the CIA-*contras*.

Democratic Senator David Boren of Oklahoma, another “moderate”, expressed grave concern at the ease with which the Nicaraguan Army chased the CIA-*contras* back into Honduras for the umpteenth time, destroying or capturing large quantities of U.S. weaponry in the process. “We think it only right to make up for this draw down in military supplies

caused by the Sandinistas," declared Boren. "With the Sandinista attack on the contra forces, we are in a much more critical situation." [Emphasis added]

It seems that nothing short of Nicaragua's passive absorption of CIA-*contra* brutality will satisfy the forces of moderation in Congress.

It is futile to seek explanations for such behavior among the spare bones of the Constitution, or by recourse to mere logic. The only way to make any sense out of the peculiar posturings of Congress is to place them within the context of what has become a ritualized public drama on the grand theme of anti-communism.

In these proceedings, the impresario function is performed by the mainstream news media, which provide the arena and select the *dramatis personae*. The basic script and the starring roles are, of course, assigned to the White House. Although there is some slight allowance for improvisation, very little of the dialogue is permitted to stray from the main theme: Forces of Freedom Battle the Evil Empire.

The composition of the supporting cast depends on which nation is currently under attack by the anti-communist crusade. In the Nicaraguan episode, the Bad Guys are the Soviet Union, Cuba and the Sandinistas. They don't get to say much, but there's no need — "everyone" knows what *they* want.

Possibly offering comfort to the Bad Guys are foreign policy Liberals, sometimes known as Communist Dupes. Their intentions may be harmless, but other players regard them as weak, which is worse than evil. Anxious to cast off that stigma, their basic speech is, "We hate communism just as much as (or more than) you do. But there's got to be a better way!" That way is never found by a working majority.

The Good Guys are the President and his followers, who are legion: conservatives in Congress, *contras* and *pro-contras*, Central American client-states, etc. Their basic speech is, "If we don't get the communists out of Managua now, the next thing you know they'll be in Harlingen, Texas." (Twenty years ago it was, "If we don't fight the communists in Vietnam, one day soon we'll be fighting them in San Francisco.")

A vital role is played by the Moderates, confused souls who sometimes talk like Liberals but can usually be relied upon to act like Good Guys. Much of the ritual's dramatic tension is based on their apparent indecision.

The intended audience is the U.S. electorate, most of which is paying little or no attention. Public opinion polls indicate that, "One in three U.S. citizens cannot identify Nicaragua as being in Central America, a majority sees no distinction between the Marxist [sic] Sandinistas and the rebel Contras."³⁵⁵ Their inattention notwithstanding, the voters are important because every so often they get to choose the principal actors. The process by which they do that remains a mystery. But, to paraphrase H.L. Mencken: No one has yet lost an election by over-estimating the willingness of U.S. voters to be scared witless by evocations of The Red Menace.

Most of that small segment of the audience which does pay attention is split between supporters of the Good Guys and allies of the Liberals. They encourage their respective champions and, every so often, a contingent will leap into the arena with a rousing demonstration of opposition to or support for the CIA-*contras*.

The script does provide for ongoing revisions. Every so often, an especially articulate and/or telegenic personality manages to interject a novel idea. But these tend to have a short performance life, and are eventually ignored or discarded, leaving the basic text intact.

It should also be noted that the players occasionally step out of character in other settings. This is especially true of Liberals and Moderates, whose addresses to select audiences tend to be much more critical of the Good Guys than anything they dare to utter for general consumption. But these are mere sideshows, with little or no effect on the main event....

This is, of course, a simplified description of the drama. Its accuracy can be assessed by reviewing the public debate on Nicaragua as recorded in the Congressional Record and the mainstream press.

Congressional overlook

The assault on Nicaragua was set in motion with \$19 million in direct funding to the CIA destabilization project. In accordance with the gentlemanly procedures that had been devised to neutralize outrage at previous CIA abuses, only a few congressmen were notified of the operation. Those discreet members of the Senate and House “oversight” committees — often referred to by critics as “overlook” committees — were assured that the money was to be used only for blocking shipments of Nicaraguan arms to El Salvadoran guerillas, and were sworn to secrecy.

Only the most willfully ignorant took the El Salvador cover story at face value, and even they were soon forced to concede the obvious. Reports on the destabilization program began filtering into Congress almost as soon as it began — from disillusioned CIA operatives, foreign embassy officials, Latin American governments concerned about the consequences of U.S. military intervention, and others. By 1982, anyone could read detailed accounts of the “secret war” in *Newsweek* and other mainstream publications.

Still the funding of the terrorists continued, under cover of the administration’s lies about Sandinista gun-running to El Salvador. It wasn’t until 1984, when the CIA got caught with its fingerprints all over an “assassination manual” and the mining of Corinto’s harbor, that Congress was provoked to reaction. With many an indignant speech, it cut off direct funding for the CIA-*contras*, and passed the first in a series of legislative amendments specifically proscribing any attempt to overthrow the government of Nicaragua.

No problem. Nothing so trivial as an act of Congress could dissuade the Reaganites from their self-appointed task. They proceeded to rummage through departmental budgets — especially those of State, Defense and the CIA — for the necessary funds. These were supplemented with money and supplies laundered through co-operative governments such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, and by sharpening the bite on the private network of anti-communist donors at home.

By such devices, all perfectly illegal, the Reaganites managed to sustain the president's terrorists for three years, while constructing a gigantic invasion platform in Honduras and El Salvador (cf. pages 104 ff.).

The people's representatives in Congress were fully aware of this. But Ronald Reagan's popularity was thought to have rendered him unchallengeable on foreign policy issues, and there weren't many brave enough to say out loud that the emperor's new suit of clothes had a decidedly martial cut.

Big joke

The president's sense of power in his deceptions was grotesquely apparent at one of his rare press conferences during this period of official non-intervention. In response to a question about the legality of the blatant assault on Nicaragua, Reagan smirked presidentially and assured his national audience that, of course, "We want to keep obeying the laws of our country", while he and the respectful gathering chortled knowingly at this artful sophistry. It was a big joke which everyone in Congress and the press room could heartily enjoy.³⁵⁶

As the administration cranked up the volume of its propaganda campaign, congressional "moderates" began feeling the pressure to restore direct funding to the CIA-*contras*. As is so often the case with foreign policy issues, the key swing votes were wielded primarily by conservative Democrats from southern states. Whatever their solicitude for Nicaragua or loyalty to the party leadership, it was tempered by an apprehension that the good ol' boys and gals back home tend to be right ornery about communism — and that it don't take all that much for a skillful demagogue like Ronald Reagan to get 'em all het up.

The critical moment came in early 1985, just after the House of Representatives voted down yet another *contra* aid bill. Injudiciously failing to clear his travel arrangements through Congress, Daniel Ortega embarked on his seventh excursion to Europe and the Soviet Union shortly after the

House vote. His journey included stops at Italy, France and Spain, all for the purpose of enlisting support against the anticipated trade embargo which the Reaganites did, in fact, impose a few months later.

But his first destination was the Soviet Union, from which he requested fresh oil supplies for his beleaguered nation. It was the cue for which the Reagan dramatists had been waiting. Howling in alarm at this manifest evidence of The Communist Menace at Our Doorstep, the cry was taken up by the mainstream press, which dutifully transformed Ortega's mendicant journey into the modern equivalent of Mussolini's pilgrimage to Nazi Germany. It was a Big Story, given prominent display on TV newscasts and front pages of the daily papers. How did they know it was a Big Story? Why, because the White House told them it was.

The political reaction was instantaneous. Those who had dared to vote against the CIA-*contra* aid bill were caught with their pants down and scurried to denounce the Nicaraguan president's "betrayal" of their "misplaced trust" — after all they had done for him. Thus was born the myth, repeated on every similar occasion since, of Ortega's foolishness and lack of political sophistication (he should have known how cretinous U.S. politics can be).

Within weeks, Congress had reversed itself and added \$27 million of visible tax dollars to the cache already accumulated by other means. In order to put a pretty face on the proceedings, a fresh Orwellian refinement was introduced to the liturgy — the terrorist funds were styled "humanitarian aid", to be used solely for such "non-lethal" supplies as food and clothing.

Humanitarian torture

Napoleon might never have uttered his famous dictum that, "An army marches on its stomach", for all that Congress cared. But the people of Nicaragua soon came to understand its meaning all too well. "With that 'humanitarian aid'," observed a young soldier months later, "they murdered some of

my closest friends, tortured and killed three peasants from a village where we were, and threw them in the river.”³⁵⁷

Not all of the boodle reached its intended destination, of course; the General Accounting Office subsequently found that at least \$11 million disappeared — presumably into the pockets of CIA-*contra* and Honduran military leaders. Of the balance, some of it was used — surprise, surprise — to deliver weapons, after all. The duplicitous Elliott Abrams ordered that weapons be concealed among the terrorists’ new shoes and shirts. “I did not want mixed loads,” insisted the official nominally in charge of the shipments, “but Abrams wanted mixed loads.”³⁵⁸ Mixed loads it was.

A year later, the “humanitarian” pretense was temporarily dropped when Congress approved \$100 million in unequivocally lethal aid to the terrorists. The vote came in the summer of 1986, on the same day that the World Court declared the U.S. assault on Nicaragua to be illegal.

Support for the president’s terrorists was strongest in the Senate, where Republicans enjoyed a slight numerical advantage for most of the Reagan administration’s two terms. Through the complicity of conservative and “moderate” Democratic senators, that support continued even after the Democrats won a majority in 1986.

Exceptional Speaker

It is in the House of Representatives where the main battles over funding for the CIA-*contras* have been acted out. A solid core of opponents to *contra* funding was led by the Speaker of the House, Tip O’Neill, until his retirement in 1987. O’Neill received much of his information about Nicaragua from relatives working there as Catholic missionaries, and used his considerable influence to mobilize the Democratic majority against military intervention in Central America, generally. In engineering the defeat of several *contra* funding measures, O’Neill achieved an unusual degree of success in opposing a presidential military adventure

Congress is constrained by a powerful tradition of deference to the presidency in matters of "national defense", and it is traditional wisdom that any congressman who takes the lead on a controversial foreign policy issue is flirting with involuntary retirement at the next election. Among others, the experience of Congressman Michael Barnes would seem to bear that out (cf. page 297). Some of the most distinguished careers in recent history have come to abrupt ends in the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Opponents of any president's foreign policy must confront two fundamental forces of U.S. political life: the enormous power of the presidency to define the terms of public debate, and the public's deeply indoctrinated dread of communism.

The almost unlimited access to national news media by the White House has been outlined in the preceding chapter, "Packaging the Activity". Suffice it here to note that the average voter hears and "learns" far more about foreign policy from the president than from his or her senators and congressman. As of January 1988, for instance, the television networks "CBS and NBC had routinely honored 37 White House requests for Reagan speeches in prime time, and all but one of these were also televised by ABC."³⁵⁹ For the most part, congressmen can only watch with the rest of the country, and hope that the president doesn't make too much trouble for them.

The president's dominance of the airwaves augments his power to set the foreign policy agenda. On those occasions when the House has rejected presidential requests for CIA-*contra* funding, the Reaganites have threatened to come back again and again and again until they get their way. They have made good those threats, always accompanying them with a "major presidential address" or a contrived media event to demonstrate the threat to national security presented by the Sandinistas. Thus, the screws are tightened on congressional swing votes, deals are cut, promises are made and, eventually, the president gets his way.

Nicaragua is not the first victim of this inexorable process. Even the extraordinarily intense opposition to the Vietnam

“Congress has never caused troops to be withdrawn and probably never will, for several strong reasons:

“• To do so would be a direct challenge to the president’s powers as commander-in-chief. Congress often chafes at the exercise of those powers, but is reluctant to interfere lest it limit or inhibit some later president’s ability to act quickly and strongly in a real emergency.

“• Such congressional interference also would be a direct challenge to a president’s policy. Congress fears, probably correctly, that it could not carry public opinion against the ‘bully pulpit’ of a president, the official primarily empowered to conduct foreign policy.”

— Tom Wicker, *New York Times*, 7 January 1988

War could not stop it: “During the seven years from July, 1966, through July, 1973, Congress recorded one hundred and thirteen votes on proposals related to the war. But its first limitation on U.S. military activities in Southeast Asia was not imposed until 1969... and it directed its full opposition to a continued commitment in the region only in August, 1973, when it voted to stop all bombing throughout Indochina.”³⁶⁰

The question remains as to why Congress persists in supporting unpopular wars in defiance of widespread public opposition. Part of the answer may lie in simple arrogance. Many congressmen feel that, as they are the ones who have been chosen for adult responsibilities and access to Classified Information, their martial wisdom must prevail over the peaceful inclinations of those who chose them.

Nagging anxiety

But the most likely explanation is the weird embrace of anti-communism. Although they seldom put it so bluntly, many congressmen simply don’t trust their constituents’ protestations of indifference to “communist threats” that are targeted by the president for extinction. The suspicion remains very powerful that the voters’ tolerance for congressional opposition to presidential wars — no matter how vicious and ill-

conceived — is quite fickle. A popular vote against war today might, under the knife of an accomplished demagogue, be mutilated into proof of softness on communism during the next election campaign. As Republican Senator Nancy Kassenbaum of Kansas put it, “A lot of people are looking for some political cover, quite frankly. They don’t want to face that nagging question, ‘Did you lose Nicaragua?’”³⁶¹

It is not a groundless anxiety. An opinion poll conducted for the *New York Times* and CBS TV in March 1988 found that military aid to the CIA-*contras* was still unpopular with the U.S. public. But 66 percent of those surveyed agreed that Nicaragua threatened the security of other Central American nations, and only 17 percent felt it did not. It was hardly a result to embolden congressional moderates. What if another Central American country were to “go communist” before the next election? How many of the folks back home would acknowledge their anti-war counsel then?

Not many, perhaps. A century of ferocious red-baiting has left ugly scars: “The American people are very worried about Marxism.... It’s extremely difficult for a congressman who is well-informed... to take on the administration over the question of current U.S. actions in Central America.”³⁶²

In that fond hope the Reaganites have placed their faith. Not since the glory days of Joe McCarthy has so much rhetorical thunder crashed down on suspected commie dupes from on high. In order to preserve President Reagan’s image as a nice guy among the folks at home, most of the dirty work has been delegated to the likes of Jeanne Kirkpatrick, an academic who first ingratiated herself with a scholarly rationalization for U.S. support of such bestial regimes as those of Chile and Guatemala. As Ambassador to the United Nations, Kirkpatrick once complained that certain members of Congress “want to see Marxist victories in Central America”.

The Reaganites’ favorite hatchet man has been White House advisor Patrick J. Buchanan, who has gleefully reprised the role he performed during the Nixon years. A typical Buchanan outburst came after Congress began to investigate a

few of the crimes disclosed by the Iran/Contragate scandal: "History is going to indict, and history will convict, this Congress of a far greater crime against America: complicity in permitting the enemies of the United States to consolidate a military beachhead on the mainland of North America.... The dirty little secret slipping out of the show trial is that the Democratic majority is opposed to victory.... The Liberal wing of the Democratic Party has made itself the silent partner — the indispensable ally — of revolutionary communism in the Third World.... Along with its auxiliaries in the mainline churches and the liberal press, it is conducting this feverish campaign to discredit, defund and defeat the *contras*, because it wants the other side to win...."

That sort of malicious nonsense, from a guest article in *Newsweek*, is the staff of political life in the Reagan White House and among its allies within and without the capitol beltway. There is little doubt that it has worked, even on administration officials: Asked by the Iran/Contragate committee why he didn't bother to check on the legality of the illicit *contra* funding operation, National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane replied, "To tell you the truth, probably the reason I didn't is because if I'd done that, [CIA Director] Bill Casey, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, and [Secretary of Defense] Cap Weinberger would have said I was some kind of a commie, you know."³⁶³

The net result is that it has become politically impossible to say a kind or temperate word about the Sandinista revolution; even those bold enough to reject funding of the *contras* are careful to accompany rejection with an obligatory condemnation of the wickedness in Managua.

Indiana Congressman Lee Hamilton, a leading opponent of *contra* funding, was an early supporter of economic sanctions, arguing that the U.S. should "increase economic pressure on Nicaragua [by] working with our allies to deny it World Bank loans and assistance from the International Monetary Fund. A policy of increased economic pressure could also include a trade cutoff." He got his wish in 1985.

“All of us here are political animals, and we cast our votes with an eye on what the repercussions will be in the next election. If we think that the president’s position is strong, and the American people give some credence to him, we want to hedge our bets a good deal. It’s a little harsh to say that’s a gutless way to do things; it’s the politically expedient way.”

— Rep. George Brown, Jr.³⁶⁴

Colorado’s Senator Gary Hart, briefly a presidential candidate, allowed as how, “It is dangerous to imagine the Sandinistas have good intentions; but it is naive to think they will be swept away by the *contras*, and it is ultimately foolish to claim that military force is our best means for controlling Sandinista misbehavior.”

As for so many of his anti-*contra* colleagues, Hart’s stated objection to the Reaganites’ assault on Nicaragua was based on feasibility; its desirability was taken for granted.

Senator Daniel Evans of Washington concurred in the administration’s diagnosis, but delicately recommended an alternative cure: “The President has likened Nicaragua and the Nicaraguan government to a cancer, a cancer which must be excised. But there are other ways to treat cancers. One is to develop anti-bodies to counter and stop the growth of the Nicaraguan-Marxist cancer which does exist.”³⁶⁵

This homely treatise on preventive medicine notwithstanding, Dr. Dan opted for radical surgery in early 1988, when he voted for military assistance to the CIA-*contras*.

And so it went, every one agreeing that the Sandinistas were an evil bunch. The only thing left to debate was how best to neutralize or get rid of them. After listening to a Reagan speech and the Democratic Party’s response in March of 1986, a Nicaraguan university student observed that, “All this is so infantile. Americans are nice people, but their leaders are like spoiled children who can’t get their way. The Democrats’ response was as bad as what Reagan was saying. All they are debating is how they are going to kill us.”³⁶⁶

“We are not surprised about the diversion of funds from arms sales to Iran to the *contras*,” remarked a Nicaraguan Protestant leader. “What surprises us is how it can be discussed legally, in front of the cameras and the eyes of the world, the way to give funds to a mercenary army, to an aggressor army, so that it can continue to destroy schools, to destroy hospitals, and to leave more children orphaned. That is what is worrying us. How is it possible that in broad daylight the assassination of another people is being discussed in Congress?”³⁶⁷

Bicentennial desecration

In the summer of 1987, Ronald Reagan was lending his presidential image to a national celebration of the U.S. Constitution’s 200th anniversary. At the same time, Congress was nervously sorting through mountains of evidence that the president and his handlers had been systematically violating that sacred document.

The assault on Nicaragua had been cloaked in lies from the beginning and, after Congress explicitly proscribed it in 1984 (see page 334), duplicity was compounded by arrogant defiance. The Reaganites circumvented congressional restraints by establishing their own fundraising network and misappropriating government funds on behalf of the CIA-*contras*.

But Congress as a whole wasn’t noticeably disturbed by that. After all, President Reagan was still thought to be extraordinarily popular, and most voters still didn’t seem to know or care very much about Nicaragua.

That changed in late 1986, when a Lebanese journal revealed that the Reaganites had been selling arms to Iran and using the profits to secretly fund the CIA-*contras* (see page 106). The public was outraged — not so much at this new evidence of the deadly obsession with Nicaragua, but at the unforgivable sin of dealing with the Iranian infidels.

In his successful 1980 election campaign against Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan had been marketed as someone who would “stand tall” against the enemies of the U.S. — most particularly the fundamentalist Moslems of Iran who had

held the Carter administration hostage to public opinion for over a year — and thereby given the Reagan campaign its main chance.

Now, here was the All-American President caught doing what he had solemnly promised his fans that he would never do — making deals with the wicked Iranians. Not even Jimmy Carter, the wimp, had resorted to that. Nor did it help the presidential image that the medium of exchange was some of the most sophisticated weaponry in the U.S. arsenal. Quite abruptly, the Reagan image wasn't standing so tall anymore. He might arrange the starvation, torture, murder and rape of all the Nicaraguans his tender heart desired; but doing deals with the Ayatollah and his gang was clearly more than a decent U.S. citizen could tolerate.

As the story unfolded in the following months, poor old Reagan was outfitted with so many different lies to tell that he couldn't keep them straight. It became almost routine for White House staffers to urgently follow up their leader's contradictory statements with the official White House version of "what he really meant". Eventually they adopted the strategy of keeping him out of hearing as much as possible.

Meanwhile, a steady stream of embarrassing disclosures ate away at the famous Reagan popularity. His handlers agonized over whether to have him acknowledge responsibility for the mess — a responsibility which only the most blindly loyal could possibly fail to perceive — or blame it all on "out of control" subordinates. In the end, they settled on the latter course as the lesser of two evils. Better that he be accused of ignorance and ineptitude than conscious collaboration with the Iranian Satan.

And that's how it played out, with the compliance of some good sports on the National Security Council who agreed to take the rap, and with a big assist from a deferential Congress.

The Senate-House congressional committee that had investigated the Iran/Contragate mess in the summer of 1987 was the

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The Builder and the Destroyer

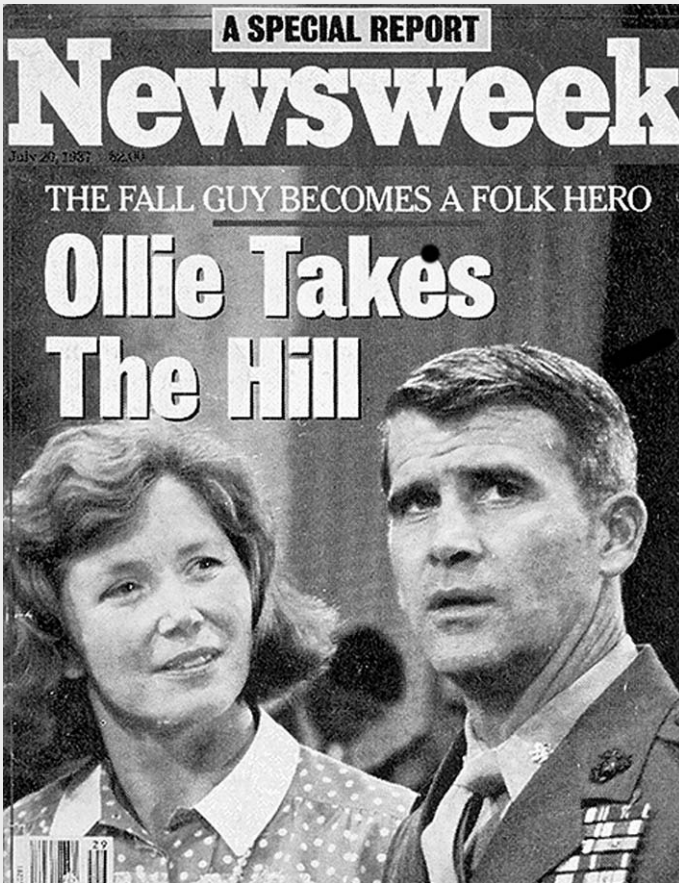
THE DRAMATIC HIGHLIGHT of the congressional hearing on the Iran/Contragate scandal during the summer of 1987 was the stirring testimony of Marine Colonel Oliver North. While seconded to the National Security Council, North had co-ordinated much of the administration's unauthorized war against Nicaragua, including the private fund-raising network for the CIA-*contras*.

As the administration's designated "fall guy", North was sacked from the National Security Council as soon as the scandal broke. Ever the good soldier, he was prepared to accept a portion of public disgrace and a return to active duty as the political price of his covert strife against the Evil Empire. But when his old pals in the White House appointed a special prosecutor to investigate, and he began to hear talk of his "crimes" and "prison", North took the piles of money his right-wing admirers collected for his defense and hired himself a fancy lawyer.

He chose well. With the help of his combative attorney and the Reaganites on the congressional committee, North essentially dictated the form and substance of his testimony before the nationally televised hearing. As the committee members listened mutely, "like warts on a pickle", the earnest Marine lectured the vast national audience for several days running on the imminent peril of communism in Central America, and the fecklessness of Congress in denying the president the means to resist the forces of darkness.

It was standard White House propaganda, recited so many times before by the likes of Ronald Reagan and Elliott Abrams. But this time, attracted by the odor of a major scandal and a televised hearing, a great many citizens were paying attention to the "debate" for the first time. And all they got to hear was Colonel North's

paranoid view of the world; his anti-Sandinista tirade went completely unchallenged by the “gaggle of gingerly congressmen”. Within a matter of hours, the fall guy had been transformed into a national hero, by his own iconic zeal, the dramatic impact of television and the bumbling ineptitude of the committee. *Newsweek* headlined its cover story on the propaganda coup, “Ollie Takes the Hill”. But a more accurate headline would have been: “The Hill Surrenders without Firing a Shot”.



North's moment of glory was brief, however. Opinion polls indicated that, while his fervent patriotism and loyalty to superiors were admired, his illegal activities were not. The public's final report on the monomaniacal Marine was decidedly mixed. But his jingoistic television performance did have a lasting impact: It deflected the committee, at just the right moment, from any slight inclination it may have entertained to peek into the darker corners of the president's war on Nicaragua.

Three months before Congress meekly surrendered to Colonel North, the terrorists he had outfitted assassinated a cheerful young man from Oregon. Ben Linder had gone to Nicaragua for a brief visit and, deeply moved by its struggle against the empire of his birth, decided to stay on and put his recently acquired engineering skills to the work of bringing electricity to remote villages. For this affront, he was targeted by the local terrorist band for extermination.

The grisly death of Ben Linder was not a major media event in his own land. The journalistic significance of Linder's brief life can be measured by the comparative treatment its extinction received from a mainstream publication like *Newsweek*. Whereas the murderous and mendacious North was anointed with two consecutive cover stories of heroic length and detail, the murdered engineer merited only a terse sidebar so trifling that it was not even listed on the magazine's contents page. In the national warfare state, heroes don't build things; they blow them up.

The response to Linder's death from Congress was likewise a study in contrasts. Testifying about CIA-*contra* terror and the murder of their son before a subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Linder's parents were greeted with something less than the fawning reception to which North was treated. They had to listen to Elliott Abrams explain how their misguided son's

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very model of decorum. To the inevitable howls of “witch hunt!” from the perennial witch hunters of the right wing, the committee politely probed the edges of a murderous conspiracy against the U.S. Constitution and world order.

That reticence was entirely consistent, given that Congress had been dragged to its task only after the White House — prodded by the Lebanese press — had itself set the investigation in motion with public disclosures of the Iranian arms deal. Having successfully avoided its responsibility for years, during which most of the relevant information had been openly discussed in the mainstream press and other forums, Congress somewhat haltingly and with much angry debate proceeded unerringly to the surface of the matter.

The ferocity of the congressional debate, along with residual anxieties about Reagan’s popularity with the voters, resulted in a committee composed preponderantly of “moderates” and supporters of the CIA-*contras*. The committee was expected to protect the republic from the distress of excessive brooding over presidential misconduct.

The Builder and the Destroyer (cont.)

death was the Sandinistas’ fault, for allowing him to venture into territory patrolled by “freedom fighters”.

Rep. Robert Dornan of California performed his now familiar impression of an anti-communist fighting cock with a terrible case of constipation. And Rep. Connie Mack of Florida favored Linder’s grieving parents with this tough wisdom: “I guess that what really has me upset is that I can’t understand how you can use the grief that I know you feel — either use it to politicize this situation, or to allow yourself to be used to politicize this situation.... I do not want to be tough on you, but I really feel that you have asked for it.”³⁶⁸

That expectation was fulfilled, and then some. The greatest opportunity Congress would ever have to counteract the White House propaganda campaign against Nicaragua was quickly perverted into the most effective single exercise of that campaign.

Playing to a huge national broadcast audience, the Democratic committee chairmen permitted their Reaganite colleagues and a jingoistic parade of administration witnesses to transform the hearing into a protracted advertisement for the CIA-*contras*. As tens of millions of voters paid attention to their president's war for the first time, one White House witness after another paid glowing tribute to the noble cause of the "freedom fighters", and bombarded the national audience with dire warnings about the communist beachhead in Sandinistaland.

"Warts on a pickle"

No one on the committee was moved to question or contradict the orchestrated cacophony of lies, half-truths and distortions about Nicaragua, and the CIA-*contras* were spared the indignity of public scrutiny. "At a post-hearing dinner for reporters who covered the proceedings, a group of about a dozen journalists was asked if any could recall a negative comment made about the *contras* during the entire hearings. Heads were scratched; no one could recollect a discouraging word."³⁶⁹

Complained one Democratic congresswoman of her dumb colleagues on the committee, "They sat there like warts on a pickle". Even *Newsweek* noticed something tentative about the performance, later referring to the demure investigators as "a gaggle of gingerly congressmen".³⁷⁰

The Reaganites could hardly credit their good fortune. You couldn't buy advertising like that for any amount of money, and its effect on the political fortunes of the CIA-*contras* was nothing short of miraculous. At a stroke, they were rescued from ignominy, and even enjoyed a brief surge of popularity.

For that they could thank the investigating committee, which ornamented the Reaganite litany with respectful silence and conveniently ignored abundant evidence of *contra* brutality and corruption. Thus, the nation learned next to nothing from the committee about: the systematic terrorization of Nicaraguan civilians, so thoroughly documented by human rights organizations; the CIA-*contra* drug traffic to the United States and Attorney General Edwin Meese's obstruction of an FBI investigation into it; the embezzlement of tens of millions of dollars which never reached the terrorists in the field; the misuse of "humanitarian" funds to purchase weapons; etc., etc.

There were other yawning gaps in the investigative record, as well — most notably the vast netherworld of covert operations. In order to appease moderate Republicans, the investigation concentrated on the activities of the National Security Council during 1984-86, when Congress had specifically prohibited military assistance to the CIA-*contras*.

That deliberately narrow focus ensured that only a short, expurgated chapter of the full story would emerge. As a committee researcher later observed, "Not enough was made of the fact that the *contra* resupply operation was not just an NSC affair, but entirely a U.S. government operation. This was not just the NSC running amok."³⁷¹

*"On November 25, 1986, when Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams was asked by a congressional committee if he knew of any foreign government that was aiding the contras, he neglected to reveal that he had personally solicited the promise of a \$10 million contribution to the contras from the government of Brunei. During the Iran-*contra* hearings, Abrams was asked to explain why he hadn't revealed the solicitation. 'I felt I did not have the authority to do that,' he explained. 'I felt I was not supposed to do that.... As I have stated several times, I did not believe I was authorized to... reveal that solicitation.'*

"Will somebody please authorize this man to tell the truth?"

— Peter Carlson, *Washington Post*, 28 December 1987

Even within the narrow framework of the investigation, significant leads were not pursued. When a committee member tried to question a witness about published reports of a White House plan to summarily imprison U.S. citizens should they protest an invasion of Nicaragua, he was silenced by the chairman and instructed to save his questions for closed session; the issue has never been publicly addressed.

Other threads left dangling: the unauthorized use of military installations in El Salvador and Costa Rica to support the CIA-*contras*; clear indications that Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams had misappropriated funds, substituted weapons for "non-lethal" aid, and committed perjury; the illegal use of Navy SEALs and other elite military units to support the CIA-*contras*; the financing of attacks on troublesome politicians with funds raised through the private *contra* aid network; and evidence that the "secret team" of retired military and CIA personnel that helped the White House arrange the arms-for-hostages deal has been in place since the Vietnam War, and is likely to find similar employment in the future.

Consequently, the elaborate apparatus with which presidents conduct their private wars remained essentially unmoled. Indeed, the committee's final report reaffirmed the compelling "national security interest" in covert operations, a conclusion which disturbed former CIA analyst David MacMichael: "The reluctance to end these activities, particularly in the aftermath of the Iran-Contragate scandal, is a danger for the people of the United States and a threat to world peace."³⁷²

Political fallout

Despite the best efforts of Congress to conceal the extent of Reaganite treachery and the threat to democracy posed by presidential wars, the political fallout from the scandal was substantial. Not even the CIA's "freedom fighters" could escape the consequences, and their brief moment of glory soon faded. By the end of 1987, public opinion polls were once again disclosing a pattern of two-to-one opposition to military assistance for the CIA-*contras*.

Worst affected was the cherished popularity of Ronald Reagan, whose reputation was badly wounded by the fiasco — again, primarily because of the Iranian connection, not the devastation of Nicaragua. Opinion polls showed that, “Reagan’s approval rating fell by almost a third as soon as the nation learned that he had sold advanced weaponry to Iran.... No president’s approval rating had ever fallen so fast.”³⁷³

The subsequent congressional investigation had little to do with it. If anything, the Iran/Contragate hearing was designed to restore public confidence in President Reagan and the presidency. Congress recoiled from the prospect of impeachment, out of anxiety for unintended political consequences and possibly for the impact on national morale.

Nixon syndrome

It was a common belief among congressmen and other deep thinkers that Richard Nixon’s brush with impeachment just thirteen years earlier had left the nation weakened and disoriented. It was feared that another such proceeding, against a president who (unlike Nixon) had once been regarded as extraordinarily popular, might so irrevocably shatter public trust in government as to make a national consensus on any issue impossible in the future.

Of course, to anyone so free of ethical constraints as Ronald Reagan and his handlers, such delicacy presented an irresistible opportunity to continue abusing administrative power. “We dare you to impeach us” might serve as the Reagan administration’s motto.

As noted above, the Iran/Contragate committee tried to limit potential damage to the presidency by concentrating on the 1984-86 activities of the National Security Council. The White House, aided by its friends in Congress and the mainstream press, managed to narrow that focus even further, to one central question: Did Reagan authorize and/or know about the diversion of profits, from the Iranian arms deal, to buy weapons for the CIA-*contras*?

If the answer were “Yes”, then Congress would have to hold its nose and consider impeachment. If not, then the entire country could breathe a sigh of relief, learn the lessons to be ignored in the future, and select some suitable underlings for ritual punishment. Other issues were discussed; but from the outset, the question of Reagan’s awareness was presented as the key to the entire affair.

The answer turned out to be, “Not certain”, which was unclear enough to get Reagan off the hook. In order to arrive safely at that irresolute conclusion, the committee had to dismiss elementary logic, a mountain of circumstantial evidence, and such incriminating documents as the 1986 memorandum in which the president’s National Security Adviser quotes him as saying, “I am really serious.... If we can’t move the *contra* package before June 9, I want to figure out a way to take action unilaterally to provide assistance.”³⁷⁴

It takes a clever mind to interpret “a way to take action unilaterally” as anything other than conscious subversion of congressional restraints. But Congress is full of clever men and women who appeared to experience no difficulty whatsoever in banishing that and more damning evidence from the collective semi-conscious.

Responsibility for the offending behavior was laid at the feet of “a cabal of zealots” in the National Security Council who were said to have carried out this crucial foreign policy initiative unbeknownst to their president. The committee suggested that they ought to be prosecuted for their sins, and by early 1988 a handful of the president’s henchmen had been indicted by a special prosecutor on a variety of relatively minor charges; speculation abounded that they would be pardoned by Reagan after the 1988 election.

Although he eluded impeachment by Congress, Reagan was condemned by the nation at large. Opinion polls indicated that a clear majority of voters weren’t buying the “cabal of zealots” story line. It was felt, rather, that Reagan knew a lot more than he was willing to admit — to believe otherwise was to attribute to him the alertness of a turnip — and that he was cowering behind his subordinates.

Particularly distressing to the old actor was the widespread belief among his former fans that he was lying to them. Reagan's entire occupational experience had been a triumph of style over substance, and he had managed to get through the first six years in the role of president with his image as a real straight shooter more or less intact.

Those days were now over. Even the Iran/Contra gate committee had to acknowledge, in a general sort of way, that the president could not evade responsibility for major foreign policy initiatives. Its final report noted that, "If the President did not know what his national security advisers were doing, he should have.... The President created or at least tolerated an environment where those who did know of the diversion believed that they were carrying out the President's policies."³⁷⁵

Needless to say, the report did not address Congress's own complicity in maintaining an "environment of tolerance" for misconduct by the president and his subordinates.

In due course, all this bad news for the Leader of the Free World was supplanted by the inevitable onset of fresh disasters. By the end of 1987, the scandal had already begun to subside in public consciousness; it figured to be a minor or non-existent issue in the 1988 presidential campaign, except for the residual damage it might yet inflict on Vice President George Bush, the Republican candidate.

As for the prevaricator-in-chief, he slowly regained some of the precious popularity squandered on the Iran/Contra gate scandal, but it was too little and too late to arrest the decline of his political fortunes. Reagan's lame duck presidency had been severely crippled, making it easier for congressional moderates to balk at military aid to the CIA-*contras*, and for Latin Americans in general to resist U.S. pressure.

The net result for Nicaragua was therefore positive. The temporary increase in public dread of the Sandinistas and sympathy with the CIA-*contras* was more than offset by the relaxation of the White House grip on Congress.

Violations of U.S. Law by the Reaganites

THE CASUAL DISREGARD OF INTERNATIONAL LAW that is such a prominent feature of the Reagan administration's foreign policy is mirrored in its indifference to the legal niceties at home. Although it is not the first outlaw administration, it appears to have stretched the limits of constitutional government further beyond the breaking point than any of its predecessors.

On such rare occasions as that provided by the Iran/Contra scandal, Congress is encouraged or compelled by the pressure of events to investigate executive misconduct. This perilous task is undertaken with enormous reluctance and timidity, concluding with a report that may or may not lead to corrective legislation. Such legislation, if enacted, is typically subverted or ignored; that's what happened to the legal restraints placed on the CIA after its high crimes and misdemeanors were exposed in the congressional hearings of the 1970s.

Impeachment, the most effective sanction available to Congress, is avoided like the plague. There seems to be an implicit quota of only one presidential impeachment per century, and that has already been met by Andrew Johnson and Richard Nixon. Subsequent presidents of the 20th century, especially if they are careful to convey the amiable aura of a Ronald Reagan, should therefore be able to violate as many laws as they please.

It may occasionally be necessary to suspend an illegal operation, and sacrifice a loyal subordinate or two for a brief term at Club Fed. But time heals all political wounds, yielding fresh opportunities for international mayhem. Any inconvenience to the scapegoats is generously compensated with fat TV/book contracts, fortunes mined from the right-wing rubber chicken circuit, and countless other charities for those convicted of crimes committed in the name of freedom. Most of the principal

bandits of the Nixon administration's Watergate scandal, for example, are today doing quite well for themselves.

The Reagan administration appears almost to be dedicated to illegality as a matter of principle. The following is a partial list of its malfeasance concerning just one "covert op", the assault on Nicaragua.

Neutrality Act of 1794

Nearly as venerable as the Constitution, this act prohibits anyone, including government officials, from giving money to or participating in any military activity against any foreign state, colony or district with which the U.S. is not legally at war — a condition that requires a formal declaration by Congress.

The Reaganites' frequent violations of this law were compounded when they used it as a pretext for siccing the FBI on U.S. individuals and groups opposed to White House policies toward Central America.

War Powers Resolution

A rather tardy congressional reaction to the undeclared Vietnam War, this resolution requires the president to notify Congress within 48 hours of any situation "... in which the U.S. Armed Forces are introduced (1) into hostilities or into a situation where imminent involvement in hostilities is clearly indicated by the circumstances; (2) into the territory, airspace, or waters of a foreign nation, while equipped for combat." This has been violated most transparently by supply and surveillance flights in Nicaraguan territory, the participation of military advisors in CIA-*contra* raids into Nicaraguan territory, and naval intrusions which include the mining of Nicaraguan harbors and artillery attacks on Corinto and Puerto Cabezas.

Violations of U.S. Law by the Reaganites (cont.)

Constitutional treaty obligations

The Constitution requires that the president take care to uphold all of its provisions, among which is the explicit stipulation that all international treaties ratified by Congress automatically acquire the full force of law — just as though they had been incorporated into the original document. The Reaganites' assault on Nicaragua violates U.S. treaty obligations to the United Nations, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the Inter-American Development Bank and the Organization of American States.

The last-named is especially relevant, since the Reaganites have so often and so falsely accused Nicaragua of ignoring its obligations to the OAS, the charter of which declares: "No State or group of States has the right to intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever, in the internal or external affairs of any other State.... No State may use or encourage the use of coercive measures of an economic or political character in order to force the sovereign will of another state."

Intelligence Oversight Act

A congressional response to past CIA abuses, this act requires the Director of the CIA to keep Congress "... fully and currently informed of all intelligence activities which are the responsibility of, are engaged in by, or are carried out for, or on behalf of, any department, agency or entity of the United States, including any significant anticipated intelligence activity."

Pretty amusing stuff to the old boys at The Company, who routinely withhold vital information from Congress and frequently lie to it outright. The oversight ("overlook") committees of the House and Senate are

Violations of U.S. Law by the Reaganites (cont.)

sworn to secrecy and remain silent, even when they know they have been bamboozled. Consequently, the act has become a mere formality, a legalistic device for concealing evidence of CIA misconduct from the public.

Nothing more clearly demonstrates the tendency to presidential despotism than the failure of Congress to demand compliance with the Intelligence Oversight Act and the War Powers Resolution. A few more laws like that and there will be little need for a Congress to pass and ignore them.

Federal spending restrictions

On several occasions in recent years, Congress has included language in military appropriation bills which explicitly disallows the use of government funds for the assault on Nicaragua. For example: "No funds available to the CIA, the Department of Defense, or any other agency or entity of the U.S. involved in intelligence activities may be obligated or expended for the purpose of which would have the effect of supporting, directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua by any nation, group, organization, movement or individual."

The Reaganites have tried to circumvent the obvious intent of such crystalline language by assigning responsibility for the assault on Nicaragua to the National Security Council, which is not empowered to conduct military operations. Taunted with that arrogant fiction, Congress has chosen to suspend disbelief — during the Iran/Contragate hearing, for example. But the CIA and the Pentagon are demonstrably involved and, in any event, the argument is absurd. It is as though the Reaganites

Violations of U.S. Law by the Reaganites (cont.)

instructed the Department of Agriculture to organize and finance an invasion of Canada, then declared that it could not possibly be an invasion — since everyone knows that Agriculture only deals with seeds and fertilizer.

There are also very explicit restrictions on military construction without congressional authorization. These have been violated to staggering excess in Honduras and El Salvador, and ignored by Congress in equal measure.

Drug running, perjury, burglary, etc.

Other federal laws violated by the Reaganites include the Arms Export Control Act, the Federal Racketeering Act, and a constitutional requirement that all funds raised by the government or its agents be processed through the national treasury.

The CIA and its *contras* developed a drug-running operation to help out with expenses. An investigation into the drug trade by the FBI's Miami office was abruptly terminated at the order of Attorney General Ed Meese. "No Problems Ed" also played a central role in the illegal destruction of Iran/Contragate evidence by National Security Council staff members.

The heavy weight of government has also been brought to bear on U.S. opponents of administration policy toward Central America, funds have been misappropriated, testimony perjured, burglaries perpetrated, etc., etc.... Doubtless many other patriotic acts will come to light in the years ahead, possibly in good time to divert attention from the next wave of crimes committed in the name of freedom.

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

While the CIA-*contras* were going about their murderous business and the pseudo-debate over their care and feeding was blustering in the United States, Nicaragua was receiving a broad range of support from the rest of the world. United States allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have been especially helpful to Nicaragua during its long siege.

That support has remained fairly constant, despite pressure from the Reaganites and lingering doubts about the ultimate intentions of the Sandinistas. In early 1981 an Under-Secretary of State was dispatched to Western Europe to enlist support for the CIA destabilization program; his mission ended in failure.

Two years later, the U.S. was still alone on its crusade, with the National Security Council urging the Secretary of State to "Increase communication/public diplomacy efforts in Western Europe, Mexico and other countries.... In Europe, systematically emphasize the military nature of Soviet/Cuban/Nicaraguan policies and actions. In Latin America and with European Socialists, emphasize the Sandinista betrayal of the original anti-Somoza revolution. Undertake major effort to have Christian Democrats condemn Cuban/Nicaraguan intervention [in El Salvador]." ³⁷⁶

All to no avail. Far from aiding and abetting U.S. aggression, most of Europe has consistently opposed it. Citizens have responded to Reaganite policies with an outrage reminiscent of the Vietnam era. Their governments have tended to be more circumspect in public, usually noting diplomatically that they see the issue as "a north-south problem rather than an east-west conflict". In either case, the message is much the same — a clear rejection of U.S. rationalizations for its unprovoked aggression.

One result has been the provision of significant amounts of economic assistance to Nicaragua from governments, individuals and solidarity groups. According to *Business Week*,

"Aid to Nicaragua reflects a widespread hostility to U.S. policies, and even sympathy for the Sandinistas among voters — including some conservatives — in allied countries." ³⁷⁷ Some 150 sister-city relationships between Nicaragua and Europe had been established by the end of 1987.

A strong indication of the way the international winds were blowing came in 1982, when Nicaragua was hoisted onto the U.N. Security Council over the furious opposition of the United States. The announcement of Nicaragua's elevation ignited wild rejoicing in the General Assembly: "A U.N. officer said that he could remember only one occasion when there was a similar response — when China was admitted to the United Nations [after decades of opposition by the U.S.]" ³⁷⁸.

Since then, the only thing preventing passage of a Security Council resolution condemning U.S. aggression has been its lonely self-serving vote. The General Assembly, meanwhile, has approved several such condemnations by overwhelming majorities. The response of the Reagan administration has been to accelerate its retreat from U.S. commitments to the United Nations.

The 1985 trade embargo was another diplomatic disaster. Not a single country joined it, and every relevant international body condemned it. The General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) noted that the embargo violated the United States' obligations under an international treaty [and therefore, the U.S. Constitution, as well]. Declared the Caribbean Community of Foreign Ministers, "We are strongly opposed to the use of sanctions outside the United Nations system", and the Latin America Economic System (SELA) "rejects the total trade embargo." ³⁷⁹

The Parliament of the European Economic Community (EEC) said that it "is alarmed by the decision of the President" to impose the embargo, and has reacted accordingly. In 1984 the EEC embarked on a five-year plan of economic assistance to the region, stressing "the importance of a greater European link to reduce Central American dependence on the United States" ³⁸⁰. The foreign ministers of the EEC have met annually

with those of the Central America and Contadora nations, ignoring U.S. objections to the meetings in general and to the participation of Nicaragua in particular. [For a discussion of Contadora process, see page 380 ff.]. The resulting aid has averaged over \$33 million per year, and the EEC has committed itself to significant increases in the future. Nicaragua has been a prime beneficiary.

Fractured alliance

Ben Linder, the first U.S. citizen murdered by the CIA-contras was the ninth *internacionalista* to be so honored. Preceding him to the grave were eight among the thousands of Europeans who every year volunteer their labor. They represent, in turn, thousands of solidarity groups and sister cities established throughout Europe to provide material assistance, counteract disinformation, and lobby their respective governments on behalf of Nicaragua. Unions, churches and socialist youth groups have been especially active in this grass roots movement, but it embraces the entire spectrum of political inclinations.

The solidarity movement has provided governments with all the democratic justification they need to defy the United States, and they have done so with mounting confidence. Particularly worrisome to the Reagan administration is the prevailing sentiment of its principal NATO allies. All but two have openly supported the Sandinista revolution. As for the other two, the right-wing governments of Great Britain and West Germany, they have been unable or unwilling to offer the U.S. any diplomatic comfort *vis-à-vis* Nicaragua — very likely because the political cost at home would be prohibitive. West Germany, for instance, has given birth to nearly 400 local solidarity committees.

Much of this opposition to U.S. aggression can be attributed to the efforts of the Socialist International. Throughout Europe, socialist parties comprise either the government or its principal opposition — a long-standing political reality that would no doubt come as a great surprise to most U.S. citizens,

who have been indoctrinated to regard “socialism” as a word only slightly less dirty than “communism” and have never bothered to learn the difference.

By applying intense pressure, the U.S. did succeed in persuading France and the Netherlands to stop supplying Nicaragua with military equipment — and thereby force it into dependence on the Soviet bloc. But apart from that single concession, based largely on the U.S. claim to an overriding “national security interest” in Central America, NATO allies have taken their own counsel. “The worst error we could make would be to follow the policy adopted by the United States,”³⁸¹ declared France’s foreign minister.

France has on several occasions presented a pointed alternative to U.S. military intervention by offering to serve as a mediator for regional conflicts. After the CIA mined Nicaraguan harbors in 1984, the French government offered the services of its navy’s minesweepers.

Nicaragua is the third largest recipient of French economic assistance in Latin America; only the vastly larger countries of Mexico and Brazil receive more. France has donated roughly \$70 million since 1979, including 24,000 tons of wheat flour and equipment for drilling geothermal wells that generate \$5 million worth of electricity annually. Telecommunications, food processing, agriculture, transportation and healthcare projects have all benefited from French equipment and technical assistance. Trade credits have been provided on France’s most generous terms.

Spain’s socialist government has also made a significant contribution, despite its own severe economic difficulties. Although its direct economic assistance has not been as great as that of France, Spain has acted as a diplomatic bridge between Nicaragua and Europe, counteracting U.S. efforts to isolate the Sandinistas.

Norway has been steadily increasing its support of the Sandinista revolution. It responded to the 1986 Congressional approval of \$100 million in military assistance to the CIA-*contras* by voting 100 million kroner (ca. \$13 million) for their intended victims. The contribution of the Netherlands’ has been

"I was one of four Nobel laureates who went to Nicaragua with the 'peace ship' sent by the Norwegian government.... Americans should understand that the Reagan administration's policies toward Nicaragua have not won the approval of our friends and allies in Western Europe. Our disregard of international law and our recent refusal to recognize the decisions of the World Court... are added sources of their dismay and our nation's increasing isolation. "

— Prof. George Wald³⁸²

even greater — well over \$100 million since 1979, and more on the way. Sweden, Denmark, Italy and Belgium have also contributed significant amounts.

Even the right-wing governments of Great Britain and West Germany have refrained from antagonizing the broad-based solidarity movements in their countries, declining to act on U.S. suggestions that they veto EEC assistance to Nicaragua.

West Germany's may be the most effective solidarity network in Europe. It was the first to respond to Nicaragua's call for *brigadistas*; several have since been killed by the CIA-*contras*, and many others have been wounded and/or raped, much to the detriment of U.S. prestige abroad. One indicator of the level of support for Nicaragua is the help given to a peasant resettlement project by the youth organization of West Germany's ruling Christian Democratic Party, whose leaders have condemned the Sandinistas in terms remarkably coincident with those employed by the U.S. ambassador to Bonn.

O Canada!

On the northern side of "the world's longest undefended border", Canada has continued its established pattern of abstention from the U. S. anti-communist crusade. As in the cases of Cuba and "Red" China, Canada has resisted all invitations to join in the attack on Nicaragua. "Within the climate of public opinion," notes a Canadian political scientist, "it would be difficult for the Canadian government, even if it wanted to."³⁸³

The government criticized the Reaganites' 1985 embargo, and permitted Nicaragua to transfer its Miami trade office to the city of Toronto. The expansion of trade between the two countries has been hampered by transportation difficulties, but it has grown steadily.

A 1981 visit to Nicaragua by a delegation of trade unionists has resulted in an energetic solidarity movement. In addition to the unions, which are considerably less inclined to commie-bashing than their AFL-CIA brethren to the south, Canadian churches and the socialist New Democratic Party (NDP) are actively involved in assistance projects and lobbying efforts. An NDP legislator from British Columbia achieved some notoriety in 1987 by loudly denouncing the U.S. assault on Nicaragua during President Reagan's visit to Parliament. Elliott Abrams has publicly complained that the Canadians are "helping to establish a Marxist regime in Nicaragua".

Tools and farmers for peace

Tools for Peace, started by British Columbia union activists, had by 1987 diversified into a nationwide collection of rubber boots, pencils, blankets and medical supplies worth one million Canadian dollars. Six other countries, including New Zealand and Great Britain, have adopted it as a model.

Taking root in Canada's prairie provinces, Farmers for Peace had by 1986 grown an annual budget of US\$374,000. The money has been used for several agricultural projects, including a much-needed equipment repair shop that fell victim to a CIA-*contra* attack which left ten dead, many others wounded, and a \$119,000 investment in ruins. The attack prompted the Minister of External Affairs to denounce "the tragic outcome of the attempt to obtain a military solution" and to reaffirm his country's commitment to helping Nicaragua.³⁸⁴

Volunteer projects are augmented by a government program that grants four tax dollars for every dollar raised from private sources; some provincial governments throw in an additional subsidy. By the end of 1987, Canada had contributed \$40 million in technical and economic assistance, and had

waived repayment of a Can\$14 million credit line from 1984. Its allocation of direct economic aid has steadily increased and is set at \$7 million for 1988.

In these and numerous other ways, the countries to which the U.S. government refers as the “western democracies” have provided support to Nicaragua.

Meanwhile, the Reaganites have been reduced to reliance upon the oppressive regimes of Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, S. Korea and South Africa to share the burdens of freedom fighting.



Another load of “Tools for Peace” is readied for shipment from British Columbia, Canada.

Reagan’s Law

When the United States began to organize Central America for its benefit at the turn of the century, one of the first institutions it devised was the Central America Court. It was conceived as a regional supreme court that would peacefully resolve the kinds of disputes that had so often in the past erupted into war.

Whether or not the nations of Central America would have learned to live by the court’s judicial wisdom can never be known: “Within nine years the institution was hollow, because twice — in 1912 and 1916 — the United States refused to recognize Court decisions that went against its interests in Nicaragua. The North Americans destroyed the Court they helped create, and in doing so vividly demonstrated how the Progressive faith in legal remedies was worthless when the

dominant power in the area placed its own national interests over international legal institutions.”³⁸⁵

With that historical curiosity as an illegal precedent, the Reaganites have demonstrated a contempt for domestic and international law with few parallels in U.S. history. Their administration’s most blatant gesture of contempt for international law, thus far, has been its rejection of several rulings in Nicaragua’s favor by the International Court of justice, or “World Court”. The court is the judicial branch of the United Nations and during its 40 years of existence has ruled on some 30 cases, over a third of them brought by the United States

Nicaragua’s U.S. attorneys filed a complaint against the U.S. in April 1984. Among its principal requests were for: a determination that the U.S. assault on Nicaragua violated international treaty obligations; a “cease and desist” order; and reparations for damages.

Since it understood from the start that its actions were legally indefensible, the Reagan administration simply announced that the World Court had no jurisdiction in the case, and that the U.S. would therefore decline to participate. But the court is itself the sole arbiter of jurisdiction, and it ruled in that Nicaragua’s petition would be accepted for review. The U.S. was bound to accept that ruling by virtue of its subscription to the U.N. Charter, Article 94 of which requires all signatories to honor decisions of the World Court. In addition, Article VI of the U.S. constitution states that international treaties ratified by Congress become the “supreme law of the land” until superseded by congressional action.

There *is* a procedure by which a nation, in rare cases, may withdraw its subjugation to the World Court. But it requires six months’ notice, a provision meant to preclude “a renunciation of any intention to withdraw our obligation in the face of a threatened legal proceeding”, as the Senate noted when it ratified the treaty in 1946. Avoiding its legal obligations is, of course, precisely what the Reagan administration was trying to do; the withdrawal was announced just three days before Nicaragua filed its complaint.

In an exquisite irony, the last nation to weasel out of World Court jurisdiction was Iran. In 1980 it resorted to that remedy in order to avoid a U.S. complaint about the hostage incident that had so much to do with the election of Ronald Reagan. On that occasion, Iran was everywhere condemned; the U.S. State Department expressed a nearly universal sentiment when it declared that the land of the ayatollahs had, by its withdrawal, “placed itself outside the boundaries of civilized nations”. The world’s reaction to the Reaganites’ uncivilized mimicry was similar but — given the realities of U.S. power and its wanton application — more subdued.

Guilty, guilty, guilty

The World Court issued its findings in June 1986. There were sixteen separate rulings, most of them going against the United States by votes of 12-3 or 14-1. It could hardly have been otherwise, since the U.S. lawlessness presented one of the most open-and-shut cases ever presented to the court.

Nicaragua’s case was considerably strengthened by the testimony of several well-placed witnesses, of which the most devastating were Edgar Chamorro and David MacMichael.

Edgar Chamorro is a member of the famous publishing family (see page 154) and a former Jesuit priest. Early disaffected with the Sandinista revolution, he had served briefly as information officer of the CIA-*contras*’ political front. In that

“I know of a village where all the draft-age men have been abducted [by the CIA-contras]; of an invalid who was killed ‘for the fun of it’; of women raped; of a body found with its eyes gouged out; of a 15-year-old girl who was forced to become a prostitute at a camp located on the Honduran side of the border. A girl of 16 was murdered, cut into pieces, and her remains scattered about. A truck with postal workers who had volunteered to pick coffee was attacked by mortar fire in an ambush.... They poured gasoline on the truck and set it on fire with the passengers still inside....”

— Rev. Jean Loison, French priest; testimony before World Court

capacity, he had occasion to observe at first-hand the CIA's supervision of the assault on Nicaragua.

Chamorro's testimony to the World Court constitutes a basic text on the methods of the CIA and its mercenaries. Among other things, it describes: how the CIA recruited and financed the *contras*; how it set up the political front solely for public relations purposes; the "recruitment" of peasants through terror and kidnapping; the bribing of Costa Rican and Honduran journalists to denounce the Sandinistas and praise the CIA-*contras*; the origins of the infamous "assassination manual", etc.

"The atrocities I heard about," testified Chamorro, "were not isolated incidents, but reflected a consistent pattern of behavior by our troops. There were unit commanders who openly bragged about their murders, mutilations, etc." The entire operation "was created by the CIA; it was supplied, equipped, armed and trained by the CIA; and its activities — both political and military — were directed and controlled by the CIA. Those Nicaraguans who were chosen (by the CIA) for leadership positions within the organization... were those who best demonstrated their willingness to unquestioningly follow the instructions of the CIA."

Another witness was former CIA analyst David MacMichael, who in 1984 quit in disgust at the Reagan administration's "hyperbole and deception". MacMichael, whose duties included preparing assessments of arms traffic from Nicaragua to El Salvador, told the court that his government had by 1981 developed a plan to destabilize Nicaragua. The idea was to start by provoking the Sandinistas into "hot pursuit across its international borders, a clampdown on civil liberties and, ultimately, the harassment of U.S. Embassy personnel in Managua". These preliminaries were to be followed by various "sanctions", leading up to invasion by a compliant Organization of American States.

MacMichael also testified that CIA analyses revealed only sporadic shipments of supplies from within Nicaragua to El

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Excerpts from World Court Decision

THE COMPOSITION OF THE COURT was much the same as for cases previously decided in favor of the United States. All rulings were determined by votes of either fourteen to one, with the only dissenting vote coming from either the U.S. or the Japanese judge, or twelve to three, with the U.S. and Japan joined by Great Britain. The other judges were from Algeria, Argentina, Brazil, France (two judges), India, Italy, Nigeria, Norway, the People's Republic of China, Poland and Senegal. Some of the key rulings were:

"By 12 votes to 3, [the court] decides that the United States of America, by training, arming, equipping, financing and supplying the contra forces... has acted against the Republic of Nicaragua in breach of its obligation under customary international law not to intervene in the affairs of another state.

"By 12 votes to 3, decides that the United States of America, by certain attacks on Nicaraguan territory in 1983-84, has acted against the Republic of Nicaragua in breach of its obligation under customary international law not to use force against another state.

"By 12 votes to 3, decides that by laying mines in the internal or territorial waters of the Republic of Nicaragua during the first months of 1984, the U.S.A. has acted against the Republic of Nicaragua in breach of its obligation under customary international law not to use force against another state, not to intervene in its affairs, not to violate its sovereignty, and not to interrupt peaceful maritime commerce.

"By 12 votes to 3, decides that the U.S.A. is under a duty immediately to cease and refrain from all such acts as may constitute breaches of the foregoing legal obligations.

“By 12 votes to 3, decides that the U.S.A. is under an obligation to make reparation to the Republic of Nicaragua for all injury caused to Nicaragua by the breaches of obligations... enumerated above.”

The court also ruled that the funding labeled “humanitarian” obviously is not, and that ideological differences cannot justify aggression: “If the provision of ‘humanitarian assistance’ is to escape condemnation as an intervention in the internal affairs of Nicaragua, not only must it be limited to the purposes hallowed in the practice of the Red Cross, namely to ‘prevent and alleviate human suffering... to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being’; it must also, and above all, be given without discrimination to all in need in Nicaragua, not merely to the contras and their dependents....

“Adherence by a State to any particular doctrine does not constitute a violation of customary international law; to hold otherwise would make nonsense of the fundamental principle of State sovereignty, on which the whole of international law rests, and the freedom of choice of the political, social, economic and cultural system of a State... The Court cannot contemplate the creation of a new rule opening up a right of intervention by one State against another on the ground that the latter has opted for some particular ideology or political system.”

Further: “The protection of human rights, a strictly humanitarian objective, cannot be compatible with the mining of ports, the destruction of oil installations, or again with the training, arming, and equipping of the contras.... In international law there are no rules, other than such rules as may be accepted by the State concerned, by treaty or otherwise, whereby the level of armaments of a sovereign State can be limited, and this principle is valid for all States without exception.”

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Salvador's guerillas, and that those consisted "principally of medicine, clothing and ammunition.... I became convinced that intelligence on the crucial question of the arms flow from Nicaragua to the Salvadoran rebels was being badly misused to support administration policy. In my opinion, analysis was strained and even distorted in the effort to convince those in Congress, the public, and the press who might have doubted the foundation of the policy."³⁸⁶

Other incriminating testimony came from a French priest and a former legal advisor to the U.S. Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, both of whom presented voluminous evidence of atrocities by the CIA-*contras*. Research on the economic impact of the destabilization campaign was conducted under the supervision of a U.S. Nobel laureate in economics.

Who cares?

The court's decision was greeted with widespread approval outside the United States. In Europe, on the seventh anniversary of the Sandinista revolution, a modern pantheon of famous authors, artists and other celebrities issued a joint appeal in support of the decision. Among those calling on the U.S. to honor its legal obligations were author Graham Greene, actress Julie Christie, composer Mikis Theodorakis, and Economics Nobel laureate Jan Tinbergen.

Naturally, the U.S. government was pleased not to comply. The State Department proclaimed that, "Today's opinion demonstrates what we have stated all along. The court is simply not equipped to deal with a case of this nature involving complex facts and intelligence information.... We consider our policy in Central America to be entirely consistent with international law."³⁸⁷

The legislative branch of government had already rendered its opinion on the case. Since the filing of Nicaragua's complaint in 1984, and the World Court's preliminary "cease and desist" order in that same year, Congress had ignored a

massive unauthorized military build-up in Central America and had approved over \$127 million in direct funding for the CIA-*contras*. On the very day in 1986 that the World Court issued its ruling against the United States, Congress approved \$100 million in military goods for the president's terrorists.

The mainstream press could not entirely ignore the issue. The *New York Times* treated the court's decision as one of three relatively low-level stories; the headline read, "World Court Supports Nicaragua after U.S. Rejected Judges Role". Competing for attention at the top of the front page were the lead article, "Reagan Is Likely to Use New Fund to Aid Pentagon", about some fairly typical fiscal legerdemain on behalf of modern warfare, and the equally significant item, "The Irish Uphold Ban on Divorce by 2-3 Margin".

The news from the World Court became deathly old in a matter of days, intruding sporadically over the following weeks in an occasional letter-to-the-editor or guest article. The majority of U.S. citizens effortlessly remained innocent of this legal trifle and, within a matter of weeks, the subject was seldom mentioned again in polite society.

THE OTHER AMERICA

The responses of Latin American nations to Nicaragua's predicament have been less uniformly supportive than those of Europe and Canada. This is hardly surprising, given the preponderance of reactionary governments in the region, and the giant shadow of the United States.

The few Latin alliances that Nicaragua *has* forged have been weakened by shifts in national politics and world markets. Venezuela was a strong supporter of the Sandinista revolution at first, but that changed abruptly when right-wing President Lusinchi came to power in 1984.

Mexico was also an important source of economic and diplomatic assistance until 1984, when a slump in the world market for its oil led to a fiscal crisis and desperate hopes for U.S. relief from its enormous debt burden. The Mexican

ernment has since scaled back its open defiance of U.S. policy in Central America, but the grassroots solidarity movement remains very strong and the government has done much to encourage it.

By 1988 the Sandinista revolution was openly embraced by only one Latin government besides Cuba, that of Peru. Celebrating the new constitution during a visit to Managua in 1987, President Alan Garcia delivered a rousing speech:

“We are fighting for the same goals: peoples’ sovereignty and freedom, the recovery of our historic unity, the vindication of our cultural heritage and true liberation.... When I see this land robbed of its men, its economy under siege, I feel a deep and genuine identification with your cause... the cause of the people, the poor of America.... The greater the aggression against you, the closer together we shall stand. In Peru, as in Nicaragua, we will never surrender, nor will we purchase indulgences by renouncing the honorable defense of Nicaragua.”³⁸⁸

While they might not share President Garcia’s lyrical identification with the poor, the majority of Latin American governments do share his interest in “the honorable defense of Nicaragua” against U.S. aggression. Apart from the dictatorships of Chile and Paraguay, and its client states in Central America, the United States’ penchant for military intervention has met with cold resistance.

“Why does the United States treat us Latin Americans with such a humiliating lack of respect?... For decades, the U.S. baffled us with its unconditional support for Central American dictators — so much so that many Latin Americans now suspect the word ‘democracy’. Those dictators created exclusive societies based on systematic injustice — breeding grounds for explosive discontent.... Our problems smoulder, then burst into flame, but one thing remains constant: the unbearable paternalism of the United States and its apparent distrust of any Latin American with a sense of self-respect. ”

— Carlos Andres Perez, President of Venezuela, 1974-79³⁸⁹

Notes one Latin observer, "The Sandinistas are not popular in Latin America.... What creates feelings of sympathy toward them are Reagan's policies — the support of the *contras*, the attempts [sic] to mine Nicaragua's harbors, the trade embargo. The U.S. is repeating with Nicaragua the counterproductive policies it has applied against Cuba."

Rebuking the Reaganites

In consequence, there has been a resurgence of resentment at the habitual bullying of the United States, giving rise to some embarrassing moments for the Leader of the Free World. The U.S. Vice President and Secretary of State were loudly booed at a 1985 reception for hemispheric leaders in Brazil; Daniel Ortega was greeted with warm applause. Shortly thereafter in Uruguay, Ortega received a similar demonstration of support from the general public: "Who received [U.S. Secretary of State] Shultz when he arrived in Montevideo? Two Mercedes and 600 bodyguards. Who received Ortega? Three hundred thousand people."³⁹⁰

Resentment at U.S. intervention has been expressed in a variety of ways, most notably by refusing to be drawn into the crusade against Nicaragua. The U.S. government has on several occasions asserted that Latin America was solidly behind its Central America policy, only to be bluntly contradicted.

In 1986, for example, a speech delivered by President Reagan urged congressional funding of the CIA-*contras* by claiming that both Brazil and Colombia approved the proposal, since both were said to



Jaime Perozo

A young Nicaraguan browses a children's library donated by a Venezuelan solidarity committee.

have been subjected to subversion instigated by the Sandinistas. In an unusual public rebuke, Brazil issued an immediate denial and requested an official explanation of Reagan's unfounded assertion, certifying that Nicaragua "has at no time intervened in Brazil's internal affairs".

Colombia's foreign minister termed the U.S. administration "intransigent and extreme... assaulting peace and international law". Its president added, "No one in Latin America likes the White House proposal.... I know we can get more through negotiation."³⁹¹

By 1987, opposition to Reaganite policies had become so solid that the Latin American Economic System (SELA) of 26 nations passed a resolution of support for Nicaragua and repeated its condemnation of the U.S. trade embargo. Guatemala's showcase civilian government risked the wrath of the dominant army by canceling Nicaragua's \$200 million debt and establishing a special commission to facilitate future trade. Even Honduras started to emit faint signs of independence, as resentment and anxiety at the presence of the CIA-*contras* spread among the populace.

The wrath of Latin America

Behind all this tweaking of the giant's nose are two fundamental concerns: a yearning for independence from Yankee hegemony, and mounting disquiet about the ultimate consequences of U.S. military intervention in the region.

Carlos Fuentes, author and former Mexican Ambassador to France, contends that, "Things now are certainly not as they were 30 years ago, when Jacobo Arbenz was overthrown in Guatemala.... If Nicaragua were to be invaded by U.S. troops, for instance, you'd see all of Latin America rising up in great anger.... You would see young Argentines, Peruvians, Columbians and Mexicans rushing to Central America to fight there.... We would see international brigades, like in the Spanish Civil War."³⁹²

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U.S. Diplomatic Isolation

“Nicaragua — Has Anything Changed?”

*Democratic Study Group
U.S. House of Representatives*

The Reagan administration has repeatedly claimed that there is strong private support among our Latin American allies for its policies of aiding the *contras*, despite their public disagreement with Administration policies....

This contention has been directly contradicted by the findings of three congressmen — Representatives Barnes, Richardson and Slattery — who recently spoke privately with the foreign ministers of 12 Latin American nations involved in the Contadora peace negotiations. The congressmen reported that they were unable to find any evidence of Latin American support for the Administration’s claims. In fact, they found that the Latin foreign ministers are even more strongly opposed to *contra* aid in private conversations than they have stated in public....

In effect, the Administration’s *contra* aid program enjoys no public or private support from the Latin American democracies. In addition, our allies in Western Europe have become increasingly outspoken in their objections to the Administration’s policies....

The worldwide lack of support among U.S. allies can also be seen from the following:

- Not one country has joined the U.S. economic embargo of Nicaragua imposed last May by President Reagan;
- Both the President of Colombia and the President-elect of Costa Rica, which borders Nicaragua, have publicly called on the Administration to stop aiding the *contras*; and

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Whether or not Nicaragua can, in fact, rely on that breadth of support against a U.S. invasion is by no means certain. But Fuentes does strike a note that has resounded throughout Latin America for decades.

Memories of Vietnam

Anxiety about the consequences of U.S. military intervention has energized a succession of peace initiatives. With one possible exception, all have foundered on the Reaganites' determination to impose their own conception of a final solution on Nicaragua.

Apart from the resentment which it inevitably arouses, the Yankees' imperial strut is not quite as impressive as it once was. For one thing, the post-Vietnam syndrome is alive and well in Latin America: To one of many arrogant chidings by Elliott Abrams, President Arias of Costa Rica responded, "I am not forgetting history, but Mr. Abrams is. He should remember the history of Vietnam; he is forgetting it."³⁹³

There is also an acute awareness that the conditions which gave rise to Nicaragua's revolution are hardly unique.

U.S. Diplomatic Isolation (cont.)

- Our European allies and Japan have refused to endorse Administration policies and have called on the Administration to support the efforts of the Contadora nations....

The Reagan Administration is pursuing aid to the contras without the support of any Latin American democracy or of any Western democracy. The Contadora nations and the four 'support nations'... represent 300 million people and every democracy in Latin America except Bolivia and Ecuador.

— *April 9, 1986*

While elitist governments might not find anything to admire in the Sandinista revolution, most of their subjects certainly could.

Accordingly, there is a widespread fear that the persistent failure of the CIA's destabilization program might lead to direct intervention by U.S. forces. That, in turn, could ignite an uprising throughout Central America, and quite possibly beyond.

Alarmed at that prospect, and despairing at U.S. intransigence, Latin American leaders of every political inclination have made numerous attempts to nurture a peaceful resolution of Central American conflicts, especially by seeking a *modus vivendi* with the Sandinista revolution.

Nothing so pacific was ever included on the agenda of the Reagan administration, which was determined from the outset to get rid of the Sandinistas, not to negotiate with them. But some congressmen and a great many citizens of the United States *will* keep nattering about peace and the like; political realities demand that such sentiments be accorded due lip service. A former congressman explains that, "When any administration wants to obtain something essential for fighting a war, it opens the bidding by showing how much it really wants peace."³⁹⁴

Until 1987, the Reaganites managed to fend off the threat of peace by making demands that Nicaragua could not possibly accept — e.g., the reinstatement of *La Guardia Nacional* — and by sabotaging nascent peace agreements. As for the CIA-*contra* terror campaign, claims the White House, that's just to "force the Sandinistas to the negotiating table".

While that diplomatic quadrille was being executed, Nicaragua's repeated efforts to resolve its differences with the United States were being rejected or ignored — as when priest and Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto journeyed to Washington in hopes of an audience with Secretary of State George Shultz. Having reacted to a faint hint that Shultz was finally prepared to start talking, Rev. D'Escoto hung around the State Department for five days, only to be told by a clerk that there

was no point in his loitering any longer; Shultz had left town, because “he had to play golf in Atlanta.”³⁹⁵

And so it went. Nicaragua has volunteered scores of peace initiatives, including “consideration of and respect for all the legitimate security concerns that the United States has raised, either in regard to itself or to the region”, only to be met with unrelenting arrogance and hostility from the Reaganites.³⁹⁶

A U.S. priest familiar with this anti-diplomatic history concludes, “Formal statements notwithstanding, [the Reagan administration] has consistently refused to seriously undertake negotiated approaches in Central America. The United States seems prepared to use diplomacy only if it will achieve what could not be achieved by force. That is, the United States is prepared to negotiate only... the capitulation of the Sandinista government to U.S. hegemony.”³⁹⁷

The peace of Contadora

Defying the Reaganites and their preference for war in Central America, Latin leaders have on several occasions come perilously close to promoting peace in the region. The most broadly based effort was the Contadora initiative, named after the Panamanian island where the governments of Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Panama met in early 1983 to work out a proposal that would be satisfactory to all concerned.

The original four members of the Contadora Group, as it came to be known, were joined in 1985 by Peru, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay. Together, the eight nations comprise 80% of Latin America’s population. Their efforts were emphatically endorsed by nearly the entire membership of the United Nations. More concretely, Canada, France, Belgium and other U.S. allies offered their services for the implementation of any agreement that might be concluded.

The first Contadora proposal was offered in 1984. Among the more significant of its 21 points were the provisions that all five Central America nations: forbid the use of their territories for any effort to destabilize their neighbors; limit the

size of their armies and arsenals to agreed-upon levels; prohibit foreign advisors, war games or military bases on their territory; promote regional communication and co-operation on security problems so as to minimize the possibility of war; and refrain from supporting insurrections against neighboring governments. Implementation of the agreement would be monitored by an international commission.

Much to the Reaganites' surprise and dismay, all parties agreed to the proposal. The agreement presented a serious threat to the plans of the White House warriors. For one thing, it demonstrated the Sandinistas' willingness to negotiate, making it all the more difficult to portray them as the belligerent scourge of Central America.

Worse, the agreement required the U.S. to dismantle its enormous military complex in Honduras, shut down the CIA-*contra* terror campaign, and withdraw its support for the military rulers of El Salvador and Guatemala.

"Applied across the board, the Contadora proposals would frustrate U.S. policy objectives. If the *contras* were deprived of their sanctuaries in Costa Rica and Honduras, their supplies from the U.S. and Honduran armies and their CIA funding, they would cease to be a serious threat.... The Salvadoran insurgency's main strength, on the other hand, is internal. It is the government and army that are propped up by the United States."³⁹⁸

Trumping peace

In order to prevent such a disagreeable outcome, El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica were instructed to rescind their consent to the draft proposal and introduce a completely new set of demands more in keeping with Reaganite policy.

The three little client states obediently carried out their assignment. It was back to square one. "These are little tiny countries," observed an anti-*contra* U.S. congressman. "We're pouring huge sums into them, and they can't afford to thumb their nose at the President."³⁹⁹

The crisis averted, a National Security Council memorandum conveyed the glad tidings: "We have trumped the latest

Nicaraguan/Mexican efforts to rush signature of an unsatisfactory Contadora agreement... although the situation remains fluid and requires careful management... We have effectively blocked Contadora group efforts to impose the second draft of the Revised Contadora Act. Following intensive U.S. consultations with El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica, the Central Americans submitted a counter-draft... Contadora spokesmen have become notably subdued recently on prospects for an early signing."⁴⁰⁰

At the same time, the White House stepped up its pressure on the Contadora nations. Mexico, which had been Nicaragua's most energetic champion, got the message and reduced its support to a diffident murmur. Panama adopted a similarly prudent attitude. The problem of Venezuela was solved by the succession of a right-wing government.

Only Colombia resisted the strain of U.S. opposition. For many months, President Betancur kept the Contadora process alive almost single-handedly, and his outspoken opposition to Reaganite policies continued to displease. A typical example: "I firmly believe that any foreign support to guerilla groups, whatever the origin, is clearly in opposition to the prevailing doctrine in Latin America regarding foreign intervention in the internal affairs of our continent.... I haven't spoken with any Latin American leader who feels differently."⁴⁰¹

Betancur's persistence was rewarded in 1985, when Peru, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay signed on. The first official pronouncement of the reconstituted group of eight noted that, "If a peaceful and negotiated solution is not found to the conflict, it will affect the potential and the social stability of all of Latin America. In the search for such solutions, time is a fundamental factor."⁴⁰²

Led by Colombia and Peru, the eight nations began to act on that sense of urgency. The peace negotiations were reactivated and, in an extraordinary display of united purpose, the foreign ministers of all eight countries descended on Washington in early 1986 to lobby against the latest White House request to Congress for CIA-*contra* funding. Although emphatically ignored by the Reagan administration, their efforts

were endorsed by the European Common Market and Japan, and were credited with an influential role in the subsequent rejection by Congress of that particular *contra* aid request.

The Contadora process was further legitimated when the secretaries general of the United Nations and the Organization of American States — the latter in rare defiance of the USA — came forward with an unprecedented offer of a combined peace-keeping force. Nicaragua accepted; the other four Central American countries followed orders and rejected it.

Undeterred, the two secretaries general and the foreign ministers of the Contadora Group visited all five capitols to seek acceptance of the most recent draft agreement: “Nicaragua welcomed their visit; Washington’s satellites — Honduras, Costa Rica and El Salvador — ignored or criticized it. The Reagan administration worked frantically to undercut and discredit the initiative, while the major U.S. media, along with most of official Washington, appeared not to notice or to understand its significance.”⁴⁰³

Unwelcome intrusion

Naturally, the Reaganites were much offended by the intrusion of the UN and OAS leaders; the State Department was prompted to express its “deepest concern” at their mission. As for the Contadora initiative, it was once again creating panic in the White House which, with sublime irony, deplored “the exacerbation of interventionist policies and actions by countries from outside the Central American area”.

Exacerbating or not, the Contadora Group seemed to have a peaceful conclusion within its grasp. A State Department memo warned that, “We need to develop an active diplomacy now to head off efforts at Latin American solidarity aimed against the U.S. and our allies, whether they are sponsored by the [Contadora] support group, the Cubans, or the Nicaraguans. We need to find a way to turn pressure they bring to bear on us or our friends to our advantage.”⁴⁰⁴

One element of the resulting “active diplomacy” was the assignment of Philip Habib as a Special Ambassador to Central America. As a former colleague of Henry Kissinger, the administration assumed that Habib would serve its bellicose purposes. He was also highly regarded by liberals and moderates in Congress, and his appointment would therefore help to mute complaints about too little diplomacy and too many guns.

But a strange thing happened on the way to the negotiating table: Habib apparently took his publicly declared role as peace-maker seriously. By April 1986, he had worked out a tentative agreement which committed the U.S. to disbanding the CIA-*contras* in exchange for Nicaragua’s divestment of its foreign military advisors and much of its arsenal.

When a letter from Habib outlining the terms of the agreement leaked out, right-wingers in Congress and elsewhere erupted in fury. The administration immediately amputated Habib’s handiwork, declaring that he had been “in error and imprecise”, and vociferously reasserted its devotion to the CIA-*contras*. Once again, the three little client states in Central America were instructed to back away from an agreement to which they had already consented, and once again they did as they were told.

Dutiful civil servant that he was, Habib took the heat for his error and imprecision — even though the offending letter had originally been approved by his administrative superior, Elliott Abrams — and could be heard months later denouncing the agreement that he had labored to produce; eventually, he resigned. A congressional observer of Habib’s futile exercise noted that, “In all the months he held his post, he wasn’t permitted to meet at any time, in any place, with a representative of the Sandinista government. His problem was that he really wanted peace.”⁴⁰⁵

Much the same thing happened to an earnest ambassador to Honduras who was fired in 1986 for permitting that government to seek negotiations with the Sandinistas. “I always thought that we meant what we said,” lamented John Ferch

(Continued on page 386)

The 'Civilized' Peace of the CIA

The new Directorate [of the CIA-*contras*] had to make inroads with the press. This was done by creating events that could be covered as news, even if the content of those events was questionable. The first public relations campaign to construct a press event involved the drafting and promoting of a 'Peace Initiative'. It was released on January 13, 1983. The CIA instructed us step-by-step how to draft it. They wanted us to look democratic and reasonable — 'civilized' was the word they used. They suggested that we come up with an appealing plan, with points that anyone could accept. But they wanted us to include some clause or point that would be entirely unacceptable to the Sandinistas, so that when we proposed it to them, they would have to reject it. I asked why we should propose something we knew they would reject; I couldn't see where that would get us. The rejection, the CIA agent told me, was what we wanted. It was important to make the Sandinistas look intransigent, and to be able to blame them for the failure to reach a democratic or political accord with the *contras*.

After the peace proposal had been drafted, we had something to take around to the press and to the Central American governments. We could create a whole series of press events and arguments centered on the peace initiative and on the Sandinistas' failure to accept it.

The CIA gave top priority to these 'diplomatic' moves, which were nothing more than an attempt to neutralize the Contadora proposal. Ours was an unacceptable, shabby proposal, a parallel document without substance, whose purpose was to confuse the public.

— Edgar Chamorro, former official of CIA-*contras*⁴⁰⁶

(Continued from page 384)

afterward. "We wanted pressures so we could negotiate.... They're going for something else. If it is not negotiations, it is really a push on the military side."⁴⁰⁷

That conclusion was seconded by a State Department official who was hounded out of his job by Elliott Abrams for "not being on the team", after submitting unflattering assessments of the CIA-*contras'* military capability. The administration has been so relentlessly antagonistic toward all peace initiatives, testified Francis McNeil to a congressional committee in early 1987, that, "At this time, no one in Latin America believes we are seriously interested in a real peace settlement. The fear in Washington is that negotiations would lead to the consolidation of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua."⁴⁰⁸

Solo Arias

The Habib episode convinced the Contadora group that it was futile to pursue its project in the face of U.S. intransigence. The initiative petered out, with no apparent hope of revival.

But at least one Central American nation besides Nicaragua was determined to give peace another chance. Concerned about the distinct possibility of a regional war, President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica revived the moribund process in early 1987. By some accounts, he was also following a personal agenda, with an eye on the leadership of the United Nations and/or a Nobel Peace Prize. Brokering a peace agreement in Central America would serve both ambitions.

His fresh start was perfectly timed, coinciding with the disintegration of the Reagan administration. Its troubles began to accumulate in late 1986, when the Democratic Party regained control of the Senate and, thereby, comfortable majorities in both houses of Congress.

But it was the protracted ignominy of the Iran/Contragate scandal that most severely clipped the wings of the Reagan war eagle. As noted above (cf. "Political fallout", page 351),

the public's disapproval stemmed primarily from disgust at the administration's perfidious dealings with Iran's Muslim fundamentalists. Nor did it help that political necessity compelled Reagan's handlers to concede the painfully obvious — that The Leader of the Free World was a bumbling incompetent whose primary function had always been to read scripts with a sincere and reassuring demeanor. At one point, the doddering figurehead was reduced to defending himself by saying that he would have to ask his staff what he had said at a crucial White House meeting.

By November of 1987, even the *New York Times* could detect which way the wind was blowing: "The Congressional report on the Iran-contra affair is not likely to do significant new harm to the Reagan Presidency, because the damage is already done. The affair knocked President Reagan off his feet a year ago."⁴⁰⁹

The presidential stature was further diminished in late 1987 by setbacks in the domestic political arena: two attempts to fill a Supreme Court vacancy with a judicial reactionary were defeated; and a devastating stock market collapse, attributed to gross economic mismanagement, evoked fears of another Great Depression and eliminated the Reaganites' last remaining claim to competence.

All this was known in Costa Rica, of course, and it provided Arias with more room to maneuver than any U.S. vassal had previously enjoyed. One Latin American observer concluded, "I have little doubt that this [Iran/Contragate] affair is leading to a certain rupture between the Reagan administration and some of its Central American allies. This is in part due to the perception by many Central Americans that, since the Democrats gained control of Congress, and Irangate, the Reagan administration is basically crippled."

That assessment was echoed by an adviser to President Arias: "It is very likely that what will emerge from all of this is a loose alliance between Costa Rica, Guatemala and Nicaragua, which will push for a settlement with or without El Salvador. Honduras's position will also probably become less

pro-United States.... As for us, the decay of the Reagan administration has changed a lot of things. We know the administration has to put up with us speaking badly of their policies and still give us aid."⁴¹⁰

That analysis underestimated the Reaganites' willingness to punish Costa Rica for its delinquency (see page 116). But, in the end, the White House was unable to forestall what came to be known as the "Arias peace plan".

Momentum toward a final agreement began to pick up in the summer of 1987. As the climactic moment approached, the Reaganites threw up their final obstruction in the form of a hastily contrived alternative to the Arias proposal. The administration's alternative, containing several provisions which Nicaragua could never accept, was lobbed into the midst of the five presidents of Central America just one day before they were due to meet in August. The intent was to remind El Salvador and Honduras, especially, of the side their guns were buttered on, and to confuse the negotiations into futility.

To nearly universal astonishment, this rather typical act of sabotage had just the opposite of its intended effect. The Reaganites, apparently oblivious to the ramifications of the Iran/Contragate mess and the plummeting market for Yankee arrogance, had finally overplayed their hand. The foreign ministers followed the lead of President Arias, ignored the U.S. counter-proposal and unanimously approved the peace plan.

Terms of the agreement

Building on the Contadora proposals, the agreement called for:

- an end to hostilities and a general amnesty in those countries experiencing armed conflict (i.e., all except Costa Rica)
- "national dialogues" between the five governments and their *unarmed* opponents
- an end to restrictions on civil and political liberties
- regional discussions on arms reduction and mutual security

- national and local elections in accordance with each country's constitution
- a 1988 election for a Central America Parliament
- supervision by representatives of the Contadora nations, the UN, the OAS, and National Reconciliation Commissions in all five countries
- an end to support for insurgencies by all governments within and outside the region.

For Nicaragua, the last of these was the essential component. Although the prohibition of outside interference applied to Taiwan and the Soviet Union, among others, its greatest impact would clearly be on U.S. maintenance of the CIA-*contras* and the ruling elites of its client states.

In exchange for dissolution of the president's terrorists, Nicaragua would be required to suspend its state of emergency and grant amnesty to the CIA-*contras*. Since that was precisely what the Sandinistas had been trying to negotiate for years, and had already conceded on numerous occasions (an amnesty program had been in force since 1983) they were perfectly willing to accept.

White House counter-attack

Although it was somewhat short on implementation details, the "Arias plan" was greeted by the international community with a collective sigh of relief. Even West Germany's conservative government, so sympathetic with the Reagan White House in other matters, expressed its approval.

A final bitter pill of world opinion was shoved down the administration's throat when the Nobel Peace Prize committee awarded its 1987 prize to President Arias. The bracing effect of that development on the undulating spine of Congress was palpable.

But the Reaganites were nothing if not persistent in their eagerness to promote war in other countries. They were not about to succumb to the threat of peace without a fight.

The White House declared the Arias plan to be “fatally flawed”, and Reagan was trotted out for a prominent photo opportunity with the political front of the CIA-*contras*. Congress was put on notice that it would soon be receiving a request for \$270 million of decidedly lethal terrorist funding.

The CIA frantically resupplied its *contras* in the field in order to fortify them against any subsequent ban on such shipments. For that purpose, a new supply base was established on Swan Island in Honduras, from which CIA planes delivered over 100 tons of supplies per month.⁴¹¹ In order to demonstrate their fighting mettle to vacillating congressmen, the terrorists were instructed to step up their attacks. They stole their finest hour by breaking a Christmas truce — to which the Sandinistas had reluctantly agreed at the urging of Cardinal Obando — with a brief slaughter of civilians at the remote mining town of Siuna.⁴¹²

The CIA’s network of radio stations sought to alarm Nicaraguan peasants about fictitious evils of the peace plan — for example, that it required all farms distributed under the land reform program to be returned to their former Somocista owners. Reagan chimed in with words of encouragement, urging his “freedom fighters” to continue the battle and ignore the peace initiative.

On the eve of their negotiations with the Nicaraguan government, Miskito *contra* leaders were offered bribes of \$3000 per month to resume hostilities. When the charismatic leader, Brooklyn Rivera decided to make his peace with the Sandinistas, he was refused entry to Honduras to speak with Miskito associates, and other leaders still on the CIA payroll were instructed to publicly repudiate his authority. “Basically,” concluded Rivera, “a sector of the U.S. administration is pressuring, threatening some of the leadership to denounce what we are doing, or to expel groups negotiating, or something even worse than that.”⁴¹³

Back in the Home of the Brave, the CIA-*contra* political front — once again reconstituted, this time as “The Nicaraguan Resistance”, after yet another wave of defections — announced

plans to solicit more funds from the anti-communist faithful for “non-lethal” purposes. It was as though the Iran/Contra-gate scandal had never occurred and the Neutrality Act never decreed. On the contrary, two prominent Republican senators made a well-publicized show of hefty contributions to the worthy cause.⁴¹⁴

Shifting the focus

In addition to sustaining the terrorists, this flurry of activity was clearly intended as a warning to the four U.S. client states that had so unexpectedly defied their master by signing on to the Arias proposal in August. The unmistakable message was: You can sign all the peace agreements you want, but Uncle Sam is going to continue the assault.

Within days of the peace agreement, Elliott Abrams & Co. were hard at work twisting arms into more belligerent attitudes. At one point, Abrams and the president’s National Security Adviser made the rounds of Central America with a thinly veiled threat: the presidents of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica were warned that, either they find some way to support the CIA-*contras*, or “there will not be a sudden surge of interest in things Central American or other kinds of aid.”⁴¹⁵

President Cerezo of Guatemala did not appear to be greatly moved by Abrams’ huffing and puffing. Arias was somewhat more malleable, escalating his rhetorical attacks on the Sandinistas, but also pointing out from time to time — in a respectfully oblique manner — that continued U.S. support of the CIA-*contras* was not doing much for the cause of peace.

As so often in the past, the civilian governments of Honduras and El Salvador proved to be the most subservient to the Reaganites’ will. They were especially helpful in shifting the focus of attention from the region as a whole to Nicaragua in particular — driven as much by a desire to obscure their own deficiencies as by deference to the Yankees.

Blind-siding the puppets

The strategy that eventually crawled out from the wreckage of the Reagan administration was to depict the Sandinistas as “untrustworthy”. Assisted by fierce denunciations of Managua from San Jose, San Salvador and Tegucigalpa, the Reaganites sought to redefine the peace plan in accordance with its own agenda.

They maintained, for instance, that no progress toward peace was possible until Nicaragua first revoked the national state of emergency. This condition contradicted the principle of simultaneity implicit in the Arias plan; i.e. all steps by all parties were to be taken more or less at the same time. (Exactly how that was to be accomplished was to be the subject of negotiations.)

The White House also demanded that the Sandinistas negotiate directly with the CIA-*contra* leadership. But this was not required under the proposed agreement — only unarmed opposition groups qualified for direct negotiations — and it was by now obvious that the president’s terrorists were not exactly free to speak for themselves.

The administration’s attempt to short-circuit the Arias plan in August had been so hastily contrived that, “It fell to Abrams to spring the news on the [*contra* political front] that night, after the deal had been struck.... ‘All this time we’ve been laboring to demonstrate that the *contras* are more than U.S. proxies,’ lamented one administration official. ‘And then we blind-side them publicly and send them packing. We made the Resistance look like nothing more than puppets.’”⁴¹⁶ Months later, with the Arias plan in motion, the puppets were still dancing on their strings: “The *contra* response to the Sandinista cease-fire plan is being drafted by U.S. officials.”⁴¹⁷

As Daniel Ortega put it, there did not seem to be much point to negotiating with the CIA-*contras*, since it was necessary “to deal with the ringmaster, not the clowns.”

Another extraneous demand by the White House was that Nicaragua release all prisoners from its jails as part of the amnesty requirement. But the Contadora amnesty provision

referred only to armed insurgents who first surrendered their weapons and agreed to participate peacefully within a constitutional framework.

Other contrived preconditions were that Nicaragua, alone, hold a new national election before the legally scheduled date of 1990, stop accepting military assistance from the Soviet bloc, unilaterally reduce the size of its army, and expel all foreign military advisors — none of which was called for by the proposed agreement.

Trouble in the House

Failure to comply with these arbitrary demands was said to constitute clear evidence that the Sandinistas had no intention of “democratizing” Nicaragua. Only additional “pressure” from the CIA-*contras* would make that possible, argued the Reaganites, and they returned to Congress for another siege of the national treasury.

When Jim Wright succeeded Tip O’Neill in 1987 as Speaker of the House in the 100th Congress, the Reagan administration expected its difficulties with the legislative branch to abate somewhat. In this it was sorely disappointed.

Wright numbered many Spanish-Americans among his constituents. He was fluent in Spanish, had traveled widely throughout Latin America, and was familiar with its history. What’s more, as a representative of the “redneck” state of Texas, no one could accuse him of being that *bête noire* of the anti-communist crusade, an “Eastern Liberal”. As a result, when he chose to take an active role in the search for peace, he was better insulated from the fiery rhetoric of the Cold War than was his predecessor.

With delicious irony, it was a bit of cleverness by the Reagan administration that made it possible for Wright to assume a leadership role in the peace process. In its frantic efforts to head off the Arias plan in August, the White House had invited the Speaker to co-author an alternative proposal. “But in fact, officials conceded privately, the administration’s

motives were more than a little disingenuous.... The real goal was to expose the Sandinistas' intransigence and thereby increase the prospects for continued contra aid.... The object, acknowledged another official, was to 'put Congress in a corner. The whole purpose of this plan is to facilitate contra funding down the line'." ⁴¹⁸

But when the five Central American presidents astonished the world by accepting the Arias plan, Wright lined up solidly behind it and informed the White House that it would be "counter-productive" to seek additional aid for the CIA-*contras*. The camel's nose was well within the tent; soon he would be sitting down at the negotiating table, with or without his original host.

The Speaker as diplomat

For years, the White House had been seducing congressional moderates into funding the CIA-*contras* by promising to seek a negotiated settlement of its differences with Nicaragua. Of course, the Reaganites never had any intention of keeping that promise; they ignored, sabotaged or unilaterally withdrew from every one of the numerous diplomatic openings presented to them (cf. pages ff.).

But political necessity dictated that the administration continue to pretend a sincere interest in negotiations. That pretense was put to the test by Jim Wright in the autumn of 1987, as he sought to demonstrate just how easy it was to deal with the Sandinistas. In essence, he took upon himself the diplomatic function that the administration had systematically neglected.

It was an extremely unusual role for a congressional leader: Theoretically, Congress is empowered only to pass judgment on U.S. diplomacy, not initiate it. But it was made possible by the convergence of several factors: the coy invitation from the White House for Wright to participate in "the search for peace" (i.e. its attempt to sabotage the Arias proposal); the unexpected agreement of the Central American presidents to the Arias plan; the confusion which that caused to Elliott Abrams & Co.; and the general disintegration of the

Reagan administration resulting from the Iran/Contragate scandal and other disasters.

Wright filled the ensuing policy vacuum by energetically promoting the peace process. In November, during a visit by Daniel Ortega to Washington for a gathering of the Organization of American States, the Speaker arranged a meeting with the Nicaraguan president and Cardinal Obando at the Vatican Embassy. The three emerged with an 11-point cease-fire plan, drafted by the Sandinistas, and endorsed in principle by both Obando and Wright.

"This must really be ruining Ronald Reagan's breakfast," remarked one congressman, as he watched this extraordinary tableau being enacted on television.⁴¹⁹ The administration was all righteous outrage at what it styled the speaker's usurpation of an executive function. As the jurisdictional dispute raged on, Wright calmly endured the wrath of the Reaganites and the sententious cluckings of the mainstream press. The subtitle of a *Newsweek* article was fairly typical: "Ortega tries to rope Washington into cease-fire talks and the speaker of the House muscles in". But in the process, Wright was given ample opportunity to defend his actions and, in so doing, managed to convey some information and ideas which the White House would have preferred the public not to hear.

After a scolding in the White House for his meeting with Obando and Ortega — which Elliott Abrams had in vain tried to persuade the Vatican Embassy to abort — Wright declared his belief that there were some "in the State Department and elsewhere who don't want the peace plan to work, who are literally terrorized by the prospect that peace may break out....

"I regard the relationship between the executive and legislative branches as a co-equal relationship, and I think it is my responsibility to uphold the dignity of the legislative branch.... If you want to know why people in Central America want to come and talk to me, I don't know; but I suppose it may be because I treat them as equals. I don't look upon them as inferiors.... I think the administration sometimes gives the unfortunate impression that it looks upon people in Central

America as inferiors, by scorning them, lecturing them, holding them up to ridicule, refusing to see them.”⁴²⁰

The Reaganites were not used to that sort of bold challenge from Congress, and it was an index of just how significantly the balance of power had shifted toward the legislative branch. Although Wright continued to receive abuse for his “meddling”, the net result was some breathing space for the peace initiative. The Arias plan was still on track, however tenuously; the Sandinistas had been given an opportunity to demonstrate their willingness to negotiate; and the White House had demonstrated that its only interest was in causing more death and destruction. As a consequence, the administration decided to indefinitely postpone its request for \$270 million in more blood money for the CIA-*contras*, and Wright confidently proclaimed that the president’s terrorists were finished in Congress (but not quite, as it turned out).

Moderate anxieties

Wright’s active involvement in the peace process had given heart to congressional liberals. But “moderates”, especially his Democratic colleagues from southern states, were still dreading the prospect of once again being forced by the president to declare themselves for or against his “freedom fighters”, and remained susceptible to any device that would enable them to straddle the issue.

It helped, somewhat, that Arias had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in October. But even that was not sufficient to fortify the courage of Democratic moderates in the House of Representatives. With a nervous eye on their anti-communist images, they refused to line up behind Wright and other opponents of CIA-*contra* aid. The delicate condition of the moderates made it possible for the White House to extort a trickle of continued support for the terrorists, and even to recapture some lost momentum — no matter that it blatantly violated the letter and spirit of the peace initiative.

Twice in the closing months of 1987, Congress approved additional funding for the CIA-*contras*, to be distributed by

those well-known humanitarian agencies, the CIA and the Department of Defense. Just under \$7 million was approved in October. As usual, the “non-lethal” funds were used to deliver weapons and ammunition to the president’s terrorists: “There’s no question that they’re delivering both humanitarian aid and lethal weapons on the same flight,” reported a congressional aide.⁴²¹

To register its opinion of that familiar duplicity, Congress approved another \$8.1 million of “humanitarian” and \$6.3 million of unequivocally lethal aid, just before the Christmas holidays. This gesture of peace and good will was facilitated by attaching it to a \$606 billion appropriations bill for the federal government. Reagan was instructed to warn that he would veto the entire bill unless the terrorist funds were approved by Congress. That would shut down the entire federal government and it appeared likely that, given the general public’s sophistication in such matters, Congress would end up with the blame for Reagan’s intransigence.

The House of Representatives accepted the president’s challenge, and approved a compromise that catered to moderate sensibilities — a trifling \$5.5 million in “non-lethal” aid. The Senate, however, stood by its president and voted for the full \$14.4 million. The bill was then referred to a House-Senate conference committee, and the resulting “compromise” was that the Reaganites got everything they asked for, including the military funds and the continued involvement of the CIA. Merry Christmas.

The Sephardic connection

An important influence on this vote for more war — despite Jim Wright’s confident prediction of the *contras*’ demise, just one month earlier — was the political effect of the Miranda hoax engineered by Elliott Abrams (see “The Art of Media Manipulation”, pages 426 ff.). That episode may help to explain the odd behavior of Democratic senators such as Daniel Inouye of Hawaii.

Inouye had served as co-chairman of the Iran/Contragate committee during the summer of 1987 and was largely responsible for its pathetic outcome. He was also a prime mover of the above-noted conference committee's approval of the \$14.4 billion in terrorist funds. He forced the issue, said Inouye, because the poor chaps were in desperate need of fresh supplies — this, despite evidence from his Democratic colleagues that the CIA-*contras* had enough stockpiled to last them at least another six months.

Then, having seen to that little matter, the good senator pushed through something really important — \$8 million to subsidize a school for North African Jews residing in Paris. This was done at the behest of Inouye's friend and campaign contributor, a New York real estate developer on the board of an organization formed to assist Sephardic Jews. What that has to do with Nicaragua and the U.S. federal budget is suggested by the reaction of a House member of the conference committee: "Just what we needed. It doesn't make any sense, except that Dan Inouye wanted it badly."⁴²²

And that's how the CIA-*contras* got their Christmas bonus, the Sephardic Jews of Paris got their educational subsidy, and the Reaganites were given reason to hope that the new year would offer fresh opportunities for the destruction of Nicaragua.

In early January 1988, a seasoned observer could report that, "Only a few weeks ago, renewed contra funding appeared doomed, a casualty of the Iran-contra affair. But prospects for approval have been on the upswing since last month's revelations by a ranking Nicaraguan defector.... Evidence that the administration had regained the initiative came Dec. 22, when Congress passed an omnibus appropriations resolution for fiscal 1988 containing more than \$14 million in supplies and services for the *contras* through February, nearly double the originally intended amount."⁴²³

Diplomatic poker

While congressional moderates and conservatives were conspiring with the administration against the peace initiative, the government of Nicaragua was struggling to keep it alive. The “Arias plan” presented an opportunity to dismantle the terrorist component of the CIA destabilization program and, in the game of diplomatic poker played through late 1987 and early 1988, the Sandinistas were prepared to use every card and bargaining chip at their disposal.

There were some new factors working in favor of the peace process — Jim Wright’s active intercession, for one. For another, the game was finally being played to a large audience in the United States. Due to a lack of interest from the mainstream press, the many previous efforts to get the White House to negotiate had gone largely unnoticed. That made it possible for the Reaganites to accuse the Sandinistas of intransigence, a charge repeated loudly and often. Even those congressmen who knew better could not trust their constituents’ to be aware of the administration’s duplicity.

But this time, what with the controversy over Wright’s congressional diplomacy, the unexpected participation of the United States’ Central American client-states, the consequent disarray of the Reaganites, and the publicity surrounding Arias’s Nobel Prize, peace was finally given a chance to be heard in the mainstream press. It thus became possible for the Sandinistas to conduct negotiations with the U.S. public and its representatives in Congress.

There followed a peculiar courtship of Congress, in which the Reaganites snipped and tailored their requests for CIA-*contra* funds to suit the requirements of the congressional “moderates”, while Nicaragua countered by offering one concession of precious sovereignty after another in an effort to soothe moderate anxieties.

Among those lobbying Congress on behalf of Nicaragua was a U.S. Jesuit priest from the Central American Historical Institute in Managua, and he was struck by the queerness of the proceedings: “We must have talked for about an hour

with each of at least five House members. Some were very hard line, which was hard for us to deal with, coming from here [Managua], knowing the reality, and then running up against all the lies.... During the whole day before the vote [on CIA-*contra* aid], I had the feeling of being in a courtroom, waiting for the verdict in a capital case. I think we were all struck by the tremendous concentration of power in Washington, with one vote by Congress literally deciding between life and death for thousands of people. It's a crime that they have that power, but they do — that's the reality, and that's why we went." ⁴²⁴

As noted above, such efforts were less than completely successful, but they helped to moderate the capitol punishment meted out by Congress. Far more influential, however, was the conciliatory behavior of the Nicaraguan government, which went far beyond its formal obligations.

Nicaragua was the first of the five signatories to appoint a National Reconciliation Commission, taking a great political risk by placing Cardinal Obando at its head. From all indications, the *contra* cardinal was no less antagonistic to the Sandinista revolution than ever. But his image was highly respected in Congress, and he was the leading symbol of the opposition forces in Nicaragua.

There were, as well, intimations of a thaw in the church's attitude toward the government: The Vatican had in recent years thought better of its dogmatic opposition to liberation theology, had appointed a conciliatory papal nuncio to Managua, and had been urging Obando to seek a rapprochement with the Sandinistas. They, in turn, calculated that the cardinal's potential value as an agent of national reconciliation outweighed the risk that he might resort to his old tricks.

That was a miscalculation; Obando eventually turned out to be the same old *contra* cardinal, after all. But in the early stages of the peace process, his appointment as head of the commission was greeted as a welcome sign of good faith on the part of the government. Not only Obando's, but the other appointments to the reconciliation commission were so

“Ultimately, the debates and votes in Congress over how much money to give the contras and under what conditions to give it to them served as a barometer measuring the resistance that the Reagan administration could expect, from the Congress and from the public, to its policy of escalating war. The administration’s intense lobbying efforts were aimed less at the immediate goal of securing a few million dollars for the contras than at the longer term goal of breaking the back of the domestic political opposition.”

— William LeoGrande⁴²⁶

clearly well-intended that the local co-ordinator of UN programs described them as “excellent”, and his counterpart from the OAS declared them to be “extraordinarily well-chosen.”⁴²⁵

Sandinista concessions

The Nicaraguan government followed with a series of concessions which earned such widespread approval that the Reaganites had a devil of a time thinking up ways to discredit them. The pro-*contra* news media, *La Prensa* and *Radio Catolica* were permitted to resume publication, a freedom which they cheerfully abused with more of the same vicious propaganda that had led to their suspension in the first place (cf. “Censoring the CIA”, page 237).

As before, the brutality of the CIA-*contras* was of no interest to the reinstated media: “*La Prensa* doesn’t attack the *contras*,” observed its editor. “We are totally opposed to the system imposed on Nicaragua and we are fighting that system as civilians.”

The manner in which that opposition is expressed was illustrated by *La Prensa*’s coverage of an anti-draft demonstration in Masaya by forty mothers, which was answered on the following day by a counter-demonstration of 20,000 people. In its report, *La Prensa* blithely united the two opposing groups into one giant protest against “Sandinista persecution”.⁴²⁷

In addition to allowing the CIA to resume its publishing activities, the Nicaraguan government decreed a unilateral 30-day cease-fire in three designated zones in order to provide the CIA-*contras* with an opportunity to take advantage of the amnesty. This gesture was answered with a sharp escalation of attacks on civilian targets. The few terrorists who took advantage of the amnesty risked execution by their leaders for doing so.

After three months, Nicaragua had done more than any of its four co-signatories to honor the terms of the peace agreement, but that still wasn't enough to turn off the CIA-*contra* tap in Congress (cf. "Moderate anxieties", page 396.) Accordingly, the Sandinistas decided in November to remove the last craven excuses of congressional moderates by making further concessions not required by the agreement.

Despite the condition that only unarmed opponents need be recognized by the government, it offered to commence indirect negotiations with the CIA-*contras*, with Cardinal Obando as mediator. Nearly 1000 terrorists and former *guardias* were released from prison with full pardons. The CIA-*contras* were offered another month-long truce in which to disarm and accept amnesty, and provisions were made for lifting the state of emergency as soon as the U.S. and Honduras stopped supporting the terrorists. At a later date, the government also disbanded the Anti-Somocista Tribunals (cf. page 260).

Test of loyalty

In surrendering so much to its courtship of congressional moderates, the Sandinista leadership had abandoned fundamental positions, sorely testing the loyalty of its constituency at home. The announced plans to broaden the amnesty and negotiate with the CIA-*contras* were especially troublesome to the faithful:

"On October 29, directorate member Bayardo Arce delivered a fierce message to the Sandinista Assembly, promising no compromise of the principles of the revolution, no 'political dialogue'. Slogans along those lines dominated the banners

[of those who] assembled to hear Daniel Ortega's speech on November 5, with its offer of indirect cease-fire talks.... The crowd greeted the announcement in disconcerted silence, cheering only when Ortega promised no amnesty for National Guard war criminals."⁴²⁸

Though not required by the peace agreement, a general amnesty was high on Obando's wish list and therefore of interest to congressional moderates. But there was no more painful issue to the majority of Nicaraguans: "Spearheading the movement against total amnesty is a national association of women whose sons and daughters were killed during the insurrection against Somoza or in the contra war.... 'Those who ask for total amnesty, let them give us back our children,' read one mother's placard.... In a *De Cara al Pueblo* town meeting with women on September 26 in celebration of AMNLAE, the women's association, the issue of amnesty was raised again and again. The majority of those who spoke were strongly, sometimes tearfully, opposed to total amnesty, and many said they had problems with even a partial amnesty, but see it as a necessary precondition for peace."⁴²⁹

Despite such anguish, plans to extend amnesty even to the last dregs of Somoza's *Guardia Nacional* were drafted, to go into effect once CIA-*contra* aggression had ceased. As an alternative, Nicaragua offered to release these most vicious of war criminals to the United States or any other country outside of Central America, on the condition that they not be allowed to return to the region. There were no takers.

In any event, nothing could ever satisfy the Reaganites. All proposals and concessions were immediately dismissed as insincere and untrustworthy, while the administration labored to push more CIA-*contra* funding through Congress in direct contradiction of the peace plan. For Christmas 1987, it was blessed by Congress with \$14.4 million of "humanitarian" and military funds.

Elliott Abrams & Co. drafted a counter-proposal for the CIA-*contras* in the spirit of previous attempts to make the San-dinistas appear intransigent by presenting them with impossible demands (cf. page 385, "The 'Civilized' Peace of

the CIA"). The list included the dissolution of agricultural co-operatives and the Sandinista Defense Committees, an end to subsidies for basic foods, and suspension of the military draft. President Arias observed, "When you look at the list of conditions and prerequisites... you become very pessimistic."

The Abrams-*contra* proposal came with a map of the areas from which the Nicaraguan Army would be required to withdraw. It comprised over half of the nation's territory which, since the terrorists did not control a square inch of it, struck most observers as a bit much. The Sandinista newspaper, *Barricada*, published a reproduction of the map and jeered, "We're not pulling your leg, dear readers.... This is the map from the U.S. counter-proposal. So, if you are in Esteli, Matagalpa, Ocotal, Juigalpa, San Carlos, Bluefields, Puerto Cabezas, and the list goes on, then you should know that as of today, you are in *contra* territory." Arturo Cruz, former figurehead of the CIA-*contra* political front, flatly described this demand as "crazy"⁴³⁰.

In short, it was business as usual at the Reagan White House, leading one liberal congressman to lament, "Every concession [of the Nicaraguan government] is greeted by more airdrops and more *contra*-aid requests. This is very much a stick-and-stick approach."⁴³¹

Isolating the victim

The Arias plan was supposed to involve all Central American countries, but a key element of the Reaganites' strategy was to focus attention on the question of Nicaragua's compliance or lack of it. For reasons of their own, the U.S. client states were eager to assist in that project.

Arias, himself, at first refused to appoint a National Reconciliation Commission for Costa Rica, arguing that his country was experiencing no conflicts serious enough to require him to fulfill this obligation of his own plan. He relented when the other signatories, especially Honduras, threatened to follow his poor example.

It had never been Arias' intent to make things easy for the Sandinistas. He was under intense pressure from powerful right-wing forces in his own country to oppose the socialists next door. By one account, "The Costa Rican has sold his plan to Democrats in Washington and to his own countrymen as a vehicle for weakening the Sandinistas politically, ultimately laying the basis for their removal from power."⁴³² Arias also maintained a close personal and business relationship with Alfonso Robelo, a leader of the CIA-*contras*' political front.⁴³³ And he was no doubt eager to atone for his unmannerly independence from the United States.

All of which probably helps to explain why the peacemaker's objections to continued support of the CIA-*contras* were oblique and deferential — even though it was the single greatest obstacle to the peace process — while his denunciations of the Sandinistas grew increasingly sharp and accusatory. He even fell to echoing the extraneous demand that the Sandinistas negotiate with the CIA-*contras*. If Nicaragua refused to do so, he insisted, "The entire world should isolate them; that is the sanction I would call for."⁴³⁴

The other three U.S. client states had plenty of their own reasons to focus attention on Nicaragua and away from themselves. Apart from the pressing need to appease the Reaganites, there was the problem of covering up their appalling records of human rights abuse. Because the Arias plan was perceived as a threat by reactionary forces throughout the region, it provoked an escalation of violence: "'The situation has gotten worse since the signing of [the peace agreement],' said a Western diplomat. 'It called for a process of democratization which would cause a loss of power for the military, so they invent an internal enemy.'

"While many acknowledge the human rights situation in Honduras is worsening, all say the abuses pale in comparison with those in neighboring El Salvador and Guatemala, where political murders are an almost daily occurrence."⁴³⁵

The slaughter did have one advantage, however. Since the customary sanction for opposition to the right wing in those countries tended to be banishment or death, it was seldom

"Mireya Lucero is a Salvadoran woman of 25, a peasant organizer who has lost nine members of her family, including her husband and her brother, to rightist terror. She remarked, 'They didn't make this plan for El Salvador; they made it against Nicaragua.'... The words 'state-influenced press' do no justice to the docility with which the major U. S. news media have followed the agenda of the Reagan administration and, it seems fair to say, of Oscar Arias himself in invoking the plan exclusively to cast suspicion on the intentions of the Sandinistas, while ignoring the outrages to peace and decency being wrought on a daily basis by [the other signatories]."

— Alexander Cockburn⁴³⁶

necessary to release anyone from prison. It was therefore possible to adopt an attitude of moral superiority to Nicaragua, which had chosen to incarcerate *guardia* war criminals, CIA-*contras* and collaborators, instead of killing them. Righteous indignation at the plight of these "political prisoners" became a popular theme for Cardinal Obando, the pro-*contra* opposition and, of course, the Reaganites.

National monologues

The U.S. client states were somewhat less than enthusiastic about initiating "national dialogues", as called for in the peace accord. President Cerezo appeared to make a genuine attempt to engage Guatemala's "leftist" insurgency in negotiations, but the army continued to exercise its veto over any significant concessions, such as land reform (cf. pages 263 ff.). The few brief encounters between the government and the guerrillas went nowhere fast.

President Azcona of Honduras reluctantly appointed a national reconciliation commission so thoroughly populated with reactionaries that no one took it seriously. It was the same, in El Salvador: "Diplomats interviewed here say that in contrast to Nicaragua's commission — to which the government named a principal opponent [two out of four, actually] — the Salvadoran commission has no such figure. 'They're all

sympathizers of the right and the military,' a Latin American ambassador says. 'With this panel, Duarte has closed the political space for dialogue. In the commission, who is for dialogue? Nobody,' says a West European diplomat."⁴³⁷

Of course, when it came to peace negotiations, Duarte's situation was far more precarious than that of the Sandinistas. He was supported by only a small portion of El Salvador's population (no truly popular candidate was allowed in the country for the 1984 national election), real power was in the hands of the army, and he confronted a genuinely popular uprising.

The rector of El Salvador's Central American University, a Jesuit, compared the uprising in his country with the U.S. mercenaries in Honduras/Nicaragua: "The FMLN is a movement founded, promoted, led and sustained by Salvadoran forces.... With respect to the *contras*, we can say almost the opposite. As soldiers, they are in fact Nicaraguans; but as a movement, they are a foreign creation, in that their army is promoted, financed and directed by the United States.... If material support to these two armies disappeared, their futures would be very different. The FMLN wouldn't even be noticeably weakened, while the *contras* would tend to disappear."⁴³⁸

Consequently, discussions between the figurehead government and the FMLN were short and unsweet. After they were interrupted by a sharp increase in death-squad activity in October, Duarte announced that he had fulfilled his obligations under the peace agreement and declined all further offers to negotiate.

It probably didn't matter much, since the government could not speak for even a plurality of the population. An opinion poll, taken before the nation-wide municipal elections held in the spring of 1988, indicated that 75 percent of the populace did not feel represented by any of the available candidates.

A reporter from the *London Observer* captured the essence of Salvadoran democracy, on election day in a remote village:

(Continued on page 409)

The Voices of Central America

From September to December 1987, random-sample surveys were conducted by the University Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP), a department of the Jesuit-run Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in San Salvador, the Psychology Research Institute of the University of Costa Rica, and the School of Journalism of the National University of Honduras. Among their findings:

- The United States — not Cuba or the Soviet Union — was named by 79 percent of Salvadorans and 61 percent of Costa Ricans as the country that most meddles in the internal affairs of Central America.
- When asked to choose whether the United States should support the Central American peace plan or continue to provide military aid to the *contras*, only 19 percent of Costa Ricans and 20 percent of Salvadorans surveyed embraced the Reagan administration's position.
- In defining the cause of armed conflict in Central America, only 12 percent of Costa Ricans and 4 percent of Salvadorans cited Communist subversion.
- Asked what the United States should do to achieve peace in El Salvador, 63 percent of Salvadorans surveyed said "stop interfering", "halt military aid", "support peace negotiations", or similar answers.
- Less than 15 percent said El Salvador enjoyed democracy and political freedom.
- Although not quite as confused as their counterparts in the U.S., some Costa Ricans can not accurately sort out U.S. friends and enemies in the region: 21 percent said the U.S. supports the guerrillas in El Salvador, while 11 percent said Cuba or the Soviet Union backed the *contras* against Nicaragua.⁴³⁹

(Continued from page 407)

“By midmorning, everything was in place. The only thing missing was the candidates. No one knew who they were. ‘I suppose there must be candidates,’ said a villager, ‘but we have no idea who they are.’ The election officials who arrived in the helicopter weren’t much more helpful. ‘We are only here to administer the election,’ said one of them. ‘We do not know anything about that.’”⁴⁴⁰

Flag kisser

The peace agreement created so many predictable difficulties for the U.S. client states that there was widespread bewilderment as to why they had signed it in the first place. Certainly they must have expected an immediate backlash from Elliott Abrams & Co., and it was not long in coming (see “Shifting the focus”, page 391). The need to make amends for their unauthorized gesture on behalf of peace soon became the most obvious concern of the wayward “democracies”.

Of the four, President Cerezo appeared least susceptible to U.S. pressure, perhaps because Guatemala was receiving the least Yankee largesse. Arias prudently limited his role to muted criticisms of the CIA-*contra* program and one-sided denunciations of the Sandinistas.

As so often before, El Salvador and Honduras were the most contrite and malleable. During a visit to Washington, El Salvador’s Duarte “chose to demonstrate his gratitude for Washington’s military and financial backing by literally kissing the American flag”, a performance which earned the derision and contempt of his countrymen.⁴⁴¹ He then sought to compound the blessings of that osculatory diplomacy by emitting a steady stream of accusations against the Sandinistas — models of hypocrisy that were doubtless pleasing to the Reaganites.

But it was Honduras that had the toughest public relations task. As the region’s principal collaborator in the U.S. terror campaign, it could hardly comply with the peace agreement

and continue to do the bidding of the United States. Of course, it never had any possibility or intention of observing the terms of the agreement: "The Hondurans' know they can't kick the *contras* out, and they are clearly in a state of impotence in terms of their ability to comply with some of their obligations,' a Western diplomat says."⁴⁴²

Progress report

It all made for some curious posturing in January of 1988, when the International Commission for Verification and Compliance (ICVC) met as planned. Established under the peace agreement, the commission included members from the five Central America nations, the UN and OAS, plus the eight nations of the Contadora Group.

The ICVC was supposed to determine the extent to which each of the five signatories had complied with the terms of the agreement; but its task was complicated by the fact that the U.S. client states refused to allow on-site inspections. Honduras was especially nervous about the commission tripping over the CIA-*contras* and their vast arsenal of U.S. weapons. An attempt by journalists and a Honduran legislator to inspect the military base at Aguacate — long known to be a *contra* staging area — had been repulsed by gunfire.

Fresh from their invigorating Christmas victory in the congressional wars, (cf. "Moderate anxieties", page 396), the Reaganites hoped to scuttle the ICVC with another heavy dose of intimidation and bribery of their client states, and they were partially successful. An ICVC official confided that, "Our conclusions are vague because the Central Americans were involved in drawing them up, and Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala are watering them down all the way."⁴⁴³

Despite these efforts to dilute the final report, the commission did reach some conclusions and they were not very helpful to the Reaganites. After much acrimonious debate, the ICVC singled out one government for its systematic obstruction of the peace process: "The government of the United States

of America maintains its policy and practice of providing assistance, military in particular, to the irregular forces operating against the government of Nicaragua. The definitive cessation of this assistance continues to be an indispensable requirement for the success of the peace efforts."

The commission also concluded that, after Costa Rica, Nicaragua had the cleanest human rights record in the region and was making definite progress toward greater democracy, despite the severe pressures of the war. It also pointed out that the Communist Party is prohibited in some U.S. client states, that thousands were still being victimized by torture and "disappearances", and that the offense of political opposition was frequently punished by murder. As Daniel Ortega put it, the report "brought out all the dirty laundry in the Central American countries, including those that pretend to be examples of democracy."⁴⁴⁴

Needless to say, those examples of democracy were less than thrilled with the report. So they decided to get rid of the commission that wrote it. It was replaced by the five Central American foreign ministers, two or three of whom could be relied upon to gang up on Nicaragua at the behest of the United States. The dissolution of the ICVC "was a major concession by Nicaragua, which strenuously opposed the move, arguing that the Central American countries cannot legitimately be 'both parties and judges'. Had Nicaragua not yielded, however, the White House and its allies would have blamed Managua for stalling the peace process."⁴⁴⁵

But the horse had already left the barn when the Reaganites tried to shut the door, and the report's clear message was expected to have an influence on subsequent votes for CIA-*contra* aid in Congress. One analyst in Washington predicted that, "This direct appeal will have an effect on Congress. It certainly will be used by the liberal opponents of *contra* aid. This is the first time that all five Central American countries, all eight Contadora countries, and representatives from the UN and the OAS have joined in a call for a complete cutoff of *contra* aid."⁴⁴⁶

Of course, the political implications of that development would depend, to a great degree, on how much and what

kind of notice the U.S. mainstream press would deign to give it. On that score, the White House had no reason to worry: It was objectivity as usual for the mainstream press. A fairly typical example was provided by *Newsweek's* January 25th account of the ICVC meeting. Headlined "Peace Now, Pay Later", it began: "Eyeball to eyeball with his Central American antagonists, Daniel Ortega blinked. The region's five presidents were meeting in... Costa Rica last week as time ran out on the peace plan they signed in Guatemala last August, and Nicaragua was still far from compliance." It ended: "No electoral change is possible until 1990, when Ortega's term ends. But his actions over the next few weeks will determine how troublesome the rest of his tenure is."

Don't mention it

There was no mention of the commission's most urgent demand, an end to the CIA-*contras*. Readers of *Newsweek* would never suspect from its account that Nicaragua's record of compliance was by far the best in the region, or that the ICVC report carried the authority of the UN, the OAS and the eight Contadora nations. Nor did this "liberal" publication find it necessary to mention Nicaragua's progress on human rights and democratization, the widespread abuses in U.S. client states, or anything else that might tend to cast Nicaragua in a comparatively favorable light.

As noted earlier, *Newsweek* has been one of the least delinquent in its reporting on Nicaragua and the CIA-*contras*. There are certainly far worse examples, many of them provided by *The New York Times*; its brief mention of the ICVC report stated flatly — and for those unfamiliar with its style of objectivity, incredibly — that, "A meeting of the verification commission ended last weekend with little agreement."

This was the kind of journalistic complicity which the Reaganites had come to rely on; with precious few exceptions, it persisted long after its deficiencies had been exposed. It seemed that nothing — not the Iran/Contragate scandal, not

the Arias plan — could disentrall the mainstream press from the spell of White House propaganda.

After the shock of the Arias plan's acceptance by the U.S. client states, the administration directed its efforts toward undermining the peace process and winning more CIA-*contra* aid battles in Congress. For those related purposes, a few basic themes were contrived by the Reaganites and conveyed to the public via the mainstream press.

“Untrustworthy” by decree

Central to the administration's strategy was the portrayal of Nicaragua as “untrustworthy” and “insincere”. To some extent, this was accomplished by simply declaring that it was so, over and over again. As usual, the press was content to pass these accusations on with little or no comment. Sometimes they were even regurgitated as fact, as in this wholly unsubstantiated assertion in the 11 January 1988 edition of *Newsweek*: “The Sandinistas similarly agreed to democratic reforms they don't really believe in, just to forestall more U.S. aid to the rebels.”

Another component of the White House strategy was to impose arbitrary demands on Nicaragua that were neither required of any other signatory, nor part of the actual peace agreement. The Sandinistas' reluctance to submit could then be depicted as non-compliance, since hardly anyone in the news media appeared to have read the actual document or otherwise bothered to learn its contents. The bastard demands were further legitimated by the likes of Cardinal Obando, who was very fond of the one about total amnesty for the terrorists, and President Arias who vowed that he would call down the wrath of the world on the Sandinistas if they did not start negotiating with the CIA-*contras* — a requirement he neglected to include in his own proposal.

When the Nicaraguan government held its nose and agreed to these extraneous demands for the sake of keeping the peace process alive, it was depicted as a cynical ploy to defeat CIA-*contra* funding (the legitimacy of which was seldom

questioned): "Mr. Ortega took the new steps toward compliance less than three weeks before Congress is scheduled to vote on new aid for the *contras*," sniffed *The New York Times*. *Newsweek* greeted additional concessions with the headline, "Nowhere to Run, Nowhere to Hide", over an article that began: "Daniel Ortega's promise-them-anything offensive was in high gear last week...."

As a veteran critic of the mainstream press observed, "Submission is translated into cynicism, and unilateral moves not even required by the accords [are] translated into compliance."⁴⁴⁷

Stoning the mothers

Another theme of the White House and the mainstream press was the capricious insincerity of the Sandinistas in lifting the state of emergency. To promote this story, the pro-*contra* opposition and the CIA manufactured events in Nicaragua that could be reported in the United States with the appropriate anti-Sandinista spin.

As in the past, the usual method was to break the law — for instance, by holding a mass rally without obtaining a permit, as required in the United States and elsewhere — and then cry "oppression" when the illegal activity was punished or restricted. News media in the U.S. faithfully report such events as evidence of totalitarian tendencies.

One of the most effective dramatic devices was the small group of women dubbed the "January 22 Organization of Mothers of Political Prisoners", who were funded by the United States to demonstrate for a total amnesty that would free the most deprived criminals in Nicaraguan prisons. Appropriately enough, January 22 is the date of a massacre perpetrated by Somoza's *Guardia Nacional* in 1967.

These relatives of CIA-*contras* and former *guardias* acted out a few protests which attracted a great deal of attention in the United States; participants numbered in the hundreds. Counter-demonstrations by "Mothers of the Heroes and the Martyrs", with as many as 5000 women, were largely ignored.

Sandinistas stone relatives of prisoners

This headline actually ran on the front page of the Hearst empire's daily newspaper in Seattle. A less petrifying account of the incident can be found in the accompanying text on this page.

In this fashion, consumers of objective journalism received the impression that virtually all the mothers of Nicaragua were rising up against Sandinista oppression.

On one occasion, a scuffle broke out when the "January 22" mothers organized a demonstration without a permit, then started tearing down banners being put up for an FSLN celebration to be held later that day. There was pushing and shoving, some rocks and bottles were thrown in both directions, and a few people received minor injuries. Inevitably, this was played up in the U.S. as yet another example of Sandinista oppression; the outcome was preordained, as in all ritual dramas. The Hearst daily in Seattle actually ran a front-page headline reading, "Sandinistas stone relatives of prisoners".

Something similar happened in the town of Masaya, when 40 mothers of young men started a demonstration against the military draft that eventually grew to include a mixed crowd of nearly 1000 protesters. This protest also attracted a tremendous amount of attention from the U.S. press, especially since the military draft had long been one of Cardinal Obando's favorite targets.

The same organs of objectivity were not very interested, however, in the counter-demonstration on the following day in support of the draft — possibly because it only attracted 20,000 people. One paper which did refer to the counter-demonstration was the *Washington Post*; it reported, however, "less than 1000 people showed up" to support the government. That was an odd slice of journalism, since even the CIA's *La Prensa* could count up to 20,000.⁴⁴⁸

Another key item of evidence that the Sandinistas were not serious about their pledges of democracy was a widely

reported sentence from a speech by Daniel Ortega. The carefully selected morsel was, "If the FSLN were to lose elections, it would give up the government, but not power." Invariably omitted was the following sentence: "The people made a revolution and conquered power for the workers, putting in place profound changes that are irreversible."

A few days later, Ortega expanded on that theme in his address to the closing session of the National Assembly: "Power originates in the people, power resides in the people, and the people can remove or install any party whenever the people regard this as proper. Power does not belong to any particular party or political organization, but to the Nicaraguan people."⁴⁴⁹

Thomas Jefferson and James Madison might well have applauded such a formulation; and Abraham Lincoln's venerated Gettysburg Address includes the very similar reference to "government of the people, by the people, for the people". But those former presidents would never have learned about that from the U.S. mainstream press. The episode bore a strong resemblance to the distortion of remarks by Tomas Borge years earlier (see page 168).

Diversiory focus

While they were unable or unwilling to accurately convey the message of Daniel Ortega, U.S. news media continued to offer every courtesy to Elliott Abrams and his venomous tongue. As though he had not repeatedly confirmed his standing as one of the most relentless propagandists to disgrace a modern nation since Josef Goebbels, Abrams was granted every indulgence. His most shining hour was the "Miranda hoax", with which he stampeded congressional moderates into approving funds for the CIA-*contras* in celebration of the 1987 Christmas season (cf. "The Art of Media Manipulation", page 426 ff.).

Whether or not it was intended, the effect of such journalistic malpractice was to continue a long tradition of service to the White House. The administration's strategy required

that constant pressure be kept on Nicaragua, while the U.S. client states were spared the indignity of too much scrutiny.

Likewise, it was important that the press not concern itself with the fact that continuation of the CIA-*contra* terror campaign was the single greatest obstacle to peace in the region. Not to worry. Apart from an occasional passing reference, mainstream news of that little hindrance was not permitted to obstruct the warpath of the Reaganites. The November 6th *New York Times* report on congressional approval of \$3.2 million in "short-term aid.... to be used strictly for non-arms assistance" is representative, tactfully failing to note that the terrorist funding violated the Arias plan. (Another article in the same edition refers to the "thousands of Nicaraguans convicted of anti-Sandinista acts", validating the Reaganites' distinction between Sandinistas and genuine Nicaraguans.)

Necessary exceptions

Of course, there were exceptions. There have to be exceptions, so that purveyors of mainstream news can cite them to certify their objectivity. One of the best examples of this "safe criticism" (*pace* Noam Chomsky) was an article in *The New York Times'* 20 January 1988 edition, which starts off: "The Central American peace treaty is in danger of being converted into a series of demands directed only at Nicaragua," and proceeds to an excellent review of the failure of the U.S. client states to comply with the Arias plan.

What the *Times* delicately refrained from mentioning, however, was that it shared a major portion of responsibility for that unfortunate circumstance. A survey of *Times'* coverage of the peace process from 7 August 1987 to 18 January 1988 disclosed "about one hundred stories on Nicaragua's compliance with the accords; half a dozen on El Salvador's; two on Honduras'; and none on Guatemala's."⁴⁵⁰ The general tenor of that coverage is indicated above.

At the start of 1988, things did not look so good for the Arias peace plan, which by then had become the Nicaraguan peace maneuvers. The effectiveness of the Miranda hoax

appeared to neutralize all the good will earned by Sandinista concessions. The subsequent renewal of outright military funding to the CIA-*contras* at the end of 1987 indicated that congressional moderates were once again lining up behind the Reaganites.

At the January meeting of the peace plan's International Commission of Verification and Compliance, the U.S. client states gave notice that their brief moment of independence was coming to an end. They watered down the final report and then disbanded the commission, so that they would not have to be embarrassed by its conclusions again. As the February 3rd deadline for another crucial vote in Congress approached, Arias could be heard via U.S. media saying things like, "The future of more aid to the *contras* is entirely in Daniel Ortega's hands. If he shows good faith in carrying out his promises, then there's no more reason for war."⁴⁵¹

The Sandinistas decided it was worth the risk of still more unpopular concessions in order to appease the U.S. Congress. Following the ICVC meeting in January, they announced a willingness to commence direct negotiations with the CIA-*contras*, with Cardinal Obando as mediator. They also lifted the state of emergency without any guarantee from the enemy, and offered to release all counter-revolutionaries detained since 1981 if a government outside the region would offer them refuge; none did. An offer by the Nicaraguan government to establish an international commission, including Democratic and Republican members of Congress, to monitor any agreement was ignored.

When the administration submitted its request for \$36.2 million to Congress for the February vote, it insisted that a small portion of the total be allocated to openly lethal purposes. Since the negotiations between Nicaragua and the CIA-*contras* were still in progress, the demand for more guns provided nervous "moderates" with a solution to their dilemma. They could now vote against the funding, but still claim devotion to the terrorists by arguing that they were trying to give peace a chance. Grasping that fragile straw, they helped to defeat the measure by a margin of eight votes.

That was supposed to put an end to the matter for at least half a year, and very likely for the balance of the Reagan administration. In return for their consent to the \$14.4 million CIA-*contra* Christmas package at the end of 1987, Democratic congressional leaders had won an agreement that the February vote would be an “ultimate test”. If it passed, any subsequent request would be granted the courtesy of expedited legislative procedures. But if it failed, any request for additional funds would have to follow the standard path through Congress, which meant that no funding measure could be considered until the end of the year, if at all.

However, the Democratic moderates whose votes were so crucial to the final outcome were so consumed by “soft on communism” anxieties that they exacted yet another concession from their party leaders. In exchange for their votes against the lethal-aid proposal, they demanded an opportunity to vote soon after on a purely “humanitarian” alternative — so that they could continue to have it both ways. Otherwise, they would consent to anything the Republicans presented, which was certain to include a specifically lethal component.

Strange bedfellows

Since moderate votes constituted the margin of victory, the Democratic leadership had no choice but to concede. They cobbled together a package of \$30.8 million, and thus began one of the strangest episodes of political maneuvering ever seen in Congress.

The Reaganites continued to insist on the inclusion of specifically lethal aid and, as a consequence, found themselves in a tacit alliance with congressional liberals who could not swallow a vote for the terrorists under any circumstances. The *contras*, on the other hand, risked the displeasure of their White House keepers by endorsing the proposed compromise — they wanted that money.

In the end, the Reaganites and the uncompromising liberals won; the funding proposal was rejected by a margin of eight votes. The terrorists wound up without a fresh infusion of

dollars, and the White House was seen to have rebuked the moderates who had so frequently conspired with it in the past. The net result was a comparatively stable majority — for a time — against specifically lethal aid. The moderates “have more reason to be angered at their twenty conservative Democratic colleagues and the many Republicans who voted against the aid plan than at [most of] the liberals, who gave it their best shot. Inadvertently, the latter achieved the best of both worlds: no *contra* aid and no alienated moderates.”⁴⁵²

This episode caused a lasting rift between the CIA-*contras* and the administration. It turned out to be so destabilizing to their relationship that questions were raised about the White House strategy. By some accounts, it was a simple case of ineptitude and miscalculation; by others, it reflected a growing consensus within the administration that the CIA-*contra* program was essentially dead, and the next best thing was to force a guaranteed losing proposition on Congress for future political effect. “It’s a matter of being able to point to the Democrats and say: You lost Nicaragua,” suggested a nameless State Department official.⁴⁵³

Whatever the reason, the president’s terrorists bitterly lamented their fate. “Thousands of Nicaraguans have died so that U.S. troops didn’t have to fight in Nicaragua,” complained a leader of the political front, “and this is the way they repay us.” Adolfo Calero grimly concluded that the U.S. is “more unreliable than the Soviet Union.”⁴⁵⁴

They were further dismayed by a major military defeat. Immediately after the Reaganites contrived the rejection of the “non-lethal” funding measure, the Nicaraguan Army inflicted heavy losses on a large concentration of CIA-*contra* forces assembled near the border with Honduras. That defeat prompted the White House to cry “invasion” for the second time in two years, in an attempt to reverse its losses in Congress (cf. “In hot pursuit of an invasion”, page 428). The terrorists suffered heavy casualties and lost a large portion of their supplies. Perhaps most significantly, the deadly encounter demonstrated once again that they were no match for the people’s army of Nicaragua.

That came as something of a shock to most of the mainstream press which, since the signing of the Arias accord the previous August, had been busily validating White House propaganda about the fine fighting fettle of the CIA-*contras*. *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Miami Herald* and others had published numerous articles praising the giant strides of the “insurgency” in girding their loins and in winning the hearts and minds of their countrymen. A typical example was the *Miami Herald*’s November 7th piece, “*Contras build peasant support*”. The source of this information? The CIA-*contras*, naturally.

Phantom occupation

Perhaps the most egregious example of mainstream advertising for the president’s terrorists was the front-page article of *The New York Times*’ Christmas day edition. Describing the attack on Siuna with which the CIA-*contras* violated the Christmas truce brokered by Cardinal Obando, the *Times* declared that they had conducted their “largest and most successful military operation of the war” and had occupied the remote mining town for two days.

If true, this would be heartening news for congressional moderates, since their main objection to the terrorist program was that it seemed unlikely to succeed. “Why can’t they take a town?” was the nagging question. But the *Times* story was a tad premature, as it turned out. There was no “occupation” — only the customary slaughter of defenseless civilians.⁴⁵⁵

Thus, the Nicaraguan Army — which apparently does not estimate the enemy’s strength by studying *The New York Times* — encountered virtually no resistance when it mopped up the CIA’s border bandits in early March. That, on top of the two successive votes in Congress denying additional terrorist funds, apparently persuaded the political front that it was time to cut a deal with the Sandinistas. A State Department official acknowledged: “They saw the need for a ceasefire. They recognized that they were in a difficult position, politically here and militarily on the ground.”⁴⁵⁶

For Nicaragua, the omens were propitious. The strange events in Congress had resulted in a major split between the Reaganites and the CIA-*contras*, who were spinning in political space and riven by internal disputes.

As for the Reagan administration, its entire Central America program was in a shambles and the chief architect was under attack by “moderates” in the White House. Elliott Abrams’ stock was lower than a snake’s belly: Not only had he “lost” the votes in Congress and control of the terrorists, his efforts to remove General Manuel Noriega from the leadership of Panama had failed miserably, while helping to expose the seamy history of collaboration between Noriega and the U.S. in drug trafficking and other activities.

In Honduras, there was an outbreak of anti-U.S. rioting by the natives, and the generals were sending subtle hints to Washington that they wanted the CIA’s terrorists removed as soon as possible. The Reaganites’ man in El Salvador, President Duarte, lost national elections that were boycotted by three-fourths of the population, and the guerrilla movement was gaining strength. The empire seemed to be losing its grip.

In that context, the Sandinistas decided to offer the CIA-*contras* an olive branch and a chance to save face, in an attempt to put an end to the fighting. They were in a relatively favorable position to do so, since the patience and timing of the “politically unsophisticated” Sandinistas had left them with near-total military and political superiority over the terrorists.

Thus it was that in March the government invited them to direct negotiations inside Nicaragua. It was a major reversal of policy, and Ortega sought to reassure the faithful: “Why did the government of Nicaragua decide to talk directly with the *contra* leadership, when we had repeatedly asserted that we would not negotiate with them? We did it because we found that, at that moment, there were conditions favorable to reaching an agreement independent of the will of the U.S. government.... The *contras*, having been used as a tool of the Reagan administration for more than six years, became convinced that they have been defeated by the Nicaraguan people.”⁴⁵⁷

The negotiations began at the town of Sapoa near the border with Costa Rica, *without* the mediation of Cardinal Obando. Apparently ignoring the counsel of the Vatican nuncio in Managua, Obando reverted to his pro-*contra* modality and adopted their bargaining positions as his own — not generally acceptable behavior for a mediator. The Obando/*contra* demands were, as usual, given prominent display by the U.S. mainstream press, and were soon regarded as indispensable by congressional moderates. “Obando showed he was no longer neutral,” concluded a Latin American diplomat, apparently unaware or unwilling to concede that the cardinal had never been neutral.⁴⁵⁸

Cease-fire agreement

The cardinal’s services were therefore not required when the two parties met at Sapoa in late March. The government delegation was led by the president’s brother, Defense Minister Humberto Ortega. After three days of surprisingly cordial discussions, a cease-fire agreement was signed. The major provisions were:

- a 60-day cease-fire to run from April 1 – May 30
- relocation of CIA-*contras* to seven designated zones in Nicaragua, where they would receive aid from the Red Cross
- amnesty for all political prisoners, including former *guardias*
- representation of CIA-*contras* in the National Dialogue established under the Arias plan
- verification by Secretary General Soares of the Organization of American States, using OAS facilities; Cardinal Obando was also named to the verification panel.

Reaction to the agreement by the majority of Nicaraguans was “generally favorable, but remarkably subdued — largely because of the amnesty provision.... Amnesty for the former National Guardsmen is a particularly charged issue....

"Another reason for the less-than-jubilant reaction is widespread doubt that the *contras* will actually keep their promises."⁴⁵⁹

The Reagan administration was characteristically gracious: "Fundamentally the agreement reflects the fact that Congress abandoned the *contras* and left them on the battlefield without food or weapons," hissed Elliott Abrams.

But Congress continued its errant ways, greeting the unexpected development with a cease-fire aid package that included \$17.7 million of allegedly non-lethal aid to the terrorists, an equal amount for medical treatment of children victimized by the terror campaign (the first U.S. reparations), and another \$10 million to support the verification commission.

Doubtful outcome

As this book was going to press in May 1988, the final outcome of the process begun at Sapoá was still very much in doubt. Everything depended on the terrorists moving to the cease-fire zones and laying down their arms; but their leaders kept presenting new demands as conditions for doing so. Those demands involved major revisions of the constitution, which had been created through an extensive national exercise in participatory democracy (cf. pages 82 ff.). The government was naturally disinclined to surrender the people's constitutional rights to the terrorists who had been trying to destroy them. The terrorist leaders also demanded the right to travel freely through the country to promote their program. Defense Minister Ortega had to remind them that, "Your troops are not here in Managua forcing us to negotiate."

As the 60-day truce ticked away, and the cease-fire zones remained empty, it became increasingly evident that the negotiations were being hampered by violent divisions among the terrorists. The Sapoá agreement had been signed by figureheads in the political front; but key military leaders regarded it as a capitulation, a view shared by Elliott Abrams & Co. The dispute erupted into a fist fight at a conference of Nicaraguan exiles in Miami, and there were reports of death threats. In

Honduras, Enrique Bermudez needed the help of the CIA and the Honduran Army to put down a mutiny against his leadership of the terror campaign.

These disputes left the Nicaraguan government uncertain about the authority of those with whom it was attempting to negotiate: "It worries us," said a Sandinista negotiator, "that in a document signed here, the ex-National Guard is not represented, since they dominate the *contra* military apparatus. At any time they can renege on the accords, create a new *contra* directorate, brush up their image, seek out new financial support, and continue the war."⁴⁶⁰

There were also signs of disarray in the White House, with reports of a policy battle between moderates who felt it was time to finally work out a *modus vivendi* with the Sandinistas, and hard-liners in the Elliott Abrams mold who rejected any thought of diplomacy. One administration official observed that, "Nobody is really in charge now."⁴⁶¹

But Abrams was still making his presence felt. Attempting to justify the administration's refusal to honor its long-standing commitment to begin negotiating with the government of Nicaragua as soon as it were to sit down with the CIA-*contra* leadership, Abrams said, "We don't need bilateral talks with the Sandinistas. We need to talk most of all about Soviet arms going into the region."

But as one of his disaffected assistants anonymously confided, "I don't know why we would want to talk about Soviet shipments with Nicaragua. We could talk to the Soviets directly. We don't want to talk with the Soviets about Central America. We just want to complain to them."⁴⁶²

It seems that Abrams also succeeded in getting key CIA-*contra* leaders back on the leash. After he met with them in Miami in late April, they became noticeably more recalcitrant and terrorist violations of the Sapoa accord began to proliferate. A religious service was attacked, leaving two children dead and several others wounded; a village priest was kidnapped; several *campesinos* were raped, tortured and killed....⁴⁶³

The terrorists refused to accept aid from the International Red Cross, contending (to the bewilderment of the world at large) that it was not an impartial agency. Instead, they received cash and "non-lethal" supplies from the U.S. government, in direct violation of the Sapoa accord. When OAS Secretary General Soares submitted a written protest, Cardinal Obando undermined him by declaring that it was not the official view of the verification commission.

In short, it was business as usual, with the Reaganites laboring to sabotage the peace process and pin the blame on the Sandinistas. According to one report, the general strategy was "to string the Sandinistas along in prolonged cease-fire talks, and then rely on a victory by the Republicans in the American presidential campaign to bring renewed military aid."⁴⁶⁴

At the end of April, Ronald Reagan registered his opinion of the peace process by signing an extension of the trade embargo initiated in 1985. According to the presidential decree, "The actions and policies of the government of Nicaragua continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States."

* * *

THE ART OF MEDIA MANIPULATION

A RECURRENT EPISODE in the popular comic strip, "Peanuts", depicts the character named Lucy playing the same dirty trick on poor old Charlie Brown over and over again. She offers to steady a football while Charlie kicks it, but removes it at the last moment, so that he is thrown off balance and falls flat on his back. This happens every time; but, despite this repeated experience, Charlie never fails to be persuaded by Lucy on the next occasion that she will behave herself. Of course, she does not, and he ends up flat on his back once again.

The ritual encounter between Lucy and Charlie serves as a metaphor for any number of dysfunctional relationships, of which that between the White House and the mainstream

press is surely a prime example. For, although they know full well that they have been repeatedly suckered by the Reaganites, the mainstreamers keep coming back for more abuse. The consequences are more severe than Charlie Brown's wounded pride and bruised back, however. Beyond the compromised integrity of the press, they include a misinformed and confused public, degradation of the political process, and a chronic deficiency of resistance to the depredations of an outlaw presidency.

Media safety valves

The Reagan White House gave notice of how far it was willing to go in manipulating public opinion when in 1983 it invaded Grenada in order to distract the nation from a bloody fiasco. The invasion was indisputably an act of international aggression that came just 48 hours after 240 U.S. Marines were blown up by a car bomb in Lebanon, to which they had been sent for reasons that no one could explain very well.

Representing about as much of a threat to the United States as the bad breath of a gnat, Grenada was just the thing for knocking the dead Marines off the front pages and the nightly newscasts. The tawdry incident suggests a new use for tiny countries — i.e. as media safety valves for presidents whose symbolic armor might be tarnished by a spot of adverse publicity (a theme subsequently developed in the film, "Wag the Dog").

In promoting its assault on Nicaragua, the Reagan administration has manipulated the press almost at will. It has done so primarily by staging phony events, most of them designed to portray Nicaragua as a threat to peace and democracy. When these events are subsequently found to have been contrived from questionable or non-existent evidence, the administration may be inconvenienced by a scathing editorial, a snide cartoon or the indignation of a liberal columnist. But such petty nuisances come after the initial, formative blast of "objective" reporting, and never with a banner headline on the front page or a thorough exposé on the TV news.

In hot pursuit of an invasion

It is this passive contradance of the White House/mainstream news which makes it possible for the Reaganites to get away with something like the Great MiG Hoax, so effective in obscuring the impressive results of the 1984 national election in Nicaragua (see "MiG madness", page 231). There have been many other episodes of a similar nature.

Twice on the eve of crucial votes in Congress, the White House has created a "threat of invasion" by Nicaragua into Honduras, in order to persuade wavering congressmen to fund the war. It is a threat that can be invoked at just about any time, since the CIA-*contras* are continually slinking back and forth across the border. In fact, the government of Honduras has ceded control of its border territory to the CIA, and openly tolerates "hot pursuit" by the Nicaraguan Army. The government in Tegucigalpa asks only that its counterpart in Managua give notice of all cross-border troop movements; it has done so, by telephone, on several hundred occasions in recent years.

For the administration's media manipulators, then, the problem is simply one of characterizing an instance of hot pursuit as an invasion that threatens the integrity of Honduras (the Reaganites being so terribly concerned about Honduran integrity). This was first done just before a key congressional vote on CIA-*contra* aid in March 1986. The front pages and the television were full of the grave crisis. The government said to be in peril, however, did not seem all that worried; the president of Honduras and most of his associates chose to grapple with the crisis by nipping down to the seaside for the Easter holiday. The Reaganites had to beg and bribe their imperiled allies into appealing for help. A Honduran official confirmed that the episode was all "part of the political and propaganda tactics of the Reagan administration".

The White House tried the same trick two years later, in March 1988, as the administration desperately tried to reverse a major congressional setback to its CIA-*contra* program. Secretary of State George Shultz warned: "Those who may have

believed that cutting off aid to the freedom fighters would help achieve peace and freedom have made a grave mistake. They must undo the error before it is too late." To help errant congressmen correct their mistake, another invasion was invented. Once again, the Reaganites had to beg the president of Honduras for an invitation to save his country from the Sandinista hordes. His reluctant request did not reach the White House until after plans had already been set in motion to dispatch 3200 U.S. troops to the theater of action.

The troops were sent down on the very same day that a special U.S. prosecutor issued indictments against two key participants in the Iran/Contragate scandal. So here was an invasion threat that served two media purposes and, instead of disgraced White House officials slouching across the front pages, the nation saw its modern gladiators applying their jungle make-up before flying off to stand tall for America. Was that perfect timing or what?

This time, the mainstreamers were a little quicker to get the joke. But their heightened acumen did not prevent them from consigning their front pages and newscasts to "objective" reports of the fictional invasion. As things turned out, the ersatz invasions were only partially successful in turning the congressional tide; but they probably did help to further convince the vaguely attentive U.S. public that Nicaragua posed a serious threat to the rest of Central America.

The rite of defection

Without question, the administration's most spectacular media coup was the Miranda Hoax perpetrated just before Christmas, 1987. What made it so sublimely incredible was that it was floated in the wake of the Iran/Contragate scandal, with its voluminous evidence of administration duplicity. Worse, the chief huckster was none other than the interminably mendacious Elliott Abrams. Under those circumstances, the press could hardly claim innocence on account of objectivity.

Abrams set the hoax in motion with a "special briefing" for the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time* magazine, and

the *Associated Press*. These four pillars of the journalistic community were treated to a carefully orchestrated presentation by Maj. Roger Miranda, former assistant to Nicaragua's Minister of Defense. Miranda had defected in mid-October, but Abrams kept him on ice until he could be trotted out for maximum effect which, in this case, was to help push another CIA-*contra* funding measure through Congress. Referring to "secret documents" that he was supposed to have smuggled out, Miranda made several accusations against his former colleagues, of which the most useful to Abrams were that:

- Nicaragua was planning to increase the size of its armed forces to 600,000 with the help of the Soviet Union; the two countries had already drawn up a long-term planning document to that effect.
- The list of weapons to be supplied by the Soviets included MiG aircraft.
- Nicaragua had drawn up plans to invade Honduras, bomb Costa Rica, and take U.S. hostages in the event of a U.S. invasion.
- The Sandinistas were continuing to provide military assistance to El Salvador's *guerrilla* movement
- The Arias plan was viewed merely as "a weapon" with which to defeat the CIA-*contras*.
- Virtually the entire countryside was opposed to continued Sandinista rule. "What we have really been fighting all these years," quoth Miranda, "is a peasant insurrection."

The major's performance was a media sensation. "The disclosures prompted front-page stories in newspapers across the country in an outpouring of editorial outrage that surprised even some of Miranda's handlers. They acknowledged privately that he offered little that was new. Caught up in the excitement, Congress quickly passed" the \$14.4 million in CIA-*contra* aid.⁴⁶⁵

The Kinzer report

Stephen Kinzer's objective report in the December 14 edition of the *New York Times* was typical, of him and of the mainstream press in general. Headlined "Soviet Is Aiding Nicaragua in Buildup, Defector Says", it began: "A former senior officer in the Nicaraguan Army who defected recently to the United States has told American officials that the Soviet Union is preparing to send large quantities of new weapons to Nicaragua, despite provisions of the new regional peace accord that called for limiting the size of national armies in Central America," and continued in that mode for ca. 70 column inches.

Lest *Times* readers evade the import of Kinzer's account, the editors provided subheadings such as "Soviet and Cuban Collaboration... Plan to Draw Region into War... Disillusioned Communist Finds a Peasant Revolt... Arms Laundering for Salvadoran Rebels". The alarming news was further embellished with two short stories accompanying the main event: "Ortega Warns the Opposition" and "Reagan Adviser Says Buildup Would Be 'Threat' to Region".

The *Washington Post* headlined its version, "Nicaraguan Describes Major Arms Buildup; Defense Minister Projects Force of 600,000", and pitched its story to match. As usual, the momentous news was lifted off the wire services and passed on to local readerships. The *Miami Herald*, gladdened the fiery hearts of the city's Cuban and Nicaraguan exiles by bugling, "Defector: Peace Bid Was a Sham". And so it went, all around the land.

The journalistic Big Four, whose privileged access led to the first wave of feverish excitement over Miranda's "revelations", had based their reports almost entirely on the defector's live performance at the State Department. In the days that followed, evidence emerged which contradicted nearly every one of his claims that the mainstreamers had faithfully conveyed. Of course, by then the damage had been done; it was unlikely to be rectified by anything so insignificant as the facts.

The most politically useful accusation was the one about the 600,000-man "armed forces". The Sandinistas had been

“talking peace while planning a military buildup”, as the case was often put. But the presumably incriminating documents on which the defector’s tale was supposed to have been based disclosed something very different; so did subsequent interviews with anonymous “senior government officials”.

Upon inspection, the Nicaraguan plans were found to call for a *reduction* of the standing army. As the *Wall Street Journal* noted on December 21, five days after the first blast of publicity, the “army actually would decline to between 60,000 and 70,000 from the current 80,000; the balance would be a reserve force to be mobilized during the U.S. invasion that Mr. Miranda says the Sandinistas believe is ‘inevitable’.”

As the document states, the purpose of the large militia is “to more convincingly avert the possibility of a direct invasion by U.S. troops”. (The Reaganites’ eagerness to throw troops at Nicaragua became manifest just three months later, when 3200 of them were dispatched to deal with a phony invasion threat; see above, “In hot pursuit of an invasion”.)

Civil defense

The militia was to be modeled on Switzerland’s “citizen army”, equipped only with rifles and a few bullets, and therefore not very likely to be used for invading other countries. The plan, which would have armed a large segment of the eligible adult males in the country, seemed to raise questions about Miranda’s talk of a “peasant insurrection”. The New York area daily newspaper, *Newsday*, quoted an administration official on December 17: “Ortega makes the argument that the large number of armed civilians, who don’t run off and join the *contras*, proves his government is popular. It is kind of hard to knock down that argument.”

In any event, there was no need for the United States to be alarmed at the prospect of a military buildup, because Nicaragua had been offering for years to negotiate an agreement that would give full regard to “U.S. security interests”. It had in fact signed three such agreements, complete with verification procedures, only to have them sabotaged by the

White House because none provided for the expulsion of the Sandinistas (cf. pages 380 ff.).

The Reaganites declined yet another opportunity to negotiate arms limitations during the very week that Miranda was priming the mainstream press. While in Washington for a summit meeting with Reagan, Soviet leader Mikhael Gorbachev offered to discuss a de-escalation of the arms race in Central America. But this overture was dismissed as “ludicrous”. An anonymous administration official explained, “You don’t understand. Miranda was for the press and Congress, not for Gorbachev.”⁴⁶⁶

On a related matter, Miranda reported that there were only twelve Soviet and less than 500 Cuban military advisers in Nicaragua. This placed him at odds with the administration, which had long been complaining about 100 Soviet and 2500 Cuban advisers. Miranda also testified that none of the Cubans had been flying helicopters or leading combat units, as the Reaganites had so often asserted. Asked to explain these discrepancies, the State Department stuck by its original story, raising doubts about the credibility of its own informant.

Customary credibility

The rest of the “revelations” proved to be equally credible. As the facts eventually revealed:

- The MiG aircraft that were said to threaten the military balance of the region were of a 1950s vintage, deemed even by U.S. defense experts to be of use only as defensive weapons, and certainly no match for the F5E attack fighters which the U.S. had just agreed to supply to Honduras (they were used to attack Nicaraguan territory in response to the phony invasion of March 1988). In any event, there was no indication that any additional MiGs would soon be forthcoming. Along with the armaments mentioned by Miranda — the bulk consisting of rifles and bullets for the militia — the MiGs were included only in a sort of “wish list” submitted to the Soviets for consideration.

- The Soviets had no intent or need to establish “another Cuba” in Central America. In fact, Miranda drew a picture of somewhat strained relations, with the Sandinistas concerned about the depth of the Soviet commitment. Those anxieties were underlined by the persistent lack of access to modern aircraft and other equipment. The *Wall Street Journal* noted that, “There is less here than meets the eye. Many of the weapons shipped to Nicaragua are aged, Warsaw Pact cast-offs.... The mechanized army’s mainstay continues to be the T-55 tank’, a 1950s weapon older than most of the Nicaraguan soldiers who drive it.”
- There was *no* evidence that Nicaragua planned to bomb Costa Rica, invade Honduras or take U.S. personnel hostage. The 44 pages of documentation provided by the State Department mention no goals other than defeating the CIA-*contras* and defending against a U.S. invasion. Administration officials later euphemized that Miranda’s claims in this regard were merely “speculative”.
- Equally “speculative” was the accusation of extensive support for Salvadoran revolutionaries. There was nothing to contradict all the accumulated evidence that this was just another Reaganite hoax. As a U.S. congressman observed, “We are the principal suppliers of the rebels”.
- Nicaragua has never attempted to conceal its desire to end the CIA-*contra* terror campaign by any means possible. It had been trying to negotiate an agreement with the U.S. for years before Arias slipped his proposal through, and was pleased to accept it. As Foreign Minister Miguel D’Escoto put it, “Of course we want to stop the war. The continuation of funding for the *contras* means more war, more death, more destruction. Yes, we want to stop it.”⁴⁶⁷ To critics of the Sandinistas, however, that’s all just so much “insincerity”.

So much for the evidence. There were also some questions about the reliability of the witness. In addition to directly

challenging his testimony regarding the Soviet and Cuban military advisers, administration officials let slip that Major Miranda had changed his story several times, “had difficulty” passing lie detector tests, and seemed to be lacking knowledge about Nicaragua that a casual reader could have easily gleaned from the U.S. mainstream press. Nevertheless, he was paid \$800,000 for his efforts, considerably more than the usual reward for defection.

Fruitful investment

Apparently it was worth it. The media magic that Miranda touched off was instrumental in securing congressional approval of more CIA-*contra* aid, offering the hope of recaptured momentum after the setbacks of the Iran/Contragate scandal. The deluge of free publicity also threatened the Central American peace process, and reinforced negative opinion of the Sandinistas. The media blitz was augmented by the likes of President Arias, who chimed in with statements such as, “I regret that the Sandinistas might be thinking about increasing their already-powerful army.”

Better still, the memory of Miranda’s “damaging revelations” lingered on long after they were demonstrated to be false. The *New York Times*, for instance, ran a modest retreat from its promotion of the defector’s charges at the bottom of page eight in the December 18 edition. While it was far from a comprehensive analysis, it did point out that the so-called plan to invade Honduras was “speculative” and that there was no evidence that the Soviets had agreed to supply Nicaragua with MiGs. The short article also noted that the 600,000 “armed forces” were to consist primarily of “lightly armed militia”.

That article’s relative obscurity may help to explain why it appears not to have registered on the author of the *Times*’ lead editorial in the same edition, which clucked about “Nasty Choices on Nicaragua: These are not easy times for those conscientiously seeking a responsible policy on Nicaragua.... What makes the choices harder is the confirmation... of start-

**The mainstream two-step,
as performed by the *New York Times***

Step I. December 14: 70 column inches, top of front page:
“Soviet Is Aiding Nicaragua In Buildup, Defector Says”

By STEPHEN KINZER
Special to The New York Times

Step II. December 18: 22 column inches, bottom of page 8:

“Defector’s Data on Nicaraguans
Called ‘Speculative’ by U.S. Aide”

By RICHARD HALLORAN
Special to The New York Times

-ling information from a defector. It seems that the Sandinistas are secretly planning to build a 600,000-man army.... For a near-broke regime even to propose a 600,000-strong army is at best vainglorious, at worst indicative of expansionist aims.”

There was more in the December 18 edition. A lengthy profile of House Speaker Jim Wright reported: “His high-profile foray into Central American diplomacy continues to rankle the White House and now, in light of reports about plans for a Soviet-supported Nicaraguan military buildup, leaves some of his Democratic supporters uneasy.”

In its 11 January 1988 edition, i.e. nearly a month after Miranda’s performance and its critical reviews, *Newsweek* was objectively reporting (in “Why the Arias Plan Is Failing”) that “The Sandinistas show no sign of giving up their Cuban and Soviet advisers and are planning a new military buildup. A prominent Sandinista defector... accuses his former cohorts of continuing aid to Salvadoran guerrillas.... Miranda’s revelations and the initial failures of the peace plan may bolster the case of pro-contra lobbyists....” and so on.

That Miranda hoax has legs, as they say in Hollywood, and gives every indication that it will play well for years to come. It is far from improbable that Elliott Abrams will be able to look on with pride, from the comfort of his Club Fed suite or publisher's office, as the progeny of this particular illegitimacy cavort through the pages and airwaves of mainstream media.

Come the revolution in El Salvador, for example, we may be edified by an editorial in the *New York Times* entitled, "The Neglected Lessons of Major Miranda", which might start off something like this: "As the Marxist-Leninists in El Salvador intensify their iron grip on the that country's unfortunate populace, few may recall the grave warning issued just before Christmas 1987 by Major Roger Miranda, a high-ranking defector from Nicaragua's Sandinista regime. But now that a second Central American nation has entered — for who knows how long? — the dark night of communist tyranny, the 101st Congress may be justly called to account: What have you done to prevent the wave of Sandinista subversion that now threatens to engulf the entire region, and which was so clearly predicted by Major Miranda?"

THE NEXT NICARAGUA

IT IS ENTIRELY POSSIBLE that Nicaragua could have arranged poverty and oppression for itself, without the assistance of the United States. Some other nations seem to have managed that, more or less on their own. But given the persistence and enormity of U.S. intervention throughout most of the past century, the question of Nicaragua's independent capacity for promoting the misery of its people must remain in the realm of such speculations as what might have happened if Napoleon had won at Waterloo, or the Kerensky government had withstood the Bolsheviks.

For anyone troubled by the United States' capacity for destruction, epitomized by the Reaganites' merciless assault on Nicaragua, the most urgent question is: Why do they do it? A precise answer might be of some use in halting, or at least limiting, the damage inflicted by future administrations on hapless Third World nations.

Unfortunately, there are many answers and not much precision — a quality that may be too much to ask of anything so fluid and complex as the behavior of a modern superpower. It is beyond the scope of this study to attempt an analysis of the process by which foreign policy is contrived, but it does seem appropriate to review alternative explanations for the relentless persecution of Nicaragua.

Spurious sanctimonies

One explanation that can be immediately dismissed is the "freedom fighter" rationale of the Reagan administration. As previously documented, the assault on Nicaragua has nothing to do with devotion to democracy, human rights, religious freedom or any other sanctimonious motif of U.S. politics.

On the contrary, the United States has consistently shown itself to be the enemy of democracy in Latin America, and an unflinching supporter of regimes so barbarous as "to stun the senses".

That tendency was underlined by a study, published in 1981, of the relationship between U.S. foreign aid and the human rights climates of recipient countries. "There *is* a relationship between human rights and American foreign policy: namely, the more the human rights climate deteriorates, the more American aid increases. The correlation was strong. There was no correlation between American aid and need.... Aid has tended to flow disproportionately to Latin American governments which torture their citizens, to the hemisphere's relatively egregious violators of human rights."⁴⁶⁸

Whatever the United States has been up to in Central America, it is difficult to discern in its conduct a deep respect — or the slightest consideration — for the essential humanity of the people who live there.

National security

No Latin American government, and certainly not that of Nicaragua, presumes to dispute the obvious fact of U.S. military dominance in the Western Hemisphere. Nicaragua has repeatedly acknowledged the "legitimate security interests" of the United States and has already signed three drafts of agreements that would secure those interests, only to see those efforts sabotaged by the White House (cf. pages 380 ff.). It has long been apparent that the Reaganites have no interest in negotiating anything with the Sandinistas: "The idea of negotiating a peaceful settlement with Nicaragua was rejected in early 1983, after a fierce struggle within the administration. Any agreement that would leave the leftist Sandinistas in power has not been seriously considered since."⁴⁶⁹

Clearly, if getting rid of the Sandinistas was deemed more important than bolstering national security, the latter cannot have been greatly imperiled. Nor was it; the overwhelming military threat to all of Latin America has been and continues

to be the United States: "In Central America, there has been no history of Soviet or Cuban intervention. However, on more than 30 occasions, the United States has invaded and occupied parts of Central America. If the U.S. does invade Nicaragua, there is little that Cuba or the Soviet Union can do. Neither country has made any commitment to defend Nicaragua."⁴⁷⁰ The State Department's own Jacobsen Report confirmed that, "The bottom line is that Nicaragua would have to defend itself" (cf. page 211).

The Reagan administration's oft-expressed anxieties about the establishment of a "communist beachhead" in Central America don't even get a very sympathetic hearing at the Pentagon: "In a reversal of the usual textbook version of how bureaucratic politics are supposed to work, the State Department argued for a military approach... while the military leaders in the Pentagon opposed it."⁴⁷¹

In short, the facts indicate quite clearly that worries about U.S. national security can explain the assault on Nicaragua no better than a sudden enthusiasm for democracy, freedom and human rights. These are merely the official explanations; their function is to minimize public opposition to a policy adopted for other reasons and, wherever possible, to enlist support for that policy.

The profit motive

One of the most popular explanations for the attack on Nicaragua is that it represents an attempt to maintain control of its wealth, so that it can be poured back into the United States. In the immortal words of the Watergate scandal's anonymous Deep Throat: "Follow the money." The trouble is, following the money doesn't seem to get you very far in this case, and the trail branches off in several divergent directions.

To be sure, in the good old days of naked Dollar Diplomacy, rich Yankees seeking to get richer had everything to do with the U.S. Marines' occupation of Nicaragua and the establishment of the Somoza surrogacy. Since then, however, the

“Only days before Senator [and Republican presidential candidate] Robert Dole was in Nicaragua, reiterating the oft-repeated U.S. attack on Nicaragua’s relations with the Soviet Union, Honduras signed its first trade agreement with that country.... The Honduran Minister of Business and Commerce said the agreement provides for most favored nation status between the two countries.”

— Envio, *Central American Historical Institute; October 1987*

rules of the game have changed considerably, and it is not at all clear that military intervention is necessary or even helpful in the pursuit of corporate profits.

The most striking example, of course, is provided by the recent history of Japan. Having failed drastically to bring Eastern Asia under its control by force, it has proceeded to dominate the entire world’s economy without brandishing so much as a samurai sword in anger. While it is true that the circumstances of that remarkable transformation are quite special — the protection and support of the United States were crucial — it demonstrates that there is no simple causal relationship between the application of military power and the accumulation of wealth. If anything, Japan’s experience suggests the opposite.

Another instructive example is provided by Canada, the United States’ largest trading partner. Its economy is owned and controlled by U.S. interests to such an extent as to arouse grave concern among Canadian nationalists. Again, not a single shot has been fired and, again, the circumstances are very different from those confronting Central American nations. But the principle is once more confirmed: The road to international riches is not necessarily paved with military casualties.

One final point in this regard: Since Nicaragua is accused of the sin of communism, it is especially ironic that so many U.S. corporations should be scrambling to drum up business in “Red” China and the Soviet Union. When they are eating McDonald’s hamburgers in Peking and drinking Pepsi Cola in Moscow, it is time to ask if it is really necessary to throw the “Marxist-Leninists” out of Managua in order to make a buck.

Apparently some of the largest corporations based in the United States do not think so (cf. page 233). The Reaganite trade embargo has not exactly helped the U.S. computer and tractor salesmen whose incomes have been diminished by its effects. The same goes for General Motors, which has seen its Nicaraguan dealers convert painlessly to Toyotas; if recent U.S. automotive history is any indication, those dealers are unlikely to switch back to Chevrolets once the embargo is lifted.

Finally, it should be noted that the economic ties between Nicaragua and the U.S. were never terribly extensive. "The source of no important raw materials, Central America represents only one percent of all U.S. trade and investment."⁴⁷² Nicaragua's share of that commerce was among the smallest in the region.

Export vs. extraction

So much for the arguments militating against the role of purely economic motives in the Reagan assault on Nicaragua. But as one learns in Economics 101, it is never that simple.

The complications can be made plain by shifting the focus from U.S. enterprises that sell manufactured goods in other countries — e.g., the aforementioned computers, tractors and automobiles — to those which make it their business to extract the natural wealth of countries like Nicaragua and sell it to the rest of the world.

In the same general category as the traditional extractive industries, such as mining and agribusiness, must be included several types of enterprise of fairly recent origin. One involves a growing trend toward employing the Third World as a cheap and pliant garbage dump for the industrialized nations. Honduras, for example, is just now wrestling with an offer to accept two million tons of U.S. toxic wastes annually for incineration in the region of the Miskito Indians, on whom the Reaganites have lavished so much tender concern. Another resource of interest to multinational corporations is the large pool of impoverished workers, who can be hired at minuscule

wage rates to assemble the television sets, clothing and golf carts of America in "runaway sweat shops" that are of growing concern to U.S. labor unions.

If a corporation were running the United States, one could expect to extrapolate its foreign policy on the basis of its niche in the world economy. Those which depend on selling consumer items abroad have an evident interest in free trade and in the broadest possible distribution of health, wealth and education. Those which seek to extract natural resources at the lowest possible cost have a presumptive interest in corruptible politicians, societies dominated by collaborating elites, and a consequently large pool of ignorant and impoverished workers. The United States is endowed with both types of enterprise. To further complicate matters, the trend to willy-nilly "mergers and acquisitions" has resulted in corporate conglomerates that conduct both types of business.

Thus, in the matter of foreign policy, there would seem to be the potential for conflicts of interest between exporting and extractive industries. However, any review of Latin American history will disclose that it has been the extractive industries which have dominated the economies and politics of the U.S. backyard, in a pattern stretching from as long ago as 1829, when Simon Bolivar lamented, "It seems that Providence has ordained the United States to plague Latin America with misery in the name of freedom."

Among the more devastating outbreaks of that plague in recent years have been the CIA operations which overthrew the elected governments of Guatemala and Chile. The former was accomplished almost entirely at the behest of the United Fruit Company⁴⁷³, and the latter with the very active involvement of such corporate giants as ITT, Anaconda and Kennecott (cf. pages 95 ff.).

Those little "covert operations" were the logical outgrowth of what has been described as a system of dependency. "This dependence, the theory runs, has stunted the Latins' economic growth by forcing their economies to rely on one or two main export crops, or on minerals that are shipped off to the industrial nations. These few export crops, such as

bananas or coffee, make a healthy domestic economy impossible... because their price depends on an international marketplace which the industrial powers, not Central America, can control. Such export crops also blot up land that should be used to grow foodstuffs for local diets. Thus malnutrition, even starvation, grows with the profits of the relatively few producers of the export crops.... Latin American development, in other words, has not been compatible with United States economic and strategic interests.⁴⁷⁴ There is certainly much in Nicaragua's experience to lend credence to such a theory. Central elements of the Sandinista economic program — such as land reform and basic food subsidies — have been designed to correct precisely the inequities that dependency theory describes.

Still, the fact remains that U.S. business interests in Nicaragua are not nearly large enough to justify the enormous investment of military resources and political capital which the Reagan administration has invested in its policy of aggression. Figures from the Department of Commerce for 1977, two years before the fall of Somoza, indicate that direct investment



Jaime Perozo

Multi-national corporations have found that it is quite possible to conduct business in a Nicaragua governed by the Sandinistas.

by U.S. companies in Nicaragua was the second lowest in the region. It amounted to some \$108 million, compared with \$178 million in Costa Rica and \$155 million in Guatemala. The \$2.442 billion invested in nearby Panama was almost four times as much as in all five Central American countries.⁴⁷⁵

Regional hegemony

If the comparatively modest value of Nicaragua to the U.S. economy cannot in itself explain the brutal attentions of the Reaganites, quite possibly its location in a larger system can: "The United States sees Central America as part of Latin America — an area which provides the second largest market for U.S. products after Western Europe, and accounts for nearly 80 percent of U.S. direct and financial investment in the third world. Any threat to U.S. interests in one country — be it Nicaragua, Chile or El Salvador — is viewed as a threat to the totality of U.S. economic control. Washington fears that a rash of imitative nationalist or revolutionary governments could threaten its considerable economic interests in Latin America."⁴⁷⁶

Within this perspective, Nicaragua's significance is that of a crucial link in a chain which, according to some critics of U.S. superpower, is clenched around the entire globe. One of the most persuasive exponents of that view is Noam Chomsky, who explains that a foreign policy elite, convened during 1939-1945 by the State Department and the ostensibly private Council on Foreign Relations, developed a comprehensive plan for U.S. postwar domination of the world economy.

"The conception that they developed," writes Chomsky, "is what they called 'Grand Area' planning. The Grand Area was to be a region that was subordinated to the needs of the American economy... the region that is 'strategically necessary for world control'. [It] had to include at least the Western Hemisphere, the Far East, and the former British Empire.... Detailed plans were laid for particular regions of the Grand Area, and also for the international institutions that were to organize and police it."⁴⁷⁷

The U.S. did of course emerge as the colossus of the post-war period, and Latin America's primary role in the resulting international political-economic system was as a provider of raw materials, preferably at low cost: "After World War II, Washington officials had concluded that access to Latin American food and raw materials, at the lowest possible prices, was essential for the West's security."⁴⁷⁸

It was also considered desirable that the region not require too much looking after from a military standpoint so that, in the great game of the Cold War just getting under way, the U.S. could concentrate its resources in such hot spots as Korea and the Middle East. In the reasonable tones of the Secretary of War (the "Defense" euphemism had not yet been adopted in 1945), "I think that it's not asking too much to have our little region over here which has never bothered anybody."⁴⁷⁹

"Our" raw materials

The enviable predicament of the United States was illuminated on several occasions by George Kennan, whom Chomsky describes as "one of the most thoughtful, humane and liberal of the [Grand Area] planners". In 1948, Kennan wrote: "We have about 50 percent of the world's wealth, but only 6.3 percent of its population. In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity."

Two years later, Kennan explained the situation at a meeting of U.S. ambassadors to Latin America. Their duty, he said, was to oversee:

- "1. The protection of our [sic] raw materials;
2. The prevention of military exploitation of Latin America by the enemy; and,
3. The prevention of the psychological mobilization of Latin America against us."

If Europe were to turn against the United States, warned Kennan, "Latin America would be all we would have to fall back on."⁴⁸⁰

That was in 1950, and the world has changed a great deal since. But it is difficult not to discern the outline of that general strategy in the history of U.S.-Latin America relations since World War II, and even before. In 1927 the Undersecretary of State for Latin America explained why the Marines were chasing Sandino and his peasant army around the Nicaraguan countryside: "The Central American area constitutes a legitimate sphere of influence for the United States.... Our ministers accredited to the five little republics have been advisers whose advice has been accepted virtually as law.... We do control the destinies of Central America, and we do so for the simple reason that the national interest dictates such a course.... There is no room for any outside influence other than ours in this region.... Until now, Central America has always understood that governments which we recognize and support stay in power, while those which we do not recognize and support fall. Nicaragua has become a test case. It is difficult to see how we can afford to be defeated."⁴⁸¹

That's plain enough. Of course, in the modern fog of public relations and *pro forma* respect for national integrity, one does not hear such blunt talk from U.S. leaders in public. The closest thing to it was the admission by Ronald Reagan in a 1986 press conference that he was going to continue beating up on Nicaragua until the Sandinistas "cry uncle" and do as they're told.

In this context, the current assault on Nicaragua makes perfect sense. The great sin of the Sandinistas is that they propose to liberate Nicaragua from the system of political, military and economic dependency which the U.S. has maintained in Latin America since the start of the 20th century. If they succeed, it could inspire other components of the system to attempt something similar. In the expressive phrase of Dianna Melrose, the Sandinista revolution poses "the threat of a good example".⁴⁸²

Threatening example

"You know, we do represent a threat," acknowledged one citizen of the new Nicaragua. "It is the sort of threat a worker represents to an enterprise which is breaching the labor laws. If all of a sudden one worker speaks up, the owner begins to worry. Nicaragua is not only challenging the U.S. It challenges the belief that there could not be another revolution [than Cuba's] in Latin America for the rest of this century. If people believe something cannot be achieved, they will not attempt it. We are becoming a stimulus to other Latin American countries, just by being. Therefore, I believe that the U.S. has concluded we must be stopped."⁴⁸³

If that is the case, it would explain a lot of Reaganite behavior. It certainly suggests an explanation for the monstrous gap between the reality of the Sandinista revolution and the Reaganites' distorted vision of it. If Nicaragua does pose the threat of a good example, it is vital that the rest of the world remain ignorant or at least confused about it. (The actual threat may be of another sort; see below, "Circumstantial evidence").

An insistence on Latin American dependency might also account for the United States' enthusiasm for dictatorships, with or without the adornment of civilian government. For the maintenance of such a system, "stability" is to be desired above all other virtues, the better to protect The American Way of Life. Of course, there are those who argue that the kind of stability imposed by a Somoza or a Pinochet with U.S. military assistance creates social pressures that are bound to erupt into revolution, sooner or later.

This debate has been sharpened by the policies of the Reagan administration. "Washington and its allies contend that priority for Central America should be political and economic stabilization. The key elements of their view are short-term stability, an export-oriented economy, private sector dominance, and reliance on the United States.

"On the other side are the advocates of structural change, who propose new economic priorities that stress production

for the internal market, widespread participation in the political process, and the satisfaction of the basic needs of all classes in society. The proponents of reform opt for national self-determination and reduced U.S. control."⁴⁸⁴

If the foregoing description of reform seems familiar, that is perhaps because it constitutes the basic program of the Sandinista revolution. Just as clearly, the Reaganites have been pursuing the policy of "stabilization" with which the U.S. has typically responded to Latin American conflicts. But many U.S. businessmen and military leaders feel that it is likely to guarantee the very outcome it is supposed to prevent.

A businessman and engineer with over 20 years of experience in the region has outlined the standard sequence of events as follows:

- "1. The elite maintains economic, political and military control over the people.
2. Protests rise from the poor about social injustice.
3. The elite rejects protests, standing firm on its privileges.
4. Frustrated protesters rebel.
5. The elite suppresses rebellion.
6. Rebellion escalates to revolution
7. The U.S. gives military assistance to the elite for the suppression of the poor.
8. The U.S.S.R. gives military assistance to the poor.

"The concept which should be clear is that the U.S. is allied with the wealthy elite in their effort to maintain their privileges. The U.S.S.R. identifies with the common people.

"Economic assistance provided by the U.S. is funneled down from the top, and it tends to dry up before it reaches the poor. The U.S.S.R., on the other hand, works from the bottom, and its influence tends to grow with the escalation. The difference is not missed by the miserable majority."⁴⁸⁵

The uses of communism

That doesn't sound very much like the story told by the U.S. government, which has characterized the "communist threat" as an effort at global tyranny, fatal to the happiness of rich and poor alike. But that kind of talk strikes critics of U.S. hegemony as a smokescreen deployed to obscure the imperial purpose of the United States, and engineer the consent of the voters at home.

The real threat of communism, argues Chomsky, is its potential for interfering with U.S. dominion over the world economy. "Communism," he writes, is "the belief that 'the government has direct responsibility for the welfare of the people'. I'm quoting the words of a 1949 State Department intelligence report which warned about the spread of this grim doctrine, which does, of course, threaten 'our raw materials'.... [A later study] concluded accurately that the primary threat of Communism is the economic transformation of the Communist powers 'in ways which reduce their willingness and ability to complement the industrial economies of the West'." ⁴⁸⁶

From that perspective, "communism" is only incidentally concerned with the writings of Marx and Lenin, or the socio-economic order of the Soviet Union. More to the point in this context, it is anything that threatens control of Latin American economies by the United States and its surrogate elites. That is why the label of "communist" is applied so freely — to priests, teachers, doctors, and anyone else who dares to tinker with the established order. By this commodious definition, the Sandinistas are communists, after all, because they clearly believe that "the government has direct responsibility for the welfare of the people", and have flaunted their determination to reduce Nicaragua's dependence on the United States.

But such a delineation of the communist threat would never do at home. The majority of U.S. citizens might become uneasy were their government to justify the struggle against the Red Menace by citing the necessity of maintaining their "position of disparity" with respect to the world's wealth. In the Home of the Brave and the Land of the Free, the fight

against communism must be nothing less than a “selfless enterprise” (as noble Nixon glorified the rape of Vietnam). A basic tenet of U.S. political culture is that the country is populated preponderantly by decent folks who mean well. That is possibly true; hence the anti-communist crusade.

To engineer the consent of decent folks to evil policies, there is nothing so efficacious as scaring them half to death. The ongoing crusade against communism has been so successful that the very word has acquired the power to instill dread. Few citizens of the United States have a clear idea what it means, or the slightest inclination to find out (to do so is fraught with risk).

The notion that the U.S. is in imminent peril from communism — a proposition for which there has never been any convincing evidence — is the theme of perhaps the most effective campaign in the history of advertising. It has resulted in a relatively well-educated population with a trained incapacity to comprehend some of the most fundamental aspects of world affairs — e.g. that the United States looms in the same sort of relationship to Central America as does the Soviet Union to Central Europe.

One result is a climate of public opinion which makes it relatively easy for a demagogue like Ronald Reagan to justify aggressive warfare by invoking the Red Menace. The voters may not share the president’s declared sense of urgency; but they are usually prepared to concede the basic legitimacy of his concern. Polling data on the Nicaragua issue confirm this fact of U.S. political life.

The crusade against communism must, accordingly, be included on any list of explanations for the Reaganite assault on Nicaragua. There appear to be millions of U.S. citizens who sincerely believe that the Sandinista revolution poses a “clear and present danger” to the security of the United States, to the cause of Freedom everywhere, to the preservation of religious liberty, etc., etc. These people may have been herded to their beliefs by the most cynical propaganda imaginable, but it works — so well, that it can recoil on the

propagandists (see below, “Raw meat, mad dogs”). These fearful souls constitute a political pressure group of desperate intensity, and their zeal is clearly a significant factor in the formation and conduct of U.S. foreign policy.

One final point in this connection: Anti-communism is such a powerful sentiment that it may be useful from time-to-time to create a “communist threat” where none exists. If an uppity nation like Nicaragua refuses to resume its position in the established order of U.S. things, there is something to be gained by forcing it to become dependent on the Soviet Union. The more often Daniel Ortega visits Moscow, the easier it is for the Reaganites to sound the alarm.

Who is “Washington”?

On the face of it, the suspicion that Nicaragua is being persecuted because of its determination to secede from the U.S. system of dependency seems to explain a great deal. There is little doubt that the United States seeks to control certain events in Latin America. But which events, for what purpose and on whose behalf? Some of the difficulties in answering those questions may be illustrated with a statement quoted earlier: “Washington fears that a rash of imitative nationalist or revolutionary governments could threaten its considerable economic interests in Latin America.”

That has a plausible ring to it, but just who is “Washington”? There are a lot of people in that city. They come and go, and they say and do all sorts of things.

“Naturally, the common people don’t want war.... But, after all, it is the leaders of a country who determine policy, and it is always a simple matter to drag people along, whether it is a democracy, fascist dictatorship, a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in every country.”

— Herman Goering, head of Nazi Germany’s air force⁴⁸⁷

The U.S. ambassador to El Salvador under the Carter administration is now one of the fiercest opponents of the Reaganites' Central American policy. Their own man in Tegucigalpa has turned against them (cf. reference to John Ferch, page 384). In early 1988 one official of the Reagan administration confided his belief that, "Different administration officials had different perspectives about the role of the *contras* that were never resolved, and now that the whole thing is coming to an end, it's hard to say whether we ever really had a clear policy goal in Nicaragua."⁴⁸⁸

If there really is foreign policy establishment intent on keeping Nicaragua and the rest of Latin America firmly within the confines of the Grand Area, as Noam Chomsky contends, who are these people, exactly what are their motives, and how do they make their influence felt?

There have been times and situations for which it has been a lot easier to answer that question. The CIA's 1954 coup against the Arbenz government of Guatemala is a case in point. Key participants in the operation later gave detailed accounts of the complicity between the Eisenhower administration and United Fruit Co., which wanted to retain Guatemala as its corporate preserve. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had been a senior partner in the law firm serving United Fruit, and its principal adviser on foreign operations. His brother, CIA Director Allen Dulles, belonged to the same law firm. Assistant Secretary of State on Inter-American Affairs John Moors Cabot was the brother of Thomas Dudley Cabot, a former president of United Fruit. The overthrow of the Arbenz administration was supervised by General Walter Bedell Smith, a close adviser to Eisenhower and a former CIA director; he was subsequently appointed to United Fruit's Board of Directors.

These facts suggest that the fate of Arbenz could have been foretold merely by superimposing the corporate roster of United Fruit on the personnel chart of the Eisenhower administration. In a somewhat more complex fashion, the same sort of tale is told by the tragic fate of the Allende government in Chile (cf. pages 95 ff.).

Circumstantial evidence

But, so far, there is nothing to indicate a similar conspiracy between identifiable business interests and the Reagan administration behind the assault on Nicaragua. There is, of course, a great deal of circumstantial evidence. One could point to the close ties between the corporate world and the administration, generally; and there is the fact that Reagan is very definitely a product of Big Business (see "The Ronald Reagan Trust Fund", page 457).

Furthermore, the incestuous relationship between the CIA and the corporate world is hardly a secret, and the same can be said of the State Department. Both agencies have lengthy histories of interference in Latin American affairs, and both maintain large staffs for that purpose.

During the Reagan administration, major U.S. corporations have formed something called Caribbean Central American Action (CCAA), which also includes representatives from the National Security Council, Congress, and the U.S. Information Agency. It describes its task as the promotion of trade and development in the region, but that seems to require a certain amount of political action. Its members have been active supporters of the CIA-*contras* and other expressions of the administration's "stabilization" policy. There is obviously a close working relationship between the Reagan administration and businessmen with various kinds of interest in Latin America, and it is entirely likely that they see eye-to-eye on many issues, but it is not something that they are inclined to discuss in public.

As noted previously, however, there are powerful business interests that do not appear to be served at all well by the Reaganites' Central America policy — IBM and EXXON, for example. An extensive 1981 survey of transnational corporations (TNCs) doing business in Central America found that, "In contrast to Reagan, virtually all TNC managers who responded to the survey placed the origins of the political and economic crisis in the region's internal problems, rather than in Cuban or Soviet influence. They also agreed that the Central

American nations face a choice between major reforms and revolutionary change that would be far more sweeping than that in Nicaragua.... Concerning Nicaragua, the survey revealed that most of them objected to the U.S. cutoff of aid to the country.... The experience of the TNCs in Nicaragua was... that they could profitably conduct business there."⁴⁸⁹

The overall picture, then, is rather cloudy. On the one hand, Reagan and his administration have intimate relations with some corporations which may approve of the assault on Nicaragua. On the other hand, many corporate leaders have expressed opposition to that policy. It also appears that similar disagreements have informed deliberations within the administration.

This is not to suggest that there is no "global strategic planning" by the U.S. government. Of course there is, but it has been justified in terms of a struggle for survival against the Evil Empire. To judge from their consistent public utterances, there is every reason to believe that most of those doing the struggling — military planners, State Department officials, CIA agents, etc. — understand their project in those terms.

At the same time, there is obviously an economic dimension to the struggle. It could hardly be otherwise, given that the conflict has been defined as a contest between competing socio-economic systems — communism vs. capitalism (or "freedom", as the latter is sometimes called). It appears that the military and economic aspects have now become so intertwined that it is impossible to separate them. It may very well be that, as Chomsky argues, a lust for the world's wealth is behind it all. But there is often a distinction between the origins of a human phenomenon and its perpetuation; that is especially true of conflicts.

It is not inconceivable that, like some hillbilly feud escalating stupidly across the generations, the hostile engagements and propaganda of the Cold War have transmuted into a self-sustaining holy war. Who needs history, when it is constantly being repeated in places like Hungary and Nicaragua?

The “threat of a good example” posed by Nicaragua, therefore, may simply be the ancient one of heresy. Having been defined (erroneously) as a communist project, it must be prevented from succeeding today so that it may not inspire or proselytize tomorrow. Perceived in that unholy light, Nicaragua’s potential threat to the military or economic security of the United States would be entirely irrelevant as, indeed, seems to be the case with the Reaganites.

In any event, there are as yet no taped conferences, bugged telephone conversations or smoking memoranda to confirm or deny that global economic scheming is the primary driving force behind the current assault on Nicaragua. Until such evidence is uncovered, there are one or two other explanations of the Reaganites’ destructive tendencies to consider.

Raw meat, mad dogs

It is a truism of U.S. politics that success depends on building coalitions of disparate groups and individuals. Furthermore, the wider the scope of the office, the more diversity it must embrace. As the president is the only official chosen by the entire electorate, anyone who aspires to that position must attempt to be “all things to all people”, or at least more things to more people than his opponent is.

The presidential candidate of the Republican Party faces the special problem of dealing with its right wing, the support of which is presumed essential to nomination. The Republican right is the main suppository of fear and hate in national politics, but those very complaints energize it with fervor unequalled by any other major segment of the electorate. Right-wingers vote in disproportionate numbers, are willing to lick envelopes until their tongues turn glue, and understand that “support” is spelled m-o-n-e-y. But if their devotion is fierce, so is their vengeance; these disciples are jealous disciples.

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Financing Ronald Reagan

By 1951, Reagan was playing opposite a chimpanzee in *Bedtime for Bonzo*.... Turning fifty, Reagan was rescued from obscurity by Ralph J. Cordiner, president of General Electric....

Reagan began making public appearances and pro-business speeches across the country on behalf of G.E. Hollywood receded into the background as Reagan collected a vast array of index cards filled with examples of federal bureaucracy run amok, social welfare programs wasting money and ruining lives, and the ever-increasing threat of socialism to America's free-enterprise system....

Several new-money millionaires decided that Reagan had a more promising future than merely speaking at Chamber of Commerce meetings.... [A group of wealthy businessmen] formed the Ronald Reagan Trust Fund to take over his personal finances and free him to concentrate on a political career....

— *Thomas R. Dye*⁴⁹⁰

The tale [of how Ronald Reagan became a millionaire] involves the sale of land so barren and craggy that it seems more suited for mountain goats than for commercial development. Yet it yielded Mr. Reagan an apparent 3000% profit. Still unexplained is why Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp., the land purchaser, ever thought it was such a good deal in the first place.

The president of Fox's real estate unit says that she doesn't know where the records of the sale are, and that she wouldn't discuss it in any event. "Why should we want to air those dirty linens? It would just dirty Fox's name. Maybe the management decided they owed Reagan a favor. Who knows? Who cares?"

— *Wall Street Journal*⁴⁹¹

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The problem for the Republican candidate is that the right wing is usually far out of touch with the rest of the country. To attract the necessary votes of independents and wayward Democrats, it is necessary to perform a “shift to the center”, which is now one of the most firmly entrenched rituals of presidential politics. Having nailed down the Republican nomination, George Bush (Reagan’s vice president) was already segueing into his centrist modality by the spring of 1988.

If Bush should find himself in the White House next year, he and his associates will have to decide on what to do with the right wing. In all likelihood, it will have worked hard for his victory, and will be ready to reap its reward in the form of political appointments and policy initiatives. If there is one policy it can be certain to insist on, it is ferocious anti-communism.

So it was when Ronald Reagan became president in 1980 — a particularly joyous occasion for anti-communist crusaders, since Reagan had for decades cast his image as one of them. As a leading analyst of Republican politics pointed out in 1986, “Ronald Reagan has three or four core beliefs and he just keeps acting on them. One is small government. The other is low tax rates. The third is strong defense. And the fourth is this one — standing up to the Communists.”⁴⁹²

Whether from the sincerity of his beliefs or other motives, Reagan has presided over an administration which has pursued those core policies with such zeal and, until recently, with such success as to inspire talk of a fundamental rightward shift in U.S. politics.

The assault on Nicaragua has been the central prong of the Reaganites deadly thrust against the Red Menace. Indeed, it was a happy accident for the crusade that the Sandinista revolution came along when it did. Not only did it provide a terrific campaign issue; but, once defined as a manifestation of the Red Menace, it offered a handy target — like shooting ducks in a barrel. As it turned out, the barrel-shooters hired for the occasion, the CIA-*contras*, were pretty lousy shots. But they

have at least managed to keep the target off balance: "Few U.S. officials now believe the *contras* can drive out the Sandinistas soon. Administration officials said they are content to see the *contras* debilitate the Sandinistas by forcing them to divert scarce resources toward the war and away from social programs."⁴⁹³

It has also been suggested that, by satisfying right-wingers' blood lust, the assault on Nicaragua has served the useful purpose of keeping them out of White House moderates' hair. "One of the things the Reagan Administration did early on," says former Rep. Michael Barnes of Maryland, "was to turn Latin American policy over to the right-wing loonies. They didn't want the right-wingers meddling in our relations with the Soviets or the Chinese. Their basic attitude was, 'Let's throw some red meat to the hard-core, mad-dog right-wingers.' The meat was Latin America, and the mess we're in today results from it."⁴⁹⁴

Barnes is a liberal Democrat, for which he has been duly punished (cf. page 297). But his conclusion is seconded by a senior vice president of the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing organization with close ties to the Reagan White House: "Conservatives do have control of Central American policy.... No other issue stirs up conservatives so much as Central America. In no other area do conservatives have as much clout. I can see a secretary of state saying, 'Why fight that? Let them have it. It's not worth the aggravation.'"⁴⁹⁵

"Nicaragua is in no way a threat to the United States. It has held elections which were freer of violence and less spoiled by intimidation, and which offered a wider range of ideological choices than most elections in the region. It has pledged not to accept foreign bases, either for nuclear or conventional weapons, on its territory and has offered to sign a treaty with the United States to that effect. Its only danger to Washington is that it sets an example of independence which has been lacking for decades in the Central American isthmus."

— Manchester Guardian editorial, 6 July 1986

The secretary is all the more likely to cave in, of course, if his president shares the right-wing view of the world, and that certainly describes Ronald Reagan.

The same theory has been adduced to explain the ugly phenomenon of Elliott Abrams: "Secretary Shultz has delegated broad powers to Abrams to conduct a policy that greatly pleases the ultra-conservatives and the president, but that perplexes many professionals in the State Department. In what State Department officials describe as an arrangement that evolved over time without any formal agreement, Shultz has, in effect, conceded Central America to the hard-line conservatives, through Abrams. In the meantime, Shultz has been able to exercise a relatively free hand in dealing with the Soviet Union."

In other words, the people of Nicaragua have been used as pawns in a deadly game of political and bureaucratic chess, deriving from the powerful influence of the Republican right wing in the administration of Ronald Reagan.

This does not necessarily mean that the Sandinistas would have been left alone had a Democrat been elected president in 1980. It was Franklin D. Roosevelt, the biggest Democrat of them all, who is alleged to have anointed Somoza as "our son of a bitch". Many of the civilians now fronting for the CIA-*contras*, in Miami with the "Nicaraguan Resistance" or in Managua with COSEP and the *Democratica Coordinadora*, are the self-same creatures of American democracy in whose clutches the administration of Democrat Jimmy Carter had once attempted to place the institutional levers of "Somocismo without Somoza"; to judge from his public pronouncements, Carter has learned very little from subsequent events.

Still, it is unlikely that a Democrat would have felt the same pressure or inclination as Ronald Reagan to pander to the most hateful element of the U.S. electorate. Almost certainly, there would have been an effort at negotiations with the Sandinistas, and Elliott Abrams would have had to find some other outlet for his queer talents.

Finally, it should be noted that much of the Democrats' acquiescence in destructive policies results, at least in part,

from the need to cover their political backsides against red-baiting attacks from the right wing. This is not to excuse such “expedient” behavior, but merely to acknowledge it as yet another dubious achievement of the right wing.

Scarcity of wisdom

Notwithstanding any plausibility that may attach to theories of economic conspiracy, political power brokering, etc., it is always advisable to recall the vital role of ignorance and stupidity in the affairs of humankind. The Reaganites’ assault on Nicaragua provides an especially appropriate occasion for such reflection, since it appears to be based so completely on false premises, tortured or non-existent evidence and faulty logic.

It should also be remembered that the consequences which flow from a pattern of behavior do not always account for the motivation behind it. There are many examples, including that provided by the missionaries who set out from Europe in the 19th century to Christianize the benighted tribes of Africa and other outposts of empire. It was presumably not their intent to weaken the bonds of clan and family relationships, or to promote the disintegration of tribal authority so that the natural resources of Africa might be transferred to Europe with minimal interference from the natives. Heaven forbid: All they wanted to do was bring the unspeakable joy of the Christian god’s love to souls in need of redemption.

It is not impossible that Nicaragua’s destruction has been motivated, at least in part, by analogous impulses of an allegedly noble and uplifting nature. For compelling evidence, it is necessary to look no further than to the mind of Ronald Reagan. That amiable presidential icon, representing most that is intellectually lazy and dishonest in the United States, appears at times to have stepped out from the pages of a Sinclair Lewis novel — part George Babbitt, part Elmer Gantry. His anti-communist zeal certainly has a missionary ring to it.

Concerning Reagan’s ignorance there is little doubt. This is the custodian of nuclear might: whose own daughter has,

with indifferent success, struggled to convince him that it is not possible to call back intercontinental missiles once they have been launched; who has stated that vegetation is the major cause of air pollution and has acted accordingly; who must be prepared for days in advance of his rare encounters with the press and often must be “clarified” afterwards by “aides”; etc., etc....

Careful handling, united with deferential treatment by the mainstream press, enabled Reagan to pull off the presidential act to widespread applause for six years. Then came the Iran/Contragate scandal, and all of a sudden neither the press nor its public was willing to suspend disbelief any longer. It did not help that the only defense Reagan’s handlers were able to devise was a confession of presidential ignorance and incompetence. “A joke making the rounds in Washington had Reagan defecting to the Soviets, only to be sent home because the Kremlin discovered that ‘he didn’t know anything’. *The Economist’s* verdict on Irangate was ‘Guilty, but asleep.’”⁴⁹⁶

It was a measure of Reagan’s well-earned reputation as a doofus that, when he claimed that he didn’t know anything about one of the most important foreign policy initiatives of his administration and that it had been pursued for years without his knowledge by a “cabal” of White House subordinates, many believed him.

Commies in Hollywood

Reagan’s belligerence toward communism, and those accused of it has been traced back to his days as president of the Screen Actors Guild following World War II. In the frenzied Cold War spirit of that time, the future president was led to a conclusion touted by the House Un-American Activities Committee. i.e. that the Reds were plotting to take over the dream factory and weaken the Land of the Free from within by means of celluloid thought control.

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“You’d Be Surprised” by Ronald Reagan

“Well, I learned a lot.... I went down [to Latin America] to find out from them and learn their views. You’d be surprised. They’re all individual countries.”

— *Ronald Reagan, 1982*

“Approximately 80% of our air pollution stems from hydrocarbons released by vegetation, so let’s not go overboard in setting and enforcing tough emission standards from man-made sources.”

— *Ronald Reagan, 1980*

“Following a half-hour lecture by the Lebanese Foreign Minister on the intricate realities of his country’s many political factions, [Reagan’s reaction was]: ‘You know, your nose looks just like Danny Thomas’s.’”

“When asked how a Nicaraguan official can be removed from office without violence, Reagan answered, ‘You just say to the fellow that’s sitting there in the office: You’re not in the office anymore.’”

“What do you do when your president ignores all the palpable, relevant facts and wanders in circles? I could not bear to watch this good and decent man go on in this embarrassing way. I buried my head in my plate.”

— *Former Budget Director David Stockman*

“He was used to making movies, an activity in which every word and gesture were scripted. He regarded his daily schedule as something like a shooting script in which characters came and went, scenes were rehearsed and acted out, and the plot was advanced one day at a time, and not always in sequence.”

— *Former White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan*⁴⁹⁷

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“The Communist plan for Hollywood was remarkably simple,” he later wrote. “It was merely to take over the motion picture business for a grand worldwide propaganda base.... From being an active (though unconscious) partisan in what now and then turned out to be Communist causes, I little by little became disillusioned or, perhaps in my case, I should say reawakened.”⁴⁹⁸

Having thus freed himself from the ideological shackles of the New Deal, the “one-worldism” of the United Nations, and other baneful delusions of the liberal Democrats, Reagan was soon riding the Rotary Club and Chamber of Commerce circuit to sound the alarm (at the tax-free expense of General Electric and other benefactors of the American Way of Life).

The more Reagan railed against the horrors of creeping socialism within and totalitarian dungeons without, the more wealthy supporters and wealth he attracted. It wasn’t long before his new friends were urging him to run for political office.

“He once described to me how he got into politics,” recalls a former White House official. He told someone, ‘By God, what am I doing in politics? The kinds of things I’ve done so far are far away from this. But then I thought that a substantial part of the political thing is acting and role-playing, and I know how to do that. So I used to worry, but I don’t anymore’.”⁴⁹⁹

The man and the occasion were well met, therefore, when Ronald Reagan replaced Jimmy Carter in the White House just 18 months after the fall of Somoza. Urged on by kindred ideologues like CIA Director William Casey and Marine Col. Oliver North, Reagan was effortlessly persuaded to play the role of Defender of the Free World at the expense of the Nicaraguan people. It was like giving candy to a baby.

“The president and his closest White House advisers were inexperienced and ignorant of foreign policy,” concludes one historian. “Their background and ideology led them to believe sincerely that the Soviets caused most of the world’s problems, even in Central America. Their approach, moreover,



Tony Auth, Washington Post Writers Group

promised sweet political rewards. By fixing on the area as a first arena for confrontation with the Soviets, the administration could win in its own 'backyard'. The world could then see that Carterism had given way to tough Republicanism. Reagan thus escalated a regional conflict into a global confrontation between the superpowers."⁵⁰⁰

Other observers feel that the president's simple-minded crusade against the Red Menace was fortified by less ideological subordinates who nevertheless recognized the political and career advantages to be gained from it. "Of course, there are a few true believers in the government," concedes David MacMichael, the former CIA agent who testified on behalf of Nicaragua at the World Court, "but for the most part they're a pretty cynical bunch who thought they could win easily in Nicaragua and publicize this as a defeat of the evil empire" (cf. page 235).

The elevation of someone like Ronald Reagan to the U.S. presidency tends to validate theories of conspiratorial elites manipulating U.S. politics. Having been trained to push all the appropriate right-wing buttons, and having been rewarded

handsomely for his performance, Reagan appears to have fuddled through his term in office like a real-life Wizard of Oz. With an amiable automaton like that on the throne, it would not be necessary to issue detailed instructions. Indeed, the fewer details for his indolent mind to grapple with, the better. It would be necessary only to recruit and groom him for office, surround him with eager acolytes such as Oliver North and Elliott Abrams to handle the dirty work, and cultivate his avuncular image for the voters.

There is little hard evidence of any such conspiracy, but the career of Ronald Reagan inevitably raises the question of whether or not, at this very moment, the millionaires of the "Palm Springs mafia" are cultivating his successors for some mean and ugly season yet to come.

A similar thought has occurred to Nicaragua's Vice President, Sergio Ramirez: "I think of Reagan as a sort of Frankenstein's monster. Not in the pejorative sense — but when you think of the Frankenstein legend, the monster was made up of the bodies and brains of different people, with horrible

"Donald Regan was not the first person to tell us that the lights were out in the presidential noggin.... David Stockman's early grenade of a kiss-and-teller warned us that Reagan on the economy was like a kid playing with matches...."

"When Sen. Bob Packwood, R-Ore., quoted Reagan uttering empty-headed campaign claptrap, conservatives said, Ahh, that's just a liberal Republican knocking a conservative. When Al Haig wrote about all the foreign policy stuff Reagan didn't know, we said, Ahh, sour grapes."

"When David Broder, that most even-tempered and fair-minded and centrist of political commentators, wrote of aides trying to 'water the arid desert between Reagan's ears', we shrugged and said, Gee, it's not like David to be that harsh...."

"This is the ideal president for staff members who want to push their own pet projects."

— David Nyhan⁵⁰¹

results. Within Reagan's mind, I don't think there is any one person, but rather a mixture of any number of extremists who have dwelt in the academic and corporate catacombs, who have waited all these years to put their policies into effect."⁵⁰²

Bureaucratic inertia

Frankenstein monster or Wizard of Oz, Ronald Reagan has been served by a ponderous administrative apparatus, ready and eager to continue a lengthy tradition of meddling in Latin American affairs. Granted, it may have been necessary to lop off some department heads, transfer a few troublemakers, and in other small ways whip the machinery of government into shape for aggression. But it has not been necessary for the Reaganites to indoctrinate the CIA and the State Department in the theory and practice of intervention.

The CIA is so active and pervasive south of the border that it functions as a sort of regional meta-government. Needless to say, its agents have been thoroughly imbued with the Cold War twist on things, and most are primed to go out and win one for Freedom. A former agent, whose faith could not survive the horrors and hypocrisy of the CIA's vandalism in Southeast Asia, has described the agency's recruitment and indoctrination methods: "The CIA wants active, charming, obedient people who can get things done in the social world, but have limited perspective and understanding, who see things in black and white and don't like to think too much....

"The orientation course featured melodramatic, frightening movies on communism.... The grand finale, the last word on communism, was to be heard in a lecture scheduled for the last day of the course.... [We were warned that] 'The Soviets attack our flag and country. Stalin is fighting to destroy all religion, our allies, and our way of life. We all jumped up, spontaneously shouting and cheering our commitment.... We quietly discussed how we could defeat this scourge.

"Thinking about it years later, I realized that the purpose of the course was to fire us up emotionally to fight communism

rather than educate us about what communism was and how it operated.”⁵⁰³

Other government agencies provide a similar, if somewhat less intense, education for their staffs. It should not astonish if many of the exposed personnel have been duly infected. That applies to the military services, certainly, and to the Department of State, which has forsaken its putative function of diplomacy to become an instrument of terrorism in accordance with the desires of the Reaganites. At the beginning, there were a few lonely voices of moderation; but they were brushed aside early in the game (as in the case of Vietnam).

“The new administration could not think creatively in political and diplomatic terms. Any tendency to think politically was short-circuited by a purge in the State Department that removed many of the Foreign Service Officers who were most experienced in Latin American affairs and whose places were taken by military officers.”⁵⁰⁴

In attempting to account for the sad fate of Nicaragua, therefore, it is necessary to factor in the administrative apparatus slapped together through all the long decades of U.S. intervention in Latin America. The cold warriors are in place; what they have been trained to perceive, and the advice they give their nominal superiors, may be assumed to coincide with the “national interest” of the United States as it is currently understood. The U.S. may be messing around in Nicaragua simply because that is what it is set up to do, and asking it to get out is rather like asking McDonald’s to stop making hamburgers, or Toyota to stop selling cars.

A breed apart

No discussion of U.S. foreign policy is complete without some reference to the national tradition of insufferable arrogance. “Please do not resent my frankness,” begged Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev of some U.S. journalists in May of 1988, but in addition to their admirable pragmatism, he felt that Americans “also have a trait... which sometimes makes it difficult to deal with them. I mean their confidence that every-

thing American is the best, while what others have is at least worse, if not altogether bad and unfit for use.”⁵⁰⁵

It is far from a novel observation, nor has it occurred only to representatives of the Evil Empire. Some 150 years ago, the famously prescient and sympathetic French chronicler, Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote in *Democracy in America*: “For the last fifty years it has been repeated to the inhabitants of the United States that they are the only religious, noble, and free people. See how among them, until now, democratic institutions prosper, while they fail in the rest of the world. Therefore, they have an immense opinion of themselves and are not far from believing that they form a breed apart from humankind.”

The “immense opinion of themselves” held by many citizens of the United States is partly a reflection of the envy and deference their country is accorded by the rest of the world. After all it was Napoleon Duarte who kissed the U.S. flag; we are not likely to see a Ronald Reagan kissing the flag of El Salvador.

But the U. S. does not need Napoleon Duarte or anyone else to fertilize its arrogance. It was already fully developed when De Tocqueville was struck by it a century-and-a-half ago. It is currently on display in the Reagan administration’s open contempt for international law. Tinged with casual cruelty and racism, it can be heard in the marching chant taught to Marines during basic training: “Napalm sticks to little children, all little children of the world. Red, yellow, black or gold, first they ignite, then they explode.”⁵⁰⁶

Of all the little children of the world, surely none have been subjected to the effects of Yankee arrogance for a longer period than those of Latin America. “The unbearable paternalism of the United States,” as a former president of Venezuela termed it, helps to explain the desperate reliance of the U.S. on dictators and military juntas. It is as though the keepers of the Western Hemisphere long ago dismissed any prospect of Latin Americans developing genuine democratic institutions and decided that they must therefore be content to let the United States install a suitable Somoza or Pinochet to impose “stability” upon them.

"In Honduras, outrage at the blatant U.S. disregard for national sovereignty came to the boiling point with the April 6th kidnapping of Juan Ramon Matta [an accused international drug trafficker]....

"Over 2000 Honduran demonstrators gathered the day after the kidnapping outside the U.S. embassy, set fire to some 25 vehicles and burned the embassy annex. 'The outburst had little to do with Matta and nothing to do with drugs,' said one demonstrator. 'It is a question of principle.... If they could do this to Matta, they could do this to any one of us. Second, if Matta is guilty of drug dealing, which most people believe he is, then let him be accused and tried in Honduras....

"The Matta kidnapping brought to a head the anger felt by all sectors of Honduran society at the systematic violation of Honduran sovereignty by the United States." ⁵⁰⁷

It is an arrogance which may beget precisely the outcome that right-wingers dread the most, i.e. the triumph of communism or something like it in Latin America. That is the view of a prominent member of El Salvador's conservative Christian Democratic Party:

"U.S. conservatives think that it is the false promises of Marxism-Leninism which ensnare ignorant peasants. This is largely false. More liberal Americans blame it on social injustice and grinding poverty; this is certainly the root of the problem, but it is not what ensures U.S. defeat.

"The most important weapon the communists have, and what makes their victory inevitable, is corruption and the Americans' arrogance and ignorance of Third World societies, which make them not only tolerate corruption, but often indirectly encourage it....

"The Vietnamese told me over and over again that this was the main weapon they had to work with, the weapon with which they converted people — not ideology.... But the American people don't understand this. They don't understand why they lost Vietnam.... This is one of the reasons why they will probably lose El Salvador." ⁵⁰⁸

Sufficient explanations

Of the possible motives reviewed here, those employed by the Reagan administration to justify its aggression are clearly spurious. The Reaganites have demonstrated not the slightest genuine concern for human rights (quite the contrary), have not the remotest cause for anxiety about Nicaragua's military capabilities, and have sabotaged every peace initiative.

More plausible are suspicions that the Reaganite policy is driven by the profit motive and/or a determination to keep Nicaragua economically dependent on the United States. The evidence for such theories is voluminous, but much of it is circumstantial and some of it is contradictory.

The best-documented explanations for the assault on Nicaragua appear to be that:

- It is a manifestation of the anti-communist crusade, which has been conducted with exceptional fervor by the Reagan administration.
- The influence of crusaders has been extended by the limits of Ronald Reagan's simple mind. His ignorance and dogmatism have made it possible for ideologues to apply military "solutions" to Central American problems.
- Nicaragua has served at least three purposes for the Republican party: (a) as a presidential campaign issue on which to "stand tall"; (b) as what was originally thought to be an easy target for a show of Reaganite force and a 'victory for Republicanism'; and (c) as "raw meat" with which to distract the mad dogs of the Republican right from issues of greater interest to White House moderates.
- Once it was defined as a communist project, the Sandinista revolution became intolerable to the crusade. Nicaragua poses the "threat of a good example", with its model of socio-economic development which deviates from the "stabilization" dogma of U.S. foreign policy.

- “The Americans’ arrogance and ignorance of Third World societies”, in combination with the dirty habits of the Cold War, tend to produce U.S. leaders who find it difficult to imagine a Central America that is not totally dependent. This basic attitude is reinforced by the knowledge that the region has been “ours” for nearly all of U.S. history.
- The habit of intervention and the Cold War have given rise to a powerful bureaucracy designed to impose the United States’ will on the nations of Central America, which it does almost as a matter of routine. It is the administrative expression of Yankee arrogance, and the question is: What would all those civil servants do if they didn’t have Nicaragua or a suitable alternative to kick around?

There may be other explanations for which compelling evidence may one day emerge. But for now, the foregoing are more than sufficient to account for the ordeal of Nicaragua during the time of Reagan.

One thing that stands out is the role of anti-communism in all this. Whatever the sincerity of those who yield to its violent embrace, it is a cause which unites a dog’s breakfast of groups and individuals. There are arms merchants trying to turn a fat buck, Israeli and Saudi Arabian leaders currying favor with Washington, frenetic crusaders battling assorted demons, political operators milking a hot issue for maximum effect, bureaucrats seeking to advance their careers, CIA agents going through the customary motions, former spooks and military personnel taking advantage of the manna floating down from right-wing heaven, etc., etc.

The anti-communist crusade is the crucible in which these diverse elements are stirred to concoct the Vietnams and Nicaraguas of this world.

CRUSADE ABATEMENT

Preventing more of the destruction that issues so freely from the minds of the Reaganites and kindred spirits will not be possible unless control of the government — direct and indirect — is taken out of their bloody hands. It is a project that will also require demolition of the ideological edifice that has sheltered them for so long.

It is a difficult problem, due not so much to any special ability of the Reaganites, but to the persistent apathy of those who must oppose them if any significant change is to take place. Few activities arouse less enthusiasm among the majority of U.S. citizens than the exercise of their citizenship, and little wonder:

Much of the time, politics is an empty-headed and joyless pursuit with little to recommend it over such alternative pleasures as bowling or doing the laundry. But to anyone who would truly like to help prevent an endless chain of Nicaraguas, there is no cure for it. Politics may be dirty work; but somebody's got to do it — and somebody always does, as Plato warned over 2000 years ago.

For all their achievements, it is unlikely that solidarity groups will ever be adequate to the task, since their resources can never match those of the federal government. Despite all the costly efforts and good works of the U.S.-Nicaragua solidarity movement, the total effect can only begin to compensate for the havoc unleashed by the White House.

This is due partly to the fact that the cost ratio of construction to destruction is extremely high, at least ten-to-one. A sister city organization can work like beavers for a year scraping together the \$10-20,000 it takes to build a medical clinic in Nicaragua, and spend another \$20,000 sending people there to help build it — only to learn weeks later that it has been blown up by the president's terrorists with a few hundred dollars worth of explosives. It takes only a single bullet or one swipe of a machete to nullify the costly training of a doctor or an engineer.

For the United States, the devastation of a small, conflict-ridden country like Nicaragua is a fiscal trifle. The entire destabilization program — including the care and feeding of the CIA-*contras*, the bribes to disruptive politicians and union leaders, the maintenance of *La Prensa* and Cardinal Obando, all of it — can be bought for what it takes to build and maintain a short stretch of interstate highway. The United States can easily afford to run several such programs at a time, and has been doing so during most of the Cold War.

The solidarity movement against just one of those programs has required the voluntary mobilization of enormous energies and resources, with results that cannot be described as completely satisfactory. Even if the CIA were to pull out of Nicaragua tomorrow (which it won't), the monumental task of reconstruction would remain. What happens when, in addition to helping clean up that mess, the relatively narrow segment of the U.S. population that cares about such things is confronted with the horrors of the next Nicaragua, and the next, and the next? It is far from a hypothetical question: If past experience is any guide, the plans for the next Nicaragua have already been laid.

High intensity suffering

The United States has a plan for the Third World, and it is called “low intensity conflict”. At the start of the Vietnam War it was called “counter-insurgency”, but it amounts to much the same thing — paying and equipping some citizens of a targeted nation to attack the rest. It is what the Reagan administration has been doing in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and there is every reason to expect more such operations in the years to come, no matter who is occupying the White House.

That's because a political consensus has formed around the notion that low intensity conflict (LIC) is the very thing for “protecting our national interests” in the Third World. It is very much a consequence of post-Vietnam syndrome, the idea being that hiring mercenaries carries far fewer political risks than the deployment of U.S. forces; it obviates a military

draft, and produces only a sparse traffic in body bags (mainly for “advisers”). It is also a great deal cheaper, since most Third World countries are so riven with internal strife that it is an inexpensive matter to enlist the hostile energies of disaffected elements with their own grievances to settle. A CIA-*contra* can be kept on the leash for a mere fraction of what it costs to outfit a U.S. soldier, and there are no costly veterans’ benefits to drain the treasury for the remainder of the mercenary’s life. Terribly cost-effective.

Of course, it matters little to a peasant farmer whether the skin is being peeled off his face by a Yankee invader or some guy who used to tend the neighboring rice paddy. The effect is the same, and the intensity of the conflict is “low” only to those — U.S. congressmen, for instance — who are far enough away that their sleep is not disturbed by the screams.

The U.S. capacity for promoting LIC has expanded rapidly under the Reaganites. The budget for Special Operations Forces, the advisers and co-ordinators of the program, has increased from \$441 million in 1981 to \$1.7 billion in 1987. There are plans for an additional \$8 billion to be spent on them over the next three years. The secret portions of the CIA’s budget have been expanded by an estimated 25 percent. A new Center for Low Intensity Conflict was established by the Army and the Air Force in 1986, and the National Security Council now has a special Board for Low Intensity Conflict.

In January of 1988, the Federal Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy, comprising “a virtual Who’s Who of the military-intellectual establishment”, issued its final report.

“The true American goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.... America well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself, beyond the power of extrication, in all wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy and ambition. She might become the dictatress of the world: she would no longer be ruler of her own spirit.”

— John Quincy Adams, 1821

Acknowledging the reduced threat of nuclear war, the commission urged continued vigilance against “Soviet-inspired insurgency” in the Third World, and recommended a rapid build-up of the capacity for “flexible response” to the red peril.

It had a familiar ring to it. “Under John Kennedy, flexible response became the byword at the Department of Defense and counterinsurgency the rallying cry in Vietnam. Before America perceived the risks inherent in these strategies of unlimited intervention, it was stuck in a bloody quagmire in Southeast Asia.”

It thus appears that, in devising their solution to the debilities of the post-Vietnam syndrome, the grand strategists of the military establishment have returned to their roots — in the poisoned, mined and blood-drenched soil of Vietnam....

It also appears that they will be taking much of the country with them: “The commission report is likely to be greeted with considerable approval in Washington, by leaders of both major parties.... Mainstream Democrats have adopted a get-tough military posture.... The need for beefed-up interventionary units has emerged as a theme in the campaign speeches” of leading Democratic candidates for president.⁵⁰⁹

The fourth branch

In the normal course of events, before there are low intensity conflicts there must be “covert operations”. That’s how the country was led into the Korean and Vietnam wars, and it is the recipe that gave rise to the CIA-*contras*.

Until recently, covert operations were conducted almost entirely by the CIA, but public outrage after the Vietnam War made it politic to distribute the tasks among other agencies of the government. According to one recent account more than half of the action has been quietly assigned to the Pentagon, and it would take an army of auditors to trace it to the innumerable nooks and crannies of the Defense Department’s gargantuan budget.⁵¹⁰

Apparently, not even the Pentagon leadership is told about some of these activities, and the “overlook” committees of

Congress are given the mushroom treatment long practiced by the CIA — i.e. “keep them in the dark and cover them with manure”. It all raises the distinct possibility that the next war the United States conducts will be initiated by some anonymous army officer with a personal score to settle, or simply too much time on his hands.

As for the CIA, one lapsed agent feels that it was out of control long before the excesses of the Reagan administration: “My view, backed by 25 years of experience is, quite simply, that the CIA is the covert action arm of the Presidency. Most of its money, manpower, and energy go into covert operations that, as we have seen over the years, include backing dictators and overthrowing democratically elected governments. The CIA is not an intelligence agency. In fact, it acts largely as an anti-intelligence agency....

“It employs the gamut of disinformation techniques, from forging documents to planting and ‘discovering’ communist weapons caches. But the major weapon in its arsenal of disinformation is the ‘intelligence’ it feeds to policymakers.... The CIA often ends up distorting reality, creating out of whole cloth ‘intelligence’ to justify policies that have already been decided upon. Policymakers then ‘leak’ this intelligence to the media to deceive us all and gain our support.”⁵¹¹

When, in addition to these practices the diverse troops of the President’s Private Army (cf. page 108 ff.) are added to the covert action stew, the question arises as to how many cooks are in charge, if any. Many feel that foreign policy is already being determined to a significant and haphazard degree by an informal “fourth branch” of government that has flourished like some deadly bacteria on the detritus of the Cold War:

“The original constitutional design created three branches of government.... The purpose was to produce a system of checks and balances. But this system is now being substantially bypassed or superseded by a fourth branch of government consisting of supersecret agencies that have taken on a new life of their own outside the constitutional process. These agencies have the power to carry out secret actions abroad — actions of which the president may not

aware. Vast machinery can be set in motion which limits presidential options.... The present custom is to inform the president rather than to seek his approval — generally after the fact.... The role of president, especially in the field of foreign affairs, is being shaped less by constitutional definition than by the actions of secret agencies.”⁵¹²

Deadly indifference

Schooled in the terrible lessons of the Cold War, those who toil in the fourth branch of government tend to see the evil hand of the Evil Empire everywhere. Their outlook is professionally xenophobic, and their purpose is “national security” at any cost. Enthusiastically supported by the narrow but ferocious right wing of the electorate, and tolerated by most of the rest, they actively pursue the various interests of the United States in every corner of the world.

Who is going to stop them? Certainly not the majority of U.S. voters, for most of whom foreign nations exist primarily as travel destinations or as grist for the *National Geographic*.

Economic issues are the principal detectable concerns of the voting public. Most folks appear to be more interested in obtaining comfort for themselves than justice for others. This is not complacency peculiar to the USA; it is just that the consequences are more horrendous, given the enormous power of the United States and the eagerness of its government to abuse it.

But the complacency is definitely there, and the tendency of U.S. citizens to “vote their pocketbooks” is so pronounced that it is fair to ask if there is an upper limit on the slaughter they are willing to let their government organize abroad in exchange for promises of economic benefits at home. Is there any point at which the piles of foreign bodies are stacked so high that they might cast a shadow across the limited horizon of the U.S. electorate?

Clearly, that point has not yet been reached in Central America. Miguel D’Escoto, Catholic priest and Nicaragua’s

“Richard Nixon said yesterday that his delay in the bombing and mining of North Vietnam was the biggest mistake of his presidency.... The 75-year-old former president said he was making a public appearance now because he wanted to express his views on foreign affairs. ‘I feel I want to pass on that experience before I’m too old to be able to do so.’”⁵¹⁵

foreign minister, reckons that the acceptable ratio of Third World deaths exceeds 100,000 to one: “If Americans die, then there is a heavy political price to pay back home, because Americans have been educated to believe that the lives of other people really don’t matter all that much. They don’t say it that explicitly, but they really react if it’s an American. It could be a hundred thousand Nicaraguans, and who cares? But if it’s an American”⁵¹³

It would be pleasant to imagine that D’Escoto got his arithmetic wrong and/or that the indifference he discerns is about to give way to a great moral awakening among the U.S. electorate. But it is difficult to detect hopeful signs in voting behavior, public opinion polls, the musings of political candidates or the world view expressed by popular culture .

“We must adopt the habit of thinking as plainly about the sovereign people as we do about the politicians they elect,” urged Walter Lippman nearly a half-century ago. “It will not do to think poorly of the politicians and to talk with bated breath about the voters. No more than the kings before them should the people be hedged with divinity.”⁵¹⁴

The United States is, after all, a democratic nation, more or less; the voters and non-voters get the leaders they deserve. Of course, the rest of the world doesn’t necessarily deserve them; but, if other countries don’t like it, let them become superpowers.

Meanwhile, the fate of the Third World will be determined, to a very significant extent, by the struggle between the “left” and the right of U.S. national politics. It has been an

(Continued on page 481)

The Limitations of Decency

"I admit that there are good white men, but they bear no proportion to the bad. The bad must be the strongest, for they rule. They do what they please.... I know the long knives; they are not to be trusted."

— 18-century Delaware Indian chief ⁵¹⁶

"Even individual whites who like and care for Negroes cannot afford to give them their rights because this would imply equality. In order to understand fully Southern conservative illegality, we have also to remember that the actual trickery, cheating and intimidation necessary for the smooth operation of disenfranchisement need be indulged in by only a small number of persons. Most people can almost avoid it.... In most cases, a resolute registrar can himself take care of the matter."

— Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* ⁵¹⁷

"The political center is frequently characterized, by those who occupy it, as a democratic force fighting a war on two fronts against the extremes of left and right. However, a closer reading of history tells us that the center has been more inclined to make common cause with the right against the left, rather than oppose both with equal fervor...."

"Recall how in 1964 the rightist Goldwater proposed a horrific policy for Vietnam, with massive bombing of the North and defoliation of the South, and how the centrist Johnson implemented these very practices not long after.... It is not the John Birch Society that is bombing Indochina into the Stone Age, nor was it the American Nazi Party that perfected napalm and put thalidomide in the defoliants."

— Michael Parenti, "Creeping Fascism" ⁵¹⁸

(Continued...)

(Continued from page 479)

exceedingly unequal contest thus far. In fact, there is no meaningful left wing. Among other things, a century of red scares and their aftermath has seen to that. The only resistance encountered by the right is tendered by centrist liberals, most of them anxious to avoid being labeled as commie-lovers, dupes or other objects of unease to Richard Nixon's famous "silent majority".

That liberal anxiety is perhaps the key to right-wing dominance of foreign policy. It will probably not be possible to alter the destructive course of that policy until the accusation of commie dupehood becomes more a source of general amusement than a palpable threat. It is long past due for the anti-communist crusade to be put on the defensive for using its fear/hate as an excuse for spreading terror around the globe in the name of Freedom.

That is not a task devoid of pitfalls or discomfort; in fact, it is likely to be very unpleasant, even dangerous. As a congressional vote on CIA-*contra* funding approached in early 1988,

The Limitations of Decency (cont.)

"One of the women who was in this [CIA-run] program for two years, tortured in Brazil for two years... said the most horrible thing about it was, in fact, the people doing the torture were not raving psychopaths. They were very ordinary people. She told about being tortured one day, and she's on this table, naked, in a room with six men, and they're doing these incredibly painful, degrading things to her body; and there's an interruption. The American is called to the telephone, and he's in the next room, and the others take a smoke break, And she's lying on the table listening, and he's saying, 'Oh, hi, honey. Yes, I can wrap it up here in another hour or so, and pick up the kids and meet you at the Ambassador's on the way home.'"

— John Stockwell, former CIA agent⁵¹⁹

Jeane Kirkpatrick, the Reagan administration's Dragon Lady, issued a warning on what is in store for anyone who dares to obstruct the shining path of the crusade: "The next President of the United States is going to face difficult decisions about how — not whether — to retrench the American empire.... Kirkpatrick warned that any such efforts would be bitterly resisted. 'These facts are on the table; the facts about this vote are very clear. If aid is denied to the resistance forces in Nicaragua, and all the consequences which we fear follow and the peace process is abandoned — which I think will happen, personally — then I believe the responsibility for that will be clear and the internal struggle in the United States will be embittered for a very long time. I think we will be in for a terrible political fight.' " ⁵²⁰

Apolitical activists

The question is: Who will the Dragon Lady and her dragoons find to fight? Those active in the peace/solidarity movement are woefully outnumbered, and many of them are reluctant to be caught doing anything that might be construed as politics. Their deliberations tend to be littered with such phrases as, "I'm not into politics.... I feel very uncomfortable with something like that.... Aren't we getting a little too political here?"

The general tendency is to react to disasters created by the government, rather than develop a consistent and persistent strategy for preventing them. Since there are so many disasters to keep up with, this is perfectly understandable. But it almost seems that the overworked machinery of solidarity does not start to groan into action until the body count reaches a certain threshold, or a critical mass of murdered children is achieved by the president's terrorists.

It points up the long-standing need for a comprehensive peace coalition to focus the energies of those opposed to the national warfare state. The Democratic Party has performed that function to a limited extent, but it is a cumbersome agglomeration of diverse interests, many of which are anything but peaceful. Since the triumph of the Reaganites in 1980, the

party leadership has made a distinct shift to the right, which has been accentuated by the mounting influence of wealthy business interests.⁵²¹ According to an unusually extensive and detailed 1987 survey of the U.S. electorate, only 41% of eligible voters identify themselves as Democrats, and only about one fourth of those consider war/peace issues to be of paramount concern.⁵²²

Of the two major parties, the Democratic is the only feasible political home for peace workers, but it can hardly be said to provide an efficient vehicle for their efforts. That is more than amply demonstrated by a an op-ed piece of Dave McCurdy,



A young woman in Seattle submits to the ministrations of the police and the press during a Pledge of Resistance demonstration. Relatively few citizens are prepared to go to such trouble on behalf of mere foreigners.

Oklahoma congressman and leader of the “moderate” Democrats who have been crucial to the success of most White House requests for CIA-*contra* funding:

“The Presidential campaign hits a time warp whenever issues of foreign policy and national defense are discussed. It seems like 1972, with the leading Democrats offering an apparent mixture of neo-isolationism, third world radicalism and defense cuts.... So far, Governor [Michael] Dukakis has been quite explicit about which weapons systems he would cut from our military budget, but he has yet to offer specific defense policies that would enhance our national security.

“Mr. [Jesse] Jackson, who describes himself as ‘a child of the third world’, has occasionally expressed solidarity with Fidel Castro, the Sandinistas and Middle Eastern radicals.... These are hardly winning ideas. The party should look to moderate and conservative Democrats in Congress for help....

“We have voted for funds to build the B-1 and Stealth bombers, to improve our nuclear deterrent forces by building a substantial number of MX missiles.... We have backed the invasion of Grenada and the raid on Libya.”⁵²³

So much for nominally fellow Democrats who do not share Congressman McCurdy’s passion for moderation. As the party’s presidential candidate, he prefers Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, a consistent supporter of the CIA-*contras* whose voting record in favor of Reaganite programs ranged as high as 70 percent. Mind, this was after the Iran/Contragate scandal and everything that went with it.

As McCurdy so thoroughly confirms, peaceniks in the Democratic Party have their work cut out for them; that is a subject for a separate treatise.⁵²⁴ But, assuming that the solidarity/peace movement does eventually develop a coherent national organization of some sort — whether independent of or intersecting with the political party structure — there are several pressing matters to attend to. Probably the most urgent need is to challenge the underlying premises of the Cold War. In that connection, there have been recent developments of an encouraging nature from an unusual source.

Pragmatic reversal

As 1987 came to a close, an odd thing happened at the Reagan White House: The Great Red-Hunter discovered the joys of détente, going so far as to approve the first-ever nuclear arms reduction treaty with the Soviet Union. “Who would have thought that Ronald Reagan, of all people, would be the first U.S. president to sign such a treaty?” was the astonished question of the hour, in Moscow no less than in Washington.

Actually, anyone familiar with the political fallout of the Iran/Contragate scandal, the peculiarities of national politics and with Reagan’s lifelong practice of tailoring his vague notions to suit current fashion might have anticipated this turn of events.

The scandal had two major effects on Reagan, one of which was to drive most of his “mad dog” ideologues out of the White House; they were replaced by Republican moderates. Of the principal conspirators against Nicaragua, only Elliott Abrams remained; his star was in decline, and he actually performed the useful function of political lightning rod, or spittoon. The net result was that, for the first time in his administration, Reagan was surrounded predominately by advisers who were inclined to be, in Mikhail Gorbachev’s terminology, “pragmatic”.

The other major effect of the scandal was to deprive Reagan of his famous popularity with the public. By all accounts, it left him depressed, and prepared to do just about anything to rekindle the affections of his countrymen — even cozying up to the Evil Empire. It was not quite the equivalent of Lincoln haunting the corridors of the White House in despair over Shiloh and McClellan’s immobility; but, for Ronald Reagan, probably nothing could be more distressing than a critical audience.

Another important factor in Reagan’s revisionism, by the nearly unanimous report of the mainstream press, was his influential wife’s desire that he develop a peace-making image: “‘She knew that while anti-communism is popular, peace is more popular,’ says a first-term aide. She also worried about

the judgment of history, telling friends that an arms deal with the Soviets would secure her husband's stature as a great president."⁵²⁵

The more he was encouraged to think about it, the more Reagan liked the idea. And why not? After all, he didn't need the right-wingers anymore. They had served their purpose — their money and influence had made him both president and financially comfortable — but he was President of All the People now.

Times change. The wheel turns. That was then, this is now....

Easily revised thought

It was not as though he had to undergo a drastic revision of his thinking, for the simple reason that there had never been much thought: "Reagan came to office with a few scraps of knowledge about the Soviet Union that had been extracted from clippings and anecdotes, many of them misunderstood or downright wrong. 'He obviously had a series of fixed and strong views,' says a former adviser, 'but he didn't have any knowledge to back them up.... Reagan liked his stories; they reinforced his disinclination to do business with Moscow.... 'He'd say: "I read it someplace." I'd say: "It's not right." He'd say: "Well, it's very effective" '."⁵²⁶

After the Iran/Contragate scandal, however, it was not as effective as playing the peacemaker. Reagan's conversion was apparently completed during his visit to Moscow in May of 1988. Once he got into it, this peace thing was pretty nifty; everyone said so. He got to see and touch real, live Russians, and to give little speeches on behalf of human rights and the American Way. As for Gorbachev, confided Reagan, he really wasn't such a bad guy once you got to know him: "Gorbachev has learned that the most effective way to reach Reagan is to engage him personally and to indulge his fondness for stories."⁵²⁷

Reagan returned from his journey to Moscow full of confidence that he had helped guarantee the future of mankind by

“slaying the dragons” of the Cold War, as he put it. The whole thing was “momentous.... Quite possibly, we are beginning to take down the barriers of the postwar era” and so on.

The majority of U.S. citizens no doubt hoped that he was telling the truth. But, among his old pals in the right wing, there was a bitter sense of betrayal. For them, there could be no negotiating with the still Evil Empire; its talk of peace is nothing more than a ruse. Anyone who believes otherwise is a dangerous fool — even if it turns out to be Ronald Reagan who, after approving the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty in late 1987, was called “a useful idiot of the Soviets” by one of his formerly staunchest supporters. (The treaty, which was ratified by the Senate just prior to Reagan’s visit to Moscow, calls for a three percent reduction of the two superpowers’ stockpiles of nuclear weapons.)

The outraged thunder on the right serves notice that the anti-communist crusade is not about to fold its tents and return to... what, exactly? For a true crusader, a world without the Evil Empire is unthinkable. Consider the implications for all the political careers rooted in it (Ronald Reagan’s, not least), the military-industrial interests profiting so exorbitantly from it, and the millions of troubled minds that have come to depend on it as an existential Nemesis.

Those interests need a visible target for their hostilities and, for that reason, it is premature for citizens of the Third World to take delight in Ronald Reagan’s new role as slayer of the Cold War dragon. He will soon be history. What next?

For one thing, there will almost certainly be more Ronald Reagans, risen from the ashes of right-wing disillusionment. Leaders fall, whether to commie treachery or self-delusion, and the crusade must go on. The preservation of Freedom depends upon it.

Reagan is actually the second professionally anti-communist president to convert to détente in recent years. Richard Nixon had undergone a similar conversion less than twenty years before with respect to “Red” China. The two careers describe a common trajectory in national politics that may be repeated well into the future. It might be called the Peace-

maker Shift — an option which, by definition, is available only to warmongers. That's because only a get-tough kind of guy, who has made a career of standing tall against the Evil Empire has the freedom to deal with it. Any "liberal" or other non-crusader who attempts a peaceful overture can expect to be savaged by the right, and much of the center, for endangering the nation through misguided weakness. That is presumably why foreign policy liberals so frequently indulge in tougher-than-tough posturing, in order to establish their anti-communist credentials.

But even when they do not adopt that posture, why should any Soviet or Chinese government rely on the kindness of liberals? Can they keep the dogs of the crusade at bay? Of course not. Had it been Jimmy Carter listening to Gorbachev's stories in Moscow, Ronald Reagan would have been ripping him apart at home, and any agreements the two leaders arrived at would have received an extremely rude reception in Congress. Thus, it is left to demagogues like Nixon and Reagan to clean up the messes they have themselves labored so very hard to deposit around the globe.

Shortage of evil empires

It's such a splendid scam that someone after Reagan is bound to capitalize on it. The only immediate difficulty is that the world is running out of worthy Evil Empires to subdue. Nixon did China, Reagan did the Soviet Union. That doesn't leave much. So it may be awhile before the Peacemaker Shift can be put into play again.

Perhaps in the not-so-distant future, China may be induced to threaten South Korea or Japan, and thus become eligible for a fresh display of American toughness. With any luck, Gorbachev's efforts to invigorate the Soviet Union will meet with failure and reaction.

In the meantime, the Third World will enjoy increased significance as an arena of superpower conflict. That is the premise of the previously noted Federal Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy: "Improved U.S.-Soviet relations

and progress in nuclear arms control are likely to be accompanied by calls for enhanced U.S. conventional weapons capabilities and for greater forcefulness in responding to 'low-intensity conflicts' in the Third World.... Particular emphasis should be placed on U.S. interests in Latin America, East Asia and the Middle East."⁵²⁸

This emphasis on standing tall in the Third World will be necessary to allay anxieties arising from Reagan's conversion. That applies not only to right-wingers, but to quite a few moderates and liberals, as well. Conflict is clear-cut. Détente is fraught with uncertainty, and if there is anything that most folks abhor, it is ambiguity — particularly where a terrible threat like nuclear war is involved.

In short, recent hints of accommodation between the superpowers offer cold comfort to sacrificial lambs such as Vietnam and Nicaragua, on whose people the awful rituals of the anti-communist crusade are performed. The demand for such involuntary sacrifice actually increases whenever ancient adversaries commence sniffing each other, because paranoids detect in the friendly face of peace the snarling threat of betrayal and destruction.

At the very least, this suggests that countries like Nicaragua will come under sharpened scrutiny from the U.S. right wing in the years ahead for the faintest sign of "exporting revolution"; cultivating it at home is just as bad, of course.

A superpower standoff may well mean that such countries become *more* exposed to the terrors of U.S. "freedom fighters". If, as seems to be the case, the U.S. and the Soviets are moving toward a sort of gentlemen's agreement to stay out of each other's backyards, then where shall the people of El Salvador or Guatemala turn if they should ever be so fortunate as to cast off the murderous elites which the U.S. has appointed to "stabilize" them? It is apparently a question of some concern to Nicaragua; there have already been reports that the Sandinistas have become increasingly nervous about the impact of détente on the reliability of Soviet support.

The tentative embrace of the superpowers, then, is likely to be viewed with tragic irony by the Third World peoples who

may be required to pay with their lives for the anxieties that détente arouses in the Home of the Brave. While Reagan was preparing for his visit to Moscow, he renewed the trade embargo against Nicaragua and Elliott Abrams slithered along with his efforts to sabotage the Sapoa peace initiative. The president's terrorists were still in business.

Anti-communist identity

In short, there is little cause for complacency among peace/solidarity activists, just because Ronald Reagan found it expedient to become pals with Mikhail Gorbachev. The need to challenge the ideological underpinnings of militant anti-communism remains as urgent as ever.

It is a daunting task. A survey of the U.S. electorate which asked respondents to describe themselves in relation to sixteen attributes found that the highest ranked item, by far, was "Anti-communist"; 70% said they "strongly identified" with that label.

Next came "A religious person", with which 49% strongly identified. Other responses: "A supporter of the peace movement", 46%; "A conservative", 27%; "A liberal", 19%.⁵²⁹

U.S. toy stores began selling the "Contra Video Game" in 1987. It was targeted at children from age 6, who could "become freedom fighters and battle for your beliefs" for \$34.⁹⁹



"We are today so uncertain and diverse in our opinions as to the origin and destiny of the world and man that we have ceased, in most countries, to punish people for differing from us in their religious beliefs. Our present intolerance is rather for those who question our economic or political principles, and we explain our frightened dogmatism on the ground that any doubt thrown upon these cherished assumptions endangers our national solidarity and survival."

— Will Durant, *The Reformation*

It is not certain what such survey responses mean in terms of actual political choices and behavior. But the unparalleled ranking of "anti-communist" as a self-defining attribute of U.S. voters removes any doubt that the crusade has achieved its primary goal. Many a Catholic potentate would have been delighted with a comparable level of antagonism toward Protestantism during the Reformation.

The analogy is apt: With its cultural chaos, multitudinous conflicts, high rate of social and geographical mobility, tenuous family and community bonds, etc., the U.S. population appears to be one of the most emotionally insecure in the world. As one of the few fundamental beliefs shared by a clear majority, anti-communism is the closest thing there is to a national ideology; for many, it has all the intense allure of a deeply held religious belief.

Nevertheless, there are some indications that U.S. attitudes toward communism have recently begun to soften. Reagan's Peacemaker Shift and the unusually effective — for a Soviet leader — public relations campaign of Chairman Gorbachev seem to have invited a reassessment of the Evil Empire. A survey taken in the spring of 1988 found that 59% of respondents felt that "economic competitors like Japan pose more of a threat to our national security than our traditional military adversaries like the Soviets". Another poll taken about the same time disclosed that 76% of the sample held a favorable opinion of Gorbachev, at least in comparison with his grim predecessors. Only 38% agreed that the Soviet Union was an "evil empire", down from 56% in 1984.⁵³⁰

That's the good news. The bad news is that it could just as quickly shift back again. The right wing will be working very hard to make sure it does, and it is very likely that a new Ronald Reagan or two will emerge to lead the charge.

Confronting the crusade

Influencing public opinion is a large and complex undertaking, and this is not the place to discuss it in any great detail. By way of general introduction to the problem, it is perhaps useful to conceive of anti-communism as a product that has been marketed for so long, in so many different ways and contexts, and so persistently, that it has become a "household word", rather like Ivory Soap or Jell-O.

The key to its continued success as a self-defining attribute of U.S. citizens lies in repetition and its taken-for-granted quality. Any attempt to challenge its "market share" will have to approximate it in persistency, while raising questions about its reputation.

Because they are so casually accepted as a fact of daily life, and so frequently voiced by people with a tenuous grasp on reality, routine advertisements for militant anti-communism tend to go unchallenged. Even among those who strongly disagree, there is a tendency to dismiss such utterances as unworthy of response. That is a mistake. If it is ever to be consigned to the unpleasant history to which it belongs, the crusade must be confronted at every possible opportunity.

That confrontation can take the relatively gentle form of simple questions: "How does one go about 'exporting revolution', exactly? Was the American Revolution exported from somewhere? Don't the people of El Salvador have the right to rise up against oppression? What have we ever done for them? Are you saying that, just because I object to the slaughter that the U.S. is underwriting in Central America, I must be a communist or a dupe? How many times has Nicaragua occupied the United States, or hired some of us to attack the rest?", etc., etc., etc....

Where and when to raise such questions? Everywhere, and constantly. At work, church, the PTA meeting, on the bus, at the Chamber of Commerce — everywhere and every time the subject comes up. Again and again and again, repetition is the essential ingredient of any marketing campaign. The anti-communist crusade learned that lesson long ago; as one consequence, harmless Nicaraguans are being slaughtered by the president's terrorists today.

Newspapers, and especially local newspapers, offer ample opportunity for public challenges to the crusade. The letters section is usually one of the most popular, and many editors are open to suggestions for op-ed pieces by anyone with something reasonable and articulate to say — the more to the point of current events, the better. Most journalists are also amenable to a little education now and then, if it is presented politely and with due respect to their professional pride. If their writings often appear to be overly steeped in the basic world view of the Cold War, that is presumably because they have grown up within its somewhat narrow confines, like just about everyone else.

Questioning taboos

One of the most tenacious critics of mainstream reporting on Central America argues that, "The press has done a terrific job as one of the few thin lines we have, to protect the public against the 'national security state' and, if we didn't have the press, we would be in terrible trouble. So, for all I'm saying about its inadequacies and deficiencies, thank God for Raymond Bonner [cf. page 191, however]. We have to, on the one hand, applaud the press when it protects our interests — which it often does — and at the same time kick 'em hard to have more courage to do their job.... It also needs a support group to question the 'national security' taboos."⁵³¹

A useful example is provided by a group of activists who have formed the Seattle Central America Media Project, which brings alternative information and perspectives to the attention of local editors. Knowledgeable participants also

prepare guest articles and co-ordinate letter-writing campaigns.⁵³² Such efforts may not always be greeted warmly by the journalists to whom they are directed, but they do present a well-documented alternative to the news from the White House and the wire services.

A final suggestion: Assuming that the necessary financing and organization can be developed, it may be worth considering a series of national public information advertisements on the past sins and present dangers of mindless anti-communism.

Effort required

None of this can be accomplished without effort, and it may often be rewarded with various forms of abuse. In most communities and workplaces, anyone who dares to challenge the wisdom of the anti-communist crusade can expect a lot of trouble. It's the kind of thing that can easily lead to strained friendships and family relations, to a reputation as a local crackpot, even to job dismissals and missed promotions (usually justified on other grounds, of course). The pressure of social and economic sanctions is a seldom mentioned, but very real force in the suppression of political discourse in the Land of the Free. It tends to operate at the subconscious level and is all the more powerful for doing so.

There is always the possibility of physical violence, as well. People have been roughed up and had their tires slashed for lesser offenses. On Christmas Eve, 1985, a young Seattle family of four was bludgeoned to death, because their attacker had snapped up a rumor that the father was the son of a communist.

"I considered myself a soldier, and sometimes soldiers have to kill," explained the crazed freedom fighter. "The kids weren't supposed to be there.... From the reports I have got [subsequently, the father] probably wasn't a communist. So now I am starting to feel bad about him, too.... I have a great concern for human life. One of the things I hoped to achieve was to save a lot of lives at the expense of a few others. To sacrifice a few for the greater number.... We are in a war against communism."⁵³³

Congressional action

For those who do not recoil at the thought of being “into politics”, the most immediate priority is to stiffen the spine of Congress, so that it will be less inclined to bend in the fiery wind of every White House military adventure and propaganda campaign. It would be nice to have a decent president, as well. But even a saint can go mad, and U.S. presidents tend more to sanctimony than sanctity.

No less a proponent of a strong executive than Alexander Hamilton foresaw the dangers of an unfettered presidency: “The history of human conduct does not warrant that exalted opinion of human virtue which would make it wise in a nation to commit interests of so delicate and momentous a kind, as those which concern its intercourse with the rest of the world, to the sole disposal of... a president of the United States.”⁵³⁴

When asked by visitors from the United States, “What can we do to help?”, the first response of Nicaraguans is invariably: persuade your government to get off our backs. “Just let us have our own country, our freedom to do with it as we think best,” is a typical formulation. That might have been possible, at least with respect to funding the CIA-*contras*, had there been just five or ten more liberal Democrats in the House of Representatives during the Reagan administration. Such a display of legislative resistance would have also had a salutary effect on the general level of debate. It follows that there is no more important single task for the solidarity movement than to alter the composition of the House.

The Third World desperately needs the wisdom of congressmen such as Mike Lowry of Seattle, one of the few politicians in the entire country who has been willing to educate the public about the perils of mindless anti-communism. “For 40 years, right-wing politicians and columnists have poisoned the foreign policy debate in the U.S.,” Lowry has explained. “Their paranoid view of the world has prevented intelligent discussion of our options for shaping a foreign policy that is in America’s best interest.

"The present U.S. policy overrates communism. It underrates our many strengths, especially the force of our ideals. I have confidence that the world's developing nations will adopt our political and economic principles if only we give them the chance....

"The U.S. must come to recognize that revolution would be occurring in Latin America whether or not the Soviets or Cubans existed.... Does anyone really believe that our foreign policy is strengthened when we announce that we will ignore the World Court's jurisdiction over our actions in Central America?....

"In the 1950s, the right wing told us that China was nothing but a colony of the Soviets.... The Soviet Union must now devote a large portion of its military budget against Communist China....

"Instead of propping up the Somozas and the Pinochets, the U.S. should identify with social and economic improvement for the millions of poor people in Latin America.... We can have positive relations with the nations of the Third World if we embrace a foreign policy that identifies America with change and progress instead of repression and poverty."⁵³⁵

Lowry provides an instructive contrast to Rep. McCurdy (cf. pages 483-484), and the implication is clear: The most effective way to help Nicaragua and other Third World nations is to work for a Congress with fewer McCurdys and more Lowrys. It is well within the realm of the possible, if those already active in the solidarity movement would but divert half of their efforts to political campaigning.

Firey fundamentalists

Of course, there are competing interests with very different plans for Congress. One of the most powerful political movements looming on the horizon is the religious right. It started to jump out of the pulpit during the sanctimonious presidential campaigns for Ronald Reagan, and has now generated its own momentum. The basic uplifting message is conveyed by these ravings of a fundamentalist preacher: "I'm

sick and tired of hearing about all the radicals, and the perverts, and the liberals, and the leftists, and the communists coming out of the closets! It's time for GOD's people to come out of the closets, out of the churches, and change America!"⁵³⁶

The religious right is very determined to stamp out communism and liberation theology in Central America, and has infested the region with missions for that purpose. Among the largest contributors to the cause are millionaire televangelists such as Jimmy Swaggart and Pat Robertson. Their fundamentalist project has been post-coitally interrupted in recent years by multiple sex scandals. But in the well-established cycle of such events, memories of the scandals will fade and crusading passions are fairly certain to become aroused again.

It all makes for an interesting moment in the history of religion and politics in the United States. Much of the public debate over Central America policy in the years ahead may be conducted between the religious right and the solidarity movement in which the mainline churches play such a prominent role. As suggested previously, however, the contest may turn out to be very one-sided, since politics strikes so many peace-workers as, well, not very peaceful.

According to Richard Healey: "In some ways they are more radical, ironically, but they are more rooted in concrete things... focused more on the sanctuary movement rather than on strictly electoral or foreign policy issues, because sanctuary is rooted in flesh-and-blood human beings. [Mainline] church people are hard to mobilize on electoral issues.... The church activists are purists and visionaries, sometimes even anti-political, but... it is the only institutional constituency where you can find the moral basis for an alternative, and in the end politics rests on a moral vision of the world."⁵³⁷

There are moral visions and moral visions, however. Any clash between the rabid religious right and the apolitical mainline churches is likely to confirm the bitter conclusion of that long-ago Delaware Indian chief (cf. page 480): "I admit that there are good white men, but they bear no proportion to the bad. The bad must be strongest, for they rule."

“What has become of patriotism? I am very incensed with the media’s lack of respect for our beloved country and its leader: the crude caricatures in your paper, the constant putting down of President Reagan, the blame laid on him for the rotten things Congress does....

“Bashing the president seems to be the ‘in’ thing. It is treason and sedition. It is making our country look bad in the eyes of the world. If we love our country, we should support our president. It is our job to make him look good, not tear him down.... The media are so far left they deride everything this country once stood for. When did America cease to be ‘One Nation Under God’ and become a shambles under the ACLU?”

— Letter to the editor of Seattle daily newspaper, May 1988

It remains to be seen if the good will ever outnumber the bad by a large enough margin in Congress to put an end to public funding of covert operations, presidential terrorists and other tendencies of the national security state.

Unpresidential eyebrows

Prospects for electing a sensible president are, if anything, even more remote. Presidential campaigns have less and less to do with issues that might be subject to debate, which has in any event been replaced by advertising. “Such is the power of advertising in the United States,” notes FSLN co-founder Tomas Borge with only mild exaggeration, “that the people could just as easily elect Coca Cola as president.”⁵³⁸

That is essentially what they have done in the case of Ronald Reagan. Ever since the telegenic career of John F. Kennedy, “charisma” has come to be accepted as the most desirable attribute of a presidential candidate, and Reagan’s performance has institutionalized that notion. During the Democratic primary ordeal in the winter of 1987-1988, the endless lamentation of pundits and persons-in-the-street was that most of the candidates “lacked charisma”. One poor soul

was even subjected to a barrage of nasty cartoons and other abuse because his hair was so fine and light-colored that his eyebrows did not display well under the glare of TV lights. (This is no joke; you could look it up.)

As more than one observer has pointed out, George Washington with his sour and imperious demeanor, and Abraham Lincoln with his reedy voice and gangly frame, would never have survived the primary elections in the era of the TV presidency. It is an especially ironic development, since the prevailing sentiment is a longing for an appropriate symbol of mighty nationhood — someone who “looks presidential”. That was the key to Reagan’s appeal, and it explains why the majority of voters didn’t care whether or not the presidential cranium housed any information or ideas of value.

“We didn’t want to know”

“We didn’t know because we didn’t want to know.... Sure, sure, we always knew he was no rocket scientist. We hired him in 1980 to make us feel better about ourselves and our prospects, after the hostages and 21 percent inflation. He was the same bozo then, talking about killer trees and welfare queens in Cadillacs, and people on the dole buying vodka instead of milk. He talked our fantasy language, after real life proved too tough for us.”⁵³⁹

Nothing has occurred during the 1988 presidential campaign thus far to suggest that much has changed. If anyone with half a brain ends up in the Oval Office, it will probably be an accident. Just such an accident may be about to occur. The likely Democratic candidate, Michael Dukakis, has expressed strong opposition to the Reaganites’ Central America policy. Like House Speaker Jim Wright, he is moderately fluent in Spanish, and has spent some time in Latin America.

As of May 1988, Dukakis enjoyed a sizable lead in the polls over George Bush, his Republican opponent. But that had little to do with Central American or any other foreign policy; it was based mainly on the perceptions that Dukakis would do a better job of managing the economy, and that Bush was

sort of a jerk. Another plus: The eyebrows of Dukakis, who is of Greek descent, are dark and bushy.

Should he make it to the White House, Dukakis will have to watch his back if he tries anything funny in Central America. Since the first duty of presidents is to act as symbols and custodians of superpower majesty, they are left pretty much alone — by exemplary moderates such as Oklahoma's Rep. McCurdy, for example — to spread terror around the globe in the name of Freedom.

But restraint and a nice appreciation of other nations' integrity can provoke an entirely different sort of response from all but the most liberal segment of the political spectrum. The only president in recent memory to adopt restraint as a key component of his foreign policy was Jimmy Carter, and look what it got him — contempt, ridicule, and Ronald Reagan.

There is no harm in hoping for a president who will apply the sort of perspective urged by liberal congressmen such as Mike Lowry to the problems of the Third World. If such a one were to use the bully pulpit of his office to promulgate a conceptual challenge to the Cold War, it would certainly be a welcome development. But, for the reasons noted above, it is probably not prudent to base a long-term strategy on such hopes.

Thus, the first order of business is to strengthen Congress. Apart from the checks-and-balances considerations already mentioned, there is a distinct practical advantage in focusing on House of Representatives campaigns: They are still conducted on a scale that allows for much more direct and meaningful voter participation. The peace movement may not be able to afford a Ronald Reagan; but it should be able to help put a few more liberal Democrats in office.

There are two other types of action that may bear fruit. One is for the U.S. solidarity movement to forge ongoing links with its counterparts in Europe, and with the Socialist International. Their support of Nicaragua and other victims of U.S. aggression needs to be encouraged. To the extent that such contacts are reported by the mainstream press, they could help

to educate the general public about the diplomatic wilderness into which the Reaganites have led the country. It is an important message, one seldom heard.

Another potential source of allies is, believe it or not, the corporate world. It is not correct to assume that all of Big Business is solidly behind the sort of aggressive foreign policy pursued by the Reagan administration. Some elements of it are; other elements are not (cf. pages 454-455). There are some reasonable and humane people doing business around the world; peace/solidarity movements may be missing a valuable opportunity by neglecting to seek them out. It certainly can't hurt to try.

Future of a good example

The United States could terminate its Nicaragua destabilization program tomorrow and not have to worry about the threat of its good example for some time to come. The economy is a mess. The pressures of the CIA-*contra* terror campaign and the treasonous disposition of its internal front have polarized the political arena, with few signs of reconciliation in sight.

There has been a lot of silly talk about Sandinista "mismanagement" causing the nation's economic difficulties, but even the head of COSEP (cf. page 143) can't bring himself to endorse that dubious analysis.

"From 1979 to 1983," notes a U.S. Jesuit economist, "the very same policies of the Nicaraguan government that people want to criticize today brought growth rates that were the highest in the hemisphere."⁵⁴⁰

Nothing could be more obvious than that the Nicaraguan economy is a mess because the Reaganites want it that way. "The U.S. doctrine of low-intensity conflict," concludes a Latin American diplomat in Managua, "is having the exact results it's supposed to have. It's causing a diversion of human, medical, energy and other resources to the war fronts."⁵⁴¹

(Continued on page 504)

A Future of Economic Suffering

Peter Marchetti, Jesuit economist

It is absolutely hypocritical for any U.S. congressperson to talk about the Sandinistas being responsible for destroying the Nicaraguan economy, when Congress is responsible for funding and legitimizing a war whose central purpose has been to make Nicaragua's economy scream. Media people who say that the Sandinistas are responsible may not be hypocritical, but they're either frightened about what their editors are going to say or they are blind....

Enrique Bolaños, leading opponent of the Sandinistas and head of [COSEP, the Higher Council of Economic Enterprise], agreed with Father Xabier Gorostiaga's allocation of responsibility for the destruction of the Nicaraguan economy. Bolaños said that 60% of the economic problem was due to the war, 10% to the variation in international market prices against Nicaragua, another 10% to the breakdown of the Central American Common Market, which is of course another result of U.S. military policy in the region, and the remaining 20% to internal factors....

You can go back all the way to 1984 to hear Washington's first prophecies about the imminent collapse of the Nicaraguan economy and political insurrection against the government.... Congress should understand that the U.S. government is waging a war on one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere, against an economy so simple and so poor that pressure against it doesn't mean it's going to disappear.... I don't know how the Congress or the U.S. media could ever understand what I'm saying.

A Future of Economic Suffering (cont.)

Their concept of economic protest comes from the super-sophisticated economy of the U.S. where, if there's a slight decline in consumer power, people protest that the god of consumption has a cold.... But in an economy in which the vast majority of the people have never been connected to sophisticated consumer channels, there is no base for the type of economic protest that the Congress and media are awaiting....

Nicaragua has enough solidarity from Latin America, Western Europe, the Soviet Union, and the other socialist countries to reproduce this very simple economy.... The Reagan policy... has created a unified Latin American movement against that policy. Over these eight years, it has brought hundreds of millions of dollars in credit from Europe that never came before....

We did in-depth research on the survival strategies among poor families, and we discovered that even though people were highly critical of the economic problems, they were also convinced of one basic truth: They were in economic straits, they were suffering economically because of Ronald Reagan and his war against this people....

What's in store for the Nicaraguan people, no matter what their government does, is more economic suffering....

The dignity of the Nicaraguan people, along with their frustration and rejection of the Reagan administration, is the real motor that will allow the government to attempt putting through a very austere package of economic measures, and call on its people to make yet another sacrifice.⁵⁴²

(Continued from page 501)

If and when the Sandinistas are granted the opportunity to manage or mismanage the economy unmolested, they will have to cope with all the problems created by the destabilization campaign, in addition to those inherited from Somoza and those associated with its location in the Third World.

Inevitably, there will be an increase in the level of general dissatisfaction once the unifying threat of Yankee aggression subsides. From the standpoint of public morale, surviving the peace could well turn out to be a much more delicate problem than mobilizing for war. That has been the fate of other revolutions.

The question is: How much longer can the people subsist on hope and revolutionary fervor? One answer is provided by a Managua taxi driver: "The Sandinistas started it, and they organized and led it. But we all rose up behind them, the whole country together. The revolution was the best moment any of us will ever live through.... It gave us a sense of might, of *potencia*, of holding together, like nothing you can dream of. We thought that changing our society would be quick and easy afterward, but that was another matter. If I felt this way about the revolution, imagine what the *commandantes* felt who came down from the mountains or out of the jails. But they can't let it go. And we're divided from the Sandinistas now. We're not against them.... We realize they need more time. But they are still cleaving to that moment of being one, and we have gone back to thinking about ourselves as individuals, and wanting things for ourselves and our children." ⁵⁴³

There are doubtless many who do **not** yet feel themselves "divided from the Sandinistas". But once the shooting stops, it will become much more difficult to cope with everyone's expectations and demands.

It is not inconceivable that the Sandinistas will be tempted to answer their critics by arguing that U.S. aggression and promotion of internal dissent have robbed them of the opportunity to fulfill the promise of the revolution. That temptation may arise because it happens to be true.

Given the likelihood of continued sabotage of the revolutionary process by Cardinal Obando, *La Prensa* and other elements of the pro-*contra* opposition, the Sandinistas might even be provoked into fresh restraints on civil liberties. They may as well, as far as the good opinion of the U.S. government is concerned; for, they will be accused of dictatorial transgressions in any event.

Limited opposition

From a practical standpoint, however, the issue of democratic pluralism is almost irrelevant, because no other political force has emerged — or is likely to do so in the foreseeable future — which can offer an effective challenge. The reason is simple: The Sandinista revolution is a genuine response to the very real needs of the overriding majority, and none of the fourteen opposition parties which attract so much interest in the United States has begun to address those needs as directly and comprehensively as the Sandinistas.

Those “Marxist-Leninists” may even be acting as a moderating influence to some degree, suggests a U.S. priest: “It should not be assumed that if Nicaragua were more democratic it would be more ‘moderate’. The Sandinistas may be restraining their own peasant and working-class followers as much as the business and upper-class groups. A more democratic process might enable peasants to pressure for the expropriation of large estates, or workers to pressure for lower salary differentials.... If the Sandinistas were more ‘democratic’ the results might be even more radical.”⁵⁴⁴

Of course, that kind of thinking would never get past the front door of *La Prensa* or the *Coordinadora Democrática*. The pro-*contra* opposition will continue its fight, with or without the contribution of terrorists, at the expense of the U.S. taxpayer. Elliott Abrams has already petitioned Congress for more cash to be distributed to his friends in Nicaragua.

“Abrams spoke of Nicaragua’s transition from an armed struggle to an unarmed political struggle. In Abrams’ view, the U.S. has the political activists it needs in Nicaragua for this

fight.... But Abrams worries that his Nicaraguan friends don't have the money to do the job.... Included in Abrams' wish list of deserving opposition groups were the Committee of Mothers, the newspaper *La Prensa*, the 'free' labor unions, and the opposition political parties.... Abrams declared that the whole spectrum of opposition groups needs U.S. help."⁵⁴⁵

Co-ordinating its efforts with the U.S. embassy, the antics of the pro-*contra* opposition will be of interest to the majority of Nicaraguans primarily for its influence on the Yankees. Its chief function is to provide the U.S. right wing with tragic examples of Sandinista oppression for the "Who lost Central America?" blame game to be played in the years ahead. It may be assumed that the game will be reported by the mainstream press in such a fashion as to leave no doubt about the outcome.

Preview of news to come

Events in the spring of 1988 offered a preview of mainstream tales of post-war Managua, with the "January 22 Mothers" being stoned, and the Miranda hoax worming its way through the body politic (see pages 415, 429). Another good one was the "labor unrest" involving a small elite of workers who already enjoyed the highest wages in the country:

"A construction worker could easily bring in three or four times more than a government minister. Auto mechanics were in a similar position.... In mid-February, the monetary [revaluation] changes were accompanied by an attempt to rationalize salaries and rein in some of the most out-of-hand areas of the economy. For the elite strata of construction workers and mechanics, it was a significant blow, and they responded by calling a strike.... At the end of the month, some upped the ante by going on a hunger strike. The strike has garnered almost no support from other workers, many of whom long resented the privileged position enjoyed by construction workers and mechanics."⁵⁴⁶

Needless to say, what the U.S. public learned from the mainstream press was that the workers were oppressed and

that the government stubbornly refused to grant their reasonable demands, along with details about their poignant hunger strike and the sympathetic concern of “the political opposition”.

It was evidently not necessary for U.S. news consumers to learn that most Nicaraguan workers opposed the strike, that the pangs of hunger were alleviated by food smuggled in under cover of darkness, that the “fourteen opposition parties”

Undermining Life in Both Countries

In July 1979, supported by practically all the Nicaraguan people, the Sandinista Front defeated Somoza and installed the Sandinista Revolution. For two years, the new government dedicated its efforts to rebuilding the country, teaching the people how to read and write, building schools, clinics, hospitals, streets, recreation centers, etc., besides building up a conscience of human dignity, sovereignty and the human values of justice, peace, honesty, efficiency, and respect for all, including women and children.

As soon as the Reagan administration took power in the United States in 1980, serious problems started for Nicaragua.... As Christians we ask ourselves: What right does the most powerful and rich nation of the world have to impose misery, pain and death on a poor and weak people like Nicaragua? What right does the Reagan administration have to decide the destiny of Nicaragua?

Our preoccupation, nevertheless, beloved brothers and sisters, does not end just with the pain, death and desperation of our suffering people. Rather, we suffer and are worried for you, because we consider the Reagan administration is undermining life not only in Nicaragua, but also in your own nation.

— *Open letter from Baptist convention of Nicaragua to the U.S. Christian community, 4 July 1986*

have yet to attract a crowd of greater than 3000 people, or that the injured parties earned more than government ministers.⁵⁴⁷ It may be assumed that there will be many more such Nicaraguan media events in the years to come, no matter who is occupying the White House, with whatever foreign policy.

However it plays out in the Land of the Free, the people of Nicaragua will be struggling to salvage what they can from the unkind legacy of Somoza and the Reaganites. That the Sandinista revolution has survived this long is something of a miracle, testifying to the patience, skill and tenacity of the Sandinista leadership. Were the circumstances not so grim, it would be amusing to speculate on how long Ronald Reagan would have been able to juggle the predicament of Daniel Ortega were their positions reversed — a few days, perhaps.

Above all, the revolution's survival testifies to the determination of the Nicaraguan majority to wrest their country's independence from the United States and its surrogate elites. But the price has been terribly high.

* * * *

EPILOGUE

*The Sandinista process is interrupted
by an "electoral coup d'état".*

THE FIRST EDITION of this book covered the period from 1909 to early 1988 and concluded with the preceding page. In the years that followed, the United States continued to plague Nicaragua with various forms of political, economic and military aggression.

Worst of all, the U.S. refused to disband its CIA-*contra* terrorists, as stipulated by the Central American peace agreement signed in August of 1987.⁵⁴⁸ The Nicaraguan government was thus forced to maintain a large military defense and all that it entailed, including crippling expenditures, painful economic decisions and a program of national conscription that was unfamiliar and unpopular among much of the population.

Even a greatly reduced force of terrorists would suffice to produce the desired effect, as a Pentagon official explained in 1989: "2000 hard-core guys could keep the pressure on the Nicaraguan government, force them to use their military, and prevent them from solving their economic problems."⁵⁴⁹ The actual number of terrorists who remained active in violation of the peace accord was around 20,000.

It has been estimated that by 1990 the terrorist campaign had resulted in damages exceeding \$12 billion — to a country with a population of 3.5 million and a Gross National Product of only \$2 billion. In relative terms, that would be roughly equivalent to \$25 trillion in economic losses to the United States (1988 dollars).

As for the number of killed and wounded, "Nicaragua has suffered proportionately more victims in this brief period than the United States did in the 60 years covering World Wars I and II, Korea and Vietnam. And that does not even include those who died to bring down the Somoza dictatorship, which easily doubles the figure."⁵⁵⁰

"The CIA created, armed and financed the contras. My father backed them with everything he had. It was my father's war, and almost everyone in Nicaragua has lost someone as a result of it."

— Patti Reagan Davis⁵⁵¹

Direct economic damage was inflicted by the U.S. embargo imposed from 1985 onward, another gross violation of international law (cf. page 135). No other country joined the embargo; but it was devastating nonetheless, given that Nicaragua's tiny economy had previously been woven into that of the United States. As one of many consequences, sugar producers were left scrambling to find alternative markets for over 50,000 tons of Nicaragua's largest export commodity.

The U.S. also hindered allies and international agencies from granting credits to Nicaragua, and in various other ways labored to inflict maximum economic harm. Collaborating in that effort was COSEP, the Higher Council of Private Enterprise, whose members were evidently willing to accept any amount of damage to their country and its people in order to defeat the Sandinistas.

As an inevitable and intended consequence of all this, support for the Sandinistas had begun to weaken as the 1990 election approached. The problem for the U.S. was that no viable political opposition had formed within Nicaragua, partly because the disparate enemies of the Sandinistas had placed their hopes on a military victory by the CIA-*contras* and/or a full-scale U.S. invasion. When neither materialized, for the reasons discussed in the preceding pages, there was no Plan B to activate.

Communists welcome

The United States therefore set about to assemble a political opposition, while at the same time intensifying the pressure on the Nicaraguan government with the considerable means at its disposal. What followed was a demonstration of just how undemocratic a "democratic" election can be.

With millions of dollars and a series of meetings, the U.S. created an opposition by gathering fourteen *very* different parties into a coalition dubbed the Nicaraguan Opposition Union (“UNO”). Among the fourteen was the Communist Party — an odd choice, given that the assault on Nicaragua had been justified as necessary to stop the spread of communism in Latin America. But its well-paid inclusion clearly reflected the coalition’s purpose and integrity

Also included was the Moscow-oriented Socialist Party which was previously “so poverty-stricken it could not publish a newspaper or even a mimeographed weekly. But in September 1988 it came into enough money to hire the posh Ruben Dario Salon of Managua’s Intercontinental Hotel for a lavishly catered press conference.”⁵⁵²

In order to improve UNO’s chances, the U.S. used the threat of unrelenting aggression to force changes in the election rules. The most important concession was to permit funding of the coalition from external sources, i.e. primarily the United States. Such foreign interference in elections is forbidden in the U.S. and all other countries; but the San-dinistas accepted this and other departures from the rules in hopes of ensuring UNO’s participation in the election and the USA’s acceptance of the outcome.

The finance rule change made it possible for the United States to openly invest roughly \$30 million in the UNO campaign. That amounted to some \$20 per voter, which may be compared with the \$4 per voter spent on the successful 1988 presidential campaign of George Bush, the former CIA director who served as Ronald Reagan’s vice-president.⁵⁵³

“We are going into this election process [spending] \$1 billion dollars. We funded the contras, we have destroyed [Nicaragua’s] economy. We have taken Mrs. Chamorro and we pay for her newspaper to run. We funded her entire operation, and now we are going to provide her with the very best election that American can buy.”

— Democratic Congressman George Miller⁵⁵⁴

Chosen to front the coalition was Violeta Chamorro, the widowed matriarch of the publishing dynasty which owned the CIA-financed *La Prensa* and other influential media. Mrs. Chamorro possessed no apparent experience of or aptitude for political leadership, but her function was largely symbolic. Much like Ronald Reagan in the United States, her words and actions were carefully scripted to suit her assigned role, that of a benevolent maternal figure who would bring peace and prosperity to Nicaragua if elected president.

As one of her coalition associates explained: “She is an icon, like the Virgin of Fatima. She doesn’t need to talk, she can just lead the procession.”⁵⁵⁵

The religious connection was central to the coalition’s campaign. Consistent with their past behavior, Cardinal Obando and his reactionary colleagues in the Catholic hierarchy openly allied themselves with UNO while chastising the



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Violeta Chamorro performing her assigned task during the 1990 presidential campaign. The uplifting pose and the white costume were scripted components of her electoral image.

Sandinistas. The U.S. gave them over four million dollars to support their activities, which included public appearances in the same arenas as UNO candidates. Obando performed in UNO's television ads; and shortly before the election, *La Prensa's* front page featured a large photo of the well-fed cardinal bestowing his blessing upon the saintly Chamorro.

Election terror

CIA-*contras* continued to terrorize the countryside throughout the campaign, serving as the armed wing of UNO. Four months prior to the election, terrorist headquarters issued a communiqué which explained: "We want to express all our backing and unconditional support for UNO candidates.... We are going to prevent Sandinista accomplices and collaborators from registering. We are going to assure the triumph of UNO."⁵⁵⁶

Among other things, that meant killing dozens of Sandinista campaign workers and threatening defenseless voters. "An attack in January against the farming community of Las Tijeras in Jinotega was typical. Armed troops had infiltrated and kidnapped a young girl at gunpoint. They marched her from house to house [and] at each house the *contras* repeated the same message: 'If you don't vote for UNO, we are going to shoot you after February 25'.... These incidents were repeated hundreds of times throughout the Nicaraguan countryside.... Approximately 25 percent of the electorate was directly affected by contra military activity."⁵⁵⁷

Additional pressure was applied with numerous cross-border incursions by Honduran troops, repeated violations of Nicaragua's defenseless airspace, and menacing coastal patrols by U.S. Navy ships — all reminders that invasion by the U.S. remained an option. Just three weeks before the election, the United States invaded Panama for no good reason and murdered some 4000 defenseless citizens in a *blitzkrieg* attack. "I hope the people of Nicaragua are paying attention," clucked President Bush.⁵⁵⁸

Despite all this and much more, it was widely believed that the Sandinistas would win the election. Their rallies continued to attract large crowds, especially compared with the modest turnouts for UNO events, and the most reliable opinion polls predicted a crushing defeat for the U.S. coalition.

So certain was the United States of that outcome that, months in advance it had begun orchestrating an international propaganda campaign to discredit the election. It was said to be hopelessly biased in order to ensure a Sandinista victory — despite all the concessions noted above and praise for the arrangements from several credible sources including the U.S. Library of Congress Research Service. Plans were also drawn up to increase military and economic aggression in anticipation of a Sandinista victory.

Nation in mourning

It therefore came as a shock to just about everyone when UNO won by a margin of roughly 55 to 41 percent. And with that, the election suddenly became a model of democratic probity in the eyes of the U.S. government.

For most analysts of the unexpected outcome, there was little doubt about the principal cause — the threat of continued military and economic aggression by the United States and its Nicaraguan proxies.

It was certainly not due to any sudden enthusiasm for UNO, whose victory failed to elicit the general rejoicing which greeted that of the Sandinistas in 1984. “On February 26, all of Nicaragua, not just the 41% that voted for the FSLN, was in mourning. UNO supporters did not pour into the streets to celebrate — there was almost no celebrating to be found.”⁵⁵⁹

A frequent post-election lament was remorse at having voted for UNO merely to express some sort of protest, on the assumption that the FSLN was bound to win anyway.

“Several municipal candidates in towns where UNO won, now do not want to take office. After the results were in, Maria

(continued on page 516)

“An electoral coup d’état”

The Sandinistas entered the electoral process in a situation of major disadvantage. Throughout the 1980s, Nicaragua was under relentless external pressures — military, economic, political, diplomatic — that took a heavy toll on the incumbent party. In the final years of their rule, the Sandinistas presided over a desperate economic crisis marked by hyperinflation and a tumultuous drop in living standards. Nicaragua faced increasing international isolation and, given the breakup of the socialist bloc, dim prospects for international assistance without a reconciliation of relations with the United States....

What is remarkable is not that the Sandinistas were voted out of power but that, given the enormous international mobilization of resources by the United States following on the heels of a decade of U.S. warfare, the FSLN received 42 percent of the vote....

The [election was] a contest, not between the Sandinistas and their domestic political opposition, but between the Nicaragua revolution and the United States....

At the heart of U.S. warfare was a simple dichotomous message that hung over the head of each and every Nicaraguan. A vote for the Sandinistas meant a continuation of hostility from the United States, and thus continued poverty, hardship, war and isolation. A vote for UNO would mean an immediate end to the U.S. aggression, a definitive cessation of military hostilities, and millions of dollars in U.S. economic aid. Nicaraguans voted on February 25 with this gun placed at their heads. U.S. involvement turned the vote into an electoral coup d’état.

— *William I Robinson*⁵⁶⁰

(continued from page 514)

Luisa, who voted for UNO, ran to greet a friend sobbing, 'We lost!'.... Some mothers of fallen combatants, many of whom are part of one of the most patriotic and revolutionary organizations in the country, have sent letters to the Women's Association office in León expressing regret at having voted for UNO, explaining that they feared losing another draft-age son."⁵⁶¹

A man named Joaquin confided to a Swedish reporter that, "I voted for UNO, but I never thought that they would win. I am actually a Sandinista, but I voted for UNO because I want peace as soon as possible. We cannot continue to live like this. If there is peace, the economy will improve and our lives will improve."

The reporter noted that, "There is no victory smile on Joaquin's face — on the contrary. He is not certain that Violeta Chamorro and the others will be able to govern the country. He does not want the United States to come and rule over Nicaragua, and he fears that the *contras*... will take revenge."⁵⁶²

Although some FSLN members urged rejection of the election outcome due to the massive interference of the United States, the party leadership chose to accept the defeat and regard it as a temporary setback.

Alejandro Bendaña, a member of the national campaign committee, later explained: "In reality, entering into a political-electoral contest was a no-win *and* a no-lose proposition for both the Sandinistas and the Bush administration. On the Sandinista side, the contest was necessary to complement and reinforce the military routing of the *contras* and the collapse of the political will in Congress to sustain the war.

"That the election could be lost did not change the reality that the war had basically been won; the *contras* had been forced to dismantle (which might not have been the case had the FSLN won), peace was being attained, and the Sandinista front still remained the strongest and most influential political organization in Nicaragua...."⁵⁶³

“The revolutionary process was simply entering a second phase.... The Sandinista loss at the polls may prove to be a temporary reversal that unfolds into a new strategic opportunity.”

Bendaña’s hopeful prophecy would eventually be fulfilled; but it would take 17 years for the “new strategic opportunity” to ripen. In the meantime, a succession of three right-wing governments would demonstrate the baleful effects of neo-liberal economics⁵⁶⁴ and subservience to the United States.

* * * * *

APPENDIX

Information and Solidarity Resources

Among the thousands of local, state and national organizations providing support to Nicaragua are the following:

Nicaragua Network

2025 I Street N.W., Suite 212, Washington, D.C. 20006

Information clearing house, with over 250 affiliated local committees. Organizes public education programs, work brigades, and tours between Nicaragua and the U.S. Its "Let Nicaragua Live" campaign of material aid is the U.S. component of the international "Nicaragua Must Survive" project.

Quest for Peace, c/o The Quixote Center

P.O. Box 5206, Hyattsville, MD 20782

Co-ordinates national network of material assistance and tabulates total value of contributions.

TecNica

2727 College Avenue, Berkeley, California 94705

Provides training and technical assistance by computer experts, craftsmen and other skilled volunteers.

Witness for Peace

P.O. Box 567, Durham, NC 27702

Places delegations of volunteers in areas of CIA-*contra* activity, with the intent of discouraging terrorist attacks; documents attacks that do occur.

Ben Linder Memorial Fund

P.O. Box 6443, Portland, Oregon 97228

Continues Linder's work of hydroelectric development.

Pledge of Resistance

P.O. Box 29272, Washington, D.C. 20017

Promotes and co-ordinates opposition to CIA-*contras* within the U.S. through public education, mass demonstrations, etc. Thousands have been arrested.

Bikes not Bombs

P.O. Box 5595, Friendship Station, WA, D.C. 20016

As one solution to problems of mass transportation and oil imports, sends bike mechanics to teach repair and assembly. Donates and ships bicycles from the U.S.

Committee of U.S. Citizens Living in Nicaragua

P.O. Box 4403, Austin, Texas 78765

Publishes newsletter, *Nicaragua Through Our Eyes*, with first-hand accounts and commentary from Nicaragua.

American Friends Service Committee

1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102

Long-standing programs of assistance to Third World countries. In Nicaragua, has concentrated on school supplies and pesticide safety for farm workers.

Architects and Planners in Support of Nicaragua

P.O. Box 1151, Topanga, CA 90290

Provides financing, expertise and volunteer labor for construction projects. Trains Nicaraguans in architecture, planning and construction techniques.

Wisconsin Co-ordinating Council on Nicaragua

P.O. Box 1534, Madison, WI 53701

Co-ordinates U.S.-Nicaragua sister organizations. Offers guidance on establishing sister relationships between cities and towns, churches, unions, medical clinics, etc.

OxFam America

115 Broadway, Boston, MA 02116

Similar to American Friends Service Committee; emphasis on medical and farm supplies.

Veterans Peace Action Team

P.O. Box 586, Santa Cruz, California 95061

Sends observer teams into areas with CIA-*contra* activity. Educates U.S. politicians and military personnel. Sponsors numerous aid projects.

Labor Network on Central America

P.O. Box 28014, Oakland, CA 94604

Offers alternative to cold warriors of the "AFL-CIA". Organizes frequent contacts between U.S. and Nicaraguan unionists. Lobbies Congress, conducts information campaigns, etc.

Science for the People

897 Main Street, Cambridge, MA 02139

Sends experts in agriculture, animal husbandry, computers, medicine, physics, mathematics, etc.

National Central America Health Rights Network

Suite 1105, 853 Broadway, New York, NY 10003

Sends volunteer doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers to train and assist.

Ventana

339 Lafayette Street, New York, NY 10012

Exchanges musicians, painters, dancers, writers, etc.

*Information compiled March 1988; subject to change.
Contact Nicaragua Network for current addresses, etc.*

ENDNOTES

Wherever possible, the U.S. mainstream press has been used as the preferred source, for three reasons: to demonstrate how much useful information can be gleaned from establishment sources, despite their limitations and imperfections; to demonstrate how different the world can be made to look when the same information is selected and highlighted from a perspective undistorted by the White House; and to reassure possibly sceptical readers that this account is not based solely on esoteric or “radical” sources.

Much of the information has been taken from the two daily Seattle newspapers, but originated elsewhere. In such cases, the original source is listed in parentheses, usually in abbreviated form. For example: “*Seattle Times* (NYT)” means that the item appeared in the *Seattle Times* on the date noted, but originated in the *New York Times*, most likely on the same or preceding day. The abbreviations are:

AP	Associated Press
BG	Boston Globe
BT	Baltimore Sun
CSM	Christian Science Monitor
DMN	Dallas Morning News
KR	Knight-Ridder Newspapers
LAT	Los Angeles Times
NYT	New York Times
ND	Newsday
Phi	Philadelphia Inquirer
WP	Washington Post
UPI	United Press International

In order to conserve space, not every quotation and fact has been cited according to strict academic practice. In such cases, the relevant source can usually be found in the reference cited immediately preceding or following it.

Also to save space, some lengthy names have been abbreviated. They are: "Seattle P-I" for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* daily newspaper; "CAHI" for Central American Historical Institute; and "NACLA", for North American Congress on Latin America.

For publishing details on books cited in these notes, see References on page 549.

Finally, *op. cit.* references separated by some distance from the original citations are referred back to them in square brackets; e.g. "[cf. #191]" means that the full citation can be found at note 191.

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518. Michael Parenti, "Creeping Fascism". *Society*, Vol. 9/No. 8, June 1972
519. John Stockwell, *op. cit.* [cf. #83]
520. Quoted in *The Nation*, 27 February 1988
521. For a detailed discussion of this trend, see Thomas Ferguson & Joel Rogers, *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics*. See also, Sherle Schwenninger & Jerry Sanders, *Post-Reagan America*.
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523. *New York Times*, 3 May 1988
524. For a concise outline of the problem, see Joshua Cohen & Joel Rogers, *Rules of the Game*
525. *Newsweek*, 6 June 1988
526. *Ibid.*
527. *Ibid.*
528. "More Vietnams?", *The Nation*, 23 January 1988
529. Times Mirror/Gallup Organization, *op. cit.*
530. (a) *The Nation*, 21 May 1988
 (b) *Seattle Times*, 26 May 1988
531. Saul Landau, *op. cit.* [cf. #189]
532. The address of "SCAMP" as of May 1988 is 107 27th Ave. East, Seattle, WA 98112. See also "Talk Back to Your Local Newspaper". *Utne Reader*, Sept.-Oct. 1987.

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533. Dan Coughlin & Jack Hopkins, "Rice explains why he killed". *Seattle Times*, 24 January 1986
534. Quoted by Anthony Lewis, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (NYT), 22 March 1988
535. "Letter to the Editor". *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 2 March 1985
536. Unidentified Bible-thumper in "Thy Kingdom Come... Thy Will Be Done". PBS/KCTS-TV (Seattle), 6 April 1988. See also "Religious counterrevolution" and "What makes Pat Robertson run?" in *Convergence*, Spring 1988 [Christic Institute].
537. Richard Healey, *op. cit.* [cf. #344]
538. Quoted in *Playboy*, September 1983
539. David Nyhan, *op. cit.* [cf. #501]
540. Peter Marchetti, interviewed in *CAHI Update*, Vol. 7/No. 4, 23 February 1988
541. *Newsweek*, 1 February 1988
542. *CAHI Update*, Vol. 7/No. 4, 23 February 1988
543. Judith Thurman, *op. cit.* [cf. #494]
544. Philip Berryman, *Inside Central America*
545. *CAHI Update*, Vol. 7/No. 15, 10 May 1988
546. *Ibid.*
547. The lead article in *The New York Times* on 16 May 1988 was headlined, "Sandinistas Take Tougher Positions, Threaten Contras ". Reporter Stephen Kinzer's account of the strike consisted of one sentence: "Government officials have... refused to meet demands of striking construction workers and auto mechanics."
548. Often referred to as the Esquipulas Agreement, after the town in Guatemala where the initial negotiations took place; cf. pages 388 ff.
549. Anonymous Pentagon official quoted in *The Nation*, 1 May 1989
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551. Patti Davis, Ronald Reagan's daughter quoted in *Newsweek*, 2 October 1989

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552. Mark Cook, "UNO: One is Not Enough".
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553. William I. Robinson, *A Faustian Bargain*. Robinson provides a detailed account of all the means and methods employed by the U.S. to sabotage the 1990 election.
554. U.S. *Congressional Record*, 4 October 1989, page H6642
555. Joseph E. Mulligan, *The Nicaraguan Church and the Revolution*
556. *Barricada*, 2 November 1989
557. William I Robinson, *op. cit.*
558. Noam Chomsky, "The Invasion of Panama".
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559. "After the Poll Wars — Explaining the Upset".
Envio, March 1990.
www.envio.org.ni/articulo/2591
560. William I Robinson, *A Faustian Bargain, op. cit.*
561. *Ibid.*
562. Ewa Thibaud, "Vardag utan segerleende".
Dagens Nyheter, 2 March 1990
563. William I. Robinson, *op. cit.*
564. For an analysis of neo-liberalism in this context, see "The Neoliberal Model in Central America: Gospel of the New Right". *Envio*, April 1991.
www.envio.org.ni/articulo/2920

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Selection of words and phrases that can be located in the text with the search function of Adobe Reader or other computer program for reading PDF documents.

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- Abrams, Elliott
- Adams, John Quincy
- AFL-CIO
- AIFLD, American Institute
for Free Labor Development
- Allende, Salvador
- alphabetizers
- American Protective League
- Americares
- Americas Watch
- amnesty
 - CIA-*contras*
 - Miskitos
- Amnesty International
- AMNLAE, Luisa Amanda Espi-
noza Women’s Association
- anti-communism
- anti-Semitism
- Anti-Somocista Tribunals
- appropriate technology
- Arbenz, Jacobo
- Arce, Bayardo
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 - sabotage of
- arrogance of USA
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 - autonomy
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- beef cattle
- Bellecourt, Vernon
- Bernardo
- Berryman, Phillip
- Blessed Virgin
- Betancur, President of Colombia
- Big Lie campaign
- Bipartisan Commission
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- Borge, Tomas
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- Brown, George, Jr.

Brunei – Colombia

- | | |
|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Brunei | Central America |
| Bryan-Chamorro Treaty | Central America Court |
| Buchanan, Patrick J. | Central America peace initiative |
| Bush, George | CEPAD, Evangelical Committee |
| business community | for Aid & Development |
| Butler, Smedley | Cerezo, President of Guatemala |
| Calero, Adolfo | Chamorro family |
| campesino | – Carlos |
| Canada | – Edgar |
| canal | – Pedro Joaquin |
| – Nicaragua | – Violetta |
| – Panama | Chile |
| capitalism | – Allende |
| Cara el Pueblo | – CIA |
| – Face the People | – Pinochet |
| Carballo, Bismarck | Chinandega |
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| Cardenal, Fernando | Chomsky, Noam |
| Caribbean | Christian, Shirley |
| Central America Action | churches |
| Carlson, Peter | – Catholic |
| Carrion, Luis | – evangelical |
| Carter, Jimmy | – fundamentalist |
| Carter administration | – mainline |
| – CIA | – Protestant |
| – Somoza | CIA, Central Intelligence Agency |
| – Sandinistas | – covert operations |
| Casey, William | – destabilization |
| casualties | – media |
| Catholic Church | CIA-contras |
| – hierarchy | – funding |
| – Pope | – Guardia |
| – Somoza | – human rights |
| CAUSA | – political front |
| copyright | – video game |
| – La Prensa | Cisneros, Henry |
| | Colombia |

CISPES – Federal Commission

- CISPES, Committee in Solidarity
 with the People of El Salvador
 communism
 – political parties
 Congress
 – moderates
 conscription
 Constitution
 – Nicaraguan
 – U.S.
 Contadora peace initiative
 Contragate
 Coolidge administration
 co-operatives
 Coordinadora Democratica
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 Defense, U.S. Dept. of
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 – embargo
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 – war costs
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 – links with United Fruit Co.
 El Mercurio, Chile
 – CIA
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 – sabotage of
 – U.S. client states
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 FAO, Broad Opposition Front
 Fast for Life
 Federal Commission on Inte-
 grated Long-Term Strategy

Ferch – labor unions

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Ferch, John | Hunthausen, Bishop Raymond |
| FMLN, Farabundo Marti | imperialism |
| Forces of National Liberation | Inouye, Senator Daniel |
| folk culture | International Court of Justice |
| Fonseca, Carlos | (World Court) |
| foreign policy elite | International Institute |
| forest resources | for Strategic Studies |
| fourth branch of U.S. govt. | International League |
| freedom of expression | for Human Rights |
| – Nicaragua | international trade |
| – U.S. client states | invasion, threat |
| FSLN, Frente Sandinista | Iran/Contragate scandal |
| de Liberacion Nacional | IRENA, Nicaraguan Institute |
| Corinto | of Natural Resources |
| Fuentes, Carlos | Israel |
| Garcia, Alan | Jacobsen Report |
| Garwood, Ellen | Japan |
| genocide of American Indians | January 22 Mothers |
| Goering, Herman | Jesuits |
| Gorbachev, Mikhael | Jews, Managua |
| Grand Area theory | Johnson, Lyndon, |
| Grenada | Kassenbaum, Nancy |
| Group of Twelve, Los Doce | Kellogg, Frank B |
| Guardia Nacional | Kennan, George |
| Guatemala | KGB |
| Gumbleton, Bishop Thomas | King, Rev. Martin Luther, Jr. |
| Habib, Phillip | Kirkland, Lane |
| Hamilton, Lee | Kirkpatrick, Jeanne |
| Hart, Gary | KISAN |
| health care | Kissinger, Henry |
| Heritage Foundation | Kissinger Commission |
| Honduras | Knox, Philander |
| Hoover administration | labor unions |
| House of the Vampires | – AFL-CIA |
| human rights | – Nicaraguan |

land reform – natural resources

- land reform
 - Agrarian Reform Act
 - landowners
- Landau, Saul
- Lane, Arthur
- La Prensa
 - censorship
 - CIA
- LASA, Latin American Studies Association
- Latin America
- Leiken, Robert
- LeoGrande, William
- Lewis, Anthony
- Liberation theology
- Linder, Ben
- Lippman, Walter
- Literacy Crusade
- Loison, Rev. Jean
- Los Doce/Group of Twelve
- low intensity conflict (LIC)
- Lowery, Rev. Joseph
- Lowry, Mike
- Loyalists, American Revolution
- Lusinchi, President of Venezuela
- McCarran-Walter Act
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 - alternatives
 - CIA
 - cult of objectivity
 - disinformation
- Manifest Destiny
- Marines, U.S.
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- MiG hoax
- mlitia
- mining of roads and harbors
- Miranda hoax
- Miskitos
- MISURA
- mixed economy
- Monge, Alberto
- Monroe Doctrine
- Moon, Rev. Sun Myung
- Moravian Church
- Murray, Emmett
- Murton, Thomas
- Myrdal, Gunnar
- National Council of Churches
- National Guard
- national security
- National Security Council
- National Union
 - of Farmers and Ranchers
- natural resources

Neutrality Act – Sandinista

Neutrality Act	political prisoners
New York Times	pollution
Newsweek	popular church
Nixon administration	post-Vietnam syndrome
Noriega, Manuel	president's private army
North, Oliver	prisons
Oakes, John B.	– sexual slavery
Obando, Cardinal Miguel	private sector
O'Neill, Tip	pro-contra opposition
OAS, Organization of American States	propaganda
Ortega, Daniel	– Europe
Ortega, Humberto	– United States
Outreach Working Group on Central America	proxy government
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Pena, Fr. Luis	– crimes
Perez, Carlos Andres	– ignorance
Perez, Rigoberto Lopez	– corruption
CPDH, Permanent Human Rights Commission	– popularity
Peru	Regan, Donald
pesticides	regional autonomy
Pezzullo, Lawrence	Reich, Otto
Philippines	religious right
Physicians for Social Responsibility	Republican Party
Pinochet, General	Romero, Archbishop Oscar
political parties	Roosevelt, Theodore
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	Sandinista Defense Committees
	Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)

Sandinista process – Zelaya

- Sandinista process
- Sandino, Augusto
- SELA, Latin American Economic System
- Shea, Nina
- Shelton, Turner
- Shirley, Mayor Brent
- Shoup, David M.
- Singh, Umendra
- Singlaub, John K.
- socialism
- Socialist International
- solidarity
- Soviet Union
- Spear, Joseph C.
- State, U.S. Dept. of
- state of emergency
- Stockman, David
- Stockwell, John
- Sumu Indians
- Tellez, Dora Maria
- terceristas
- terrorism
- Tocqueville, Alexis de
- United Federation of Honduran Workers (FUTH)
- United Fruit Company
- UNO, United Nicaraguan Opposition
- U.S. Information Agency (USIA)
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