



*Nicaragua's Sandinistas first took up arms in 1961, invoking the name of Augusto César Sandino, a general turned foe of U.S. intervention in 1927-33. Sandino—here (center) seeking arms in Mexico in 1929 with a Salvadoran Communist ally, Augustín Farabundo Martí (right)—led a hit-and-run war against U.S. Marines. Nearly 1,000 of his men died, but their elusive chief was never caught.*

# Nicaragua

Perhaps not since the Spanish Civil War have Americans taken such clearly opposed sides in a conflict in a foreign country. Church organizations and pacifists send volunteers to Nicaragua and lobby against U.S. contra aid; with White House encouragement, conservative outfits have raised money for the “freedom fighters,” in some cases possibly violating U.S. laws against supplying arms abroad.

Even after nearly eight years, views of the Sandinista regime’s fundamental nature vary widely. Some scholars regard it as far more Marxist-Leninist in rhetoric than in practice. *Foreign Policy* editor Charles William Maynes argues that Managua’s Soviet-backed rulers can be “tamed and contained” via the Central American peace plan drafted by Costa Rica’s President Oscar Arias Sánchez.

Not likely, says Edward N. Luttwak of Washington, D.C.’s Center for Strategic and International Studies. Expectations that Daniel Ortega and Co., hard pressed as they are, “might actually allow the democratization required” by the Arias plan defy the history of Marxist-Leninist regimes. Such governments, says Luttwak, make “tactical accommodations,” but feel they must “retain an unchallenged monopoly of power.” An opposition victory would be “a Class A political defeat” for Moscow. The debate continues.

As scholars point out, the U.S. *economic* stake in Nicaragua is small. Indeed, in all of poverty-ridden Central America outside Panama, *Yanqui* direct business investment is under \$800 million—about 2.5 percent of the U.S. stake in Latin America as a whole. But the troubled region, along with the Caribbean, is part of the United States’ oft-neglected “backyard.” And that, since Fidel Castro’s Cuban revolution (1959), has been the locale of several Eastern Bloc targets of opportunity—notably El Salvador, still torn by civil war, and Grenada, invaded by U.S. forces in 1983, as well as Nicaragua.

Here, Richard L. Millett traces Nicaragua’s history, into which Americans were first drawn more than a century ago. Clifford Krauss reviews the sinuous path of the Sandinistas in power. Henry A. Kissinger reflects on what the contest between the White House and Congress over Nicaragua policy tells us about *American* governance.

## 'PATRIA LIBRE'

by Richard L. Millett

When President Calvin Coolidge sent U.S. Marines to Nicaragua in 1926, most Americans had little idea of where they were going or why.

The place names—Managua, Corinto, Wiwili, Bluefields—seemed out of O. Henry's *Cabbages and Kings*. So did the Marines' mission. Nicaragua's government sought help in quelling a revolt led by opposition generals backing a would-be president in exile in Mexico.

Polls showed that many Americans thought Nicaragua was in Africa or the West Indies. They wondered, as Will Rogers put it, "Why are we in Nicaragua, and what the hell are we doing there?"

By 1928 discontent ran high in Congress where, 10 years after the slaughter of World War I, isolationist sentiment was strong. Senator George W. Norris (R.-Neb.) charged that Coolidge's "unauthorized and indefensible" intervention set a perilous "precedent." If a president can wage war in Nicaragua without congressional consent, said the senator, "he can do the same thing with many other countries."

Yet, just as George Norris was not the last U.S. senator to invoke the specter of undeclared war in Nicaragua, Coolidge's was not the first intervention. During the 19th century, U.S. Navy ships often called at Central America's ramshackle ports to see to the safety of *Yanqui* residents and property. In 1854, after a U.S. envoy was roughed up by a political mob in Greytown, a British-controlled port on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, the sloop *Cyane* shelled the town. (The British, entering the Crimean War, let it pass.) U.S. troops first went ashore in Nicaragua in force in 1909, when President William Howard Taft sent 400 Marines to Bluefields, another Caribbean port, to back a revolt against a dictatorship. The Marines landed again in 1912, to *quell* a revolt.

Indeed, except for a few months in 1925-26, at least a few Marines were maintained in Nicaragua until 1933—a long 21 years.

### I

## 'A TRADITION OF REBELLION'

All in all, Nicaragua's history is largely a history of disruptions—by foreigners, by its own leaders (or would-be leaders), and even by the forces of nature: earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes. An archeological dig uncovered footprints made by Indians caught fleeing a volcanic blast more than 2,000 years ago. Nicaraguans have been surviving



*Early industry: campesinos and coffee shrubs. Coffee beans brought Nicaragua into the world economy; by World War I, coffee accounted for 63 percent of exports. German, French, and U.S. investors helped develop the trade.*

disasters, natural or manmade, ever since.

Theirs is both the largest and among the least densely populated of the Central American republics. About the size of Michigan, Nicaragua averages only 68 people per square mile. Visitors have long noted its beauty. Archeologist Ephraim George Squier, U.S. chargé d'affaires in Central America in 1849–50, rhapsodized about Nicaragua's "high and regular volcanic cones, its wooded plains, broad lakes, bright rivers, and emerald verdure." The people, too, were beguiling—"the *mozo* [young lad] and his *machete*, the red-belted cavalier . . . pricking his champing horse through the streets, the languid Señora puffing the smoke of her cigarette in lazy jets through her nostrils . . ."

The hot western lowlands embrace two large lakes—on whose shores lived Nicarao, an Indian chief—a chain of volcanoes, and rich soil that supports crops of cotton, sugar cane, and rice, as well as cattle. The cool highlands produce coffee and tobacco. In the thinly-populated Atlantic coastal plain, heavy rainfall (often above 200 inches a year) nurtures lush forests. Nicaragua's location once seemed blessed: As an ideal site for a canal linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, it was, said Louis-Napoléon in 1846, fated for "prosperity and grandeur."

As Squier saw it, Nicaragua's "genial earth waits only for the touch

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of industry to reward the husbandman a hundredfold.”

Yet today, the 3,373,000 Nicaraguans (average income: \$790) rank with their neighbors in Honduras and war-torn El Salvador as the poorest Central Americans. Their modest “touch of industry” came late.

Central America’s first railroads opened in Costa Rica in 1854 and Panama in 1855; Nicaragua’s first line was begun 23 years later. Europeans brought the coffee bean from Cuba to Costa Rica, still the heart of the Central American coffee industry, a half century before it reached Nicaragua. The country was an early banana producer, but when the big Banana Boom arrived in 1900–30, The United Fruit Company and other *Yanqui* firms got most of their crop from Honduras and Guatemala.

As late as World War II, Nicaragua was tied with Honduras as the region’s least developed country. Foreign investors were wary. As William H. Seward, Abraham Lincoln’s secretary of state, wrote to a U.S. envoy to Nicaragua during the 1860s, “everybody loses patience with them for not being wiser, more constant, and more stable.”

### British Intruders, Mexican Emperor

How that fateful instability developed is a complex tale.

The first Spanish conquistadors arrived from Panama in 1522, midway in Spain’s era of Latin American conquest, between Hernán Cortés’s seizure of the Aztec Empire in Mexico and Francisco Pizarro’s plundering of Peru. As elsewhere in Central America, the Spanish settled mainly in the west (still home to nearly 90 percent of the population). They subjugated, baptized, and enslaved most of the natives. But Nicaragua’s gold and silver deposits soon ran out. In two decades, 200,000 Indians—at least one-third of the population—were shipped off to toil in Panama and the mines of Peru. (A 1548 census counted just 11,137 Indians.) The province, part of Spain’s kingdom of Guatemala, became a neglected colonial backwater.

The Spanish built churches and monasteries, but few roads or schools. They exploited rather than developed. What they gave, besides their Mediterranean-style architecture, their language, plantation farming, and Catholicism, to *all* of Central America was a rivalry between two groups: Conservatives, mostly aristocratic landowners with close ties to Spain and the church; and Liberals, generally native-born Creoles, anticlerical and restive about Spanish rule.

In Nicaragua, the rivalry centered around old families—Chamorro and Sacasa were big names—and two cities: Granada, the Conservative agricultural hub, and León, the Liberal commercial center.

The Spanish never really ruled all of Nicaragua. British adventurers

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*Richard L. Millett, 49, is professor of history at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville. Born in Providence, Rhode Island, he received an A.B. from Harvard University (1960), and an M.A. (1962) and a Ph.D. (1966) from the University of New Mexico. His books include Guardians of the Dynasty (1977).*

roamed the Mosquito Coast, a strip along the Atlantic named for its Miskito Indians. In time, they saw that a river entering the sea at San Juan del Norte could be part of a route to the Pacific. The first of many inland forays by British buccaneers (against weak Spanish resistance) culminated in the sacking of Granada in 1665.

The Spanish Empire finally collapsed in Central America in 1821, when Agustín de Iturbide, a Mexican military chieftain, declared himself emperor of an independent “New Spain”—Mexico and Central America. By 1824, Nicaragua’s Liberals and Conservatives agreed to join their four neighbors—Costa Rica, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala—in forming the United Provinces of Central America.

### Republican *Jefes*

Led by a president in Guatemala City, the federation was eminently sensible in theory. Its government investigated an isthmian canal. Central America, said historian Alejandro Marure, will be the “happiest nation on the globe.” But chronic tensions (e.g., each state remained “sovereign”) broke up the union during the 1830s.

Nicaragua declared itself “free, sovereign and independent” in 1838. The idea of citizenship remained vague throughout Central America, however, and Nicaragua was particularly fragmented. The Spanish and Creoles, concentrated in the populous, prosperous west, dominated politics and the agricultural economy. The majority mestizos (people of mixed Spanish and Indian blood) scratched out a living growing rice, corn, and beans (still staples of Central American diets). The remote east was populated by the Miskitos and other indigenous Indians and by blacks, originally brought from Jamaica and the Cayman Islands by the British to work in logging.\*

Unlike the predominantly Catholic west, the east coast was heavily Protestant. During the 19th century, German missionaries of the Moravian Church settled among the Indians, built schools, and devised a Miskito alphabet so they could teach the Bible (and the Moravian distaste for socialism). Other Protestant missionaries followed.

What Nicaragua’s ruling Spanish elites developed, as the late Carlos Fonseca Amador, a founder in 1961 of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN), noted, was “a rich tradition of rebellion.”

Early on, as Conservatives and Liberals fought for supremacy, Nicaragua came to epitomize the banana republic. Between 1824 and 1842, it endured 18 changes of power and 17 armed conflicts—typically fought by a few hundred ragged, ill-trained troops on either side, hungry for loot and armed with muskets, cannon, and swords. So often were León and

\*Nicaragua’s approximate racial mix: 70 percent mestizo, 17 percent white, nine percent black, four percent Indian. The Miskitos and blacks distrust “the Spanish,” the whites and mestizos in the west; “the Spanish” in turn regard their east coast compatriots as inferior. Numbering about 75,000 in 1980, the Miskitos are Nicaragua’s largest indigenous ethnic group.

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Granada sacked that in 1857 Managua, a town midway between them, was made the capital.

By then, Americans had become involved, willy-nilly, in Nicaragua's highly contentious domestic politics.

## II ENTER UNCLE SAM

President James Monroe had declared Latin America off-limits to the European powers in 1823. But for years the weak and distracted United States did little to enforce the Monroe Doctrine (which Otto von Bismarck dismissed as "a species of arrogance"). Then, in 1848, during James Polk's administration, the U.S. won the Mexican War and acquired California. The Gold Rush spurred U.S. interest in a canal, in Panama or Nicaragua. Soon, President Zachary Taylor, the "Old Rough and Ready" Mexican War hero, moved to curb the British, who had created "Mosquitia," a protectorate with a puppet Miskito king and putative control of San Juan del Norte, renamed Greytown, which was sure to be the eastern terminus of any Nicaraguan canal. The Clayton-Bulwer Treaty (1850) provided that neither country would seek exclusive control of any trans-isthmian route, or "occupy or fortify or colonize" any part of Central America. The United States' role as the chief foreign actor in Nicaragua had begun.

The *Yanqui* transportation tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt developed a Nicaraguan route to the California gold fields. Soon, nearly as many Forty-Niners would be crossing Nicaragua by stagecoach and lake steamer as by the trans-Panama route (on which the risk of yellow fever and malaria was greater). The possibility that Nicaragua might really prosper intensified the Liberal-Conservative contests for local supremacy. Indeed, in 1855, the Liberals wearied of trying to unseat the Conservative president, Fruto Chamorro, who had Guatemalan aid.

Fatefully, they sought help from *outside* Central America. Thus entered one of many figures who would, in varying ways, illustrate Nicaragua's chronic difficulties in mastering its own fate.

William Walker, a Tennessee-born "filibuster" (soldier of fortune) who had once tried to rule part of Mexico, was hired by the Liberals to fight the Conservatives. But within 13 months of landing at the Pacific port now named Corinto with 58 armed "immortals," Walker assembled an army, captured Granada, and became Nicaragua's president.\*

Walker mesmerized Americans. (*Harper's Weekly* called him "a

\*As far as is known, Walker was the second U.S.-born leader of a foreign country. Joseph Jenkins Roberts, a black freedman from Virginia, was elected to head the new African republic of Liberia in 1847.

hero.") But his erratic rule lasted only 10 months. His grandiose plans to "regenerate" Nicaragua under Anglo-Saxon leadership—to make English its language, to adopt slavery (abolished by the United Provinces in 1824), and to expand—alarmed Central Americans. With backing from Peru (which contributed \$100,000), Cornelius Vanderbilt (whose transit rights Walker annulled), and the British, the Costa Ricans led Nicaragua's three other neighbors in an invasion known as the National War. U.S. Marines finally escorted Walker out of the country in 1857. (Later, caught attempting a comeback, he was executed in Honduras.)

Among other things, the episode showed how U.S. policy toward faraway Nicaragua could be shaped by domestic issues, in this case slavery. President James Buchanan refused to recognize the pro-slavery Walker regime, so as not to worsen tensions between America's Northern and Southern states. Even so, Nicaraguans saw Walker's intrusion as proof of a U.S. desire to dominate them. And a pattern emerged: Nicaragua's political factions would repeatedly seek foreign intervention rather than accept defeat at the hands of their local opponents.

That habit was the undoing of Nicaragua's first truly nationalist leader, General José Santos Zelaya.

A member of León's rising middle class, Zelaya was one of the Central American strongmen to emerge in the "Liberal Revolution" that swept the region during the late 19th century—inspired by progress-minded *jefes* (chiefs) like Mexico's president Porfirio Díaz and European thinkers such as France's Auguste Comte. They gave economic growth priority over democracy, and felt that what Comte called "republican dictatorships" could best achieve it.

### The Rough Rider's Award

No democrat, Zelaya held the presidency for 16 years (1893–1909) by beating down Conservative revolts and rewriting the Constitution to permit his re-election. (In one race, semi-literate rural voters were given a choice of three candidates, "José," "Santos," and "Zelaya.") He brought stability and some economic progress, and managed to ease the British out of the Mosquito Coast while borrowing from London bankers to build schools and a rudimentary network of roads and rail lines. (Foreign capital was important to the Liberal formula for progress.)

While saluting Washington as the "natural protector" of small republics like his, Zelaya built Central America's strongest army. (His new military academy employed a German captain and several Chileans.) Zelaya aimed to expand Nicaragua's influence. Indeed, he aided a force of Honduran Liberals in mounting a conquest of their weak homeland, a perennial focus of Central America's wars.

But Nicaragua—not for the last time—was to become embroiled in larger countries' affairs.

A far-off event—the 1898 Spanish-American War—brought U.S.



## CENTRAL AMERICA: AN ISTHMUS OF OPPOSITES

They are "more opposite to one another than in Europe the Spaniard is opposite to the French, or to the Hollander, or to the Portugall." So wrote Englishman Thomas Gage, who toured Central America in 1648.

Gage referred to the "deadly hatred" between the two dominant Spanish clans, the *peninsulares* who bore Spain's yoke gladly—and the locally-born Creoles who did not. The region of seven countries\* and 26 million people still has its "opposites."

Costa Rica is mostly white, in part because Spanish women joined its settlers early. (Miscegenation was common elsewhere.) Guatemalans have the most Indian blood. Nicaragua has a high proportion (nearly three-fourths) of mixed-race inhabitants, called mestizos or ladinos.

While its neighbors are uncrowded, El Salvador is the most densely populated nation in the Western Hemisphere—and the only Central American country without large amounts of public land. As recently as the 1960s, 95 percent of its acreage was owned by about 14 families.

Some 22 percent has been transferred to poor farmers under a land reform program launched in 1980 by a Christian Democratic military junta. But the program has stirred the ire of property owners and become a target of Marx-

\*The old United Provinces of Central America encompassed Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. But Belize and Panama are also regarded as Central American states.



ist-Leninist insurgents. Hence, José Duarte's civilian government has been beset by both rightist groups and Cuban-backed guerrillas.

Here, political geography does not favor Communist forces as it did in the Vietnam War. El Salvador's Marxist-Leninists have not enjoyed sanctuaries in neighboring nations. But Nicaragua's *contras* do. Much as Central Americans complain about *Yanquis*, Communist revolutionaries do not have wide local appeal.

Among other incongruities, prosperous Costa Rica has no army, poor Nicaragua has the region's largest. In a Spanish-speaking world, Belize, settled by British logcutters, retains English. And in a world of *campesinos*, Panama is an international financial entrepôt; banks employ 10

percent of its work force.

The dream of unity survived the old Central American federation. (A new federal constitution was actually written in 1921.) But it remains a dream. A U.S.-sponsored Central American Court of Justice, set up following a 1906 war between Guatemala and El Salvador, lasted just 10 years. (Nicaragua's withdrawal killed it.) A more recent example of how disputes can flare in the region was the 1969 "soccer war."

The trek of landless Salvadorans—more than 38,000 of them by the early 1960s—to Honduras had long disturbed its peasants, workers, shopkeepers, and landowners. Boundary disputes erupted, and in 1967 the two countries broke relations. In 1969, when both their soccer teams reached the World Cup finals, so much violence accompanied the games in their capitals that the deciding match (won by the Salvadorans) was played in Mexico City. Even so, mobs in Honduras attacked Salvadorans there, and mobs in El Salvador returned the favor. By the time the Organization of American States intervened, a Salvadoran invasion force had pushed to within 75 miles of Tegucigalpa, and Honduran warplanes had bombed San Salvador.

Then as now, the odds were against Simón Bolívar's 1815 prediction that Central Americans will "form a confederation" and become a "happy region" enjoying "tribute from the four quarters of the globe."

### BELIZE

Population: 159,000. Size: 8,867 sq. mi. Pop. Density: 18 per sq. mi. Capital: Belmopan (pop. 2,932). Gross National Product: \$190 million. Per Capita Income: \$1,200. Major Exports: sugar, citrus fruits, bananas, seafood, timber. Literacy: 92 percent. Independence: 1981, from Britain. (British Honduras was last European possession on Latin American mainland; English remains official language.) U.S. Aid (1987): \$12,600,000 (economic), \$600,000 (military). Leader: Manuel A. Esquivel, Prime Minister since 1984 election.

### HONDURAS

Population: 4,528,000. Size: 43,277 sq. mi. Pop. Density: 105 per sq. mi. Capital: Tegucigalpa (pop. 530,000). Gross National Product: \$3.36 billion. Per Capita Income: \$740. Major Exports: bananas, coffee, timber, beef. Literacy: 60 percent. Independence: 1821 from Spain, 1838 from United Provinces of Central America. U.S. Aid (1987): \$187,800,000 (economic), \$61,200,000 (military). Leader: José Sirmón Azcona Hoyos, elected 1985 to four-year term. Present constitution (1982) ended decade of military rule.

### GUATEMALA

Population: 8,177,000. Size: 42,042 sq. mi. Pop. Density: 194 per sq. mi. Capital: Guatemala City (pop. 1,220,000). Gross National Product: \$7.64 billion. Per Capita Income: \$930. Major Exports: coffee, cotton, sugar, bananas. Literacy: 58 percent. Independence: 1821 from Spain, 1838 from United Provinces of Central America. U.S. Aid (1987): \$177,400,000 (economic), \$5,490,000 (military). Leader: President Mario Vicio Cerezo Arévalo, elected 1985 to five-year term, ending 15 years of military rule.

### NICARAGUA

Population: 3,373,000. Size: 49,759 sq. mi. Pop. Density: 68 per sq. mi. Capital: Managua (pop. 780,000). Gross National Product: \$2.67 billion. Per Capita Income: \$790. Major Exports: coffee, cotton, beef. Literacy: 87 percent. Independence: 1821 from Spain, 1838 from United Provinces of Central America. U.S. Aid: None since 1982. Leader: Daniel Ortega Saverio, Sandinista comandante on Junta that took power in 1979; elected 1984 to six-year term as President. Constitution (1986) prescribes representative democracy, but real power held by nine-member Sandinista National Directorate.

### COSTA RICA

Population: 2,660,000. Size: 19,650 sq. mi. Pop. Density: 135 per sq. mi. Capital: San José (pop. 740,000). Gross National Product: \$3.67 billion. Per Capita Income: \$1,380. Literacy: 90 percent. Major Exports: coffee, bananas, beef, sugar. Independence: 1821 from Spain, 1838 from United Provinces of Central America. U.S. Aid (1987): \$175,400,000 (economic), \$1,728,000 (military). Leader: President Oscar Arias Sánchez, elected 1986 to four-year term, continuing tradition of peaceful and constitutional transfers of power dating back to 1899, and since broken only twice (1917, 1948).

### PANAMA

Population: 2,222,000. Size: 29,762 sq. mi. Pop. Density: 75 per sq. mi. Capital: Panama City (pop. 470,000). Gross National Product: \$4.83 billion. Per Capita Income: \$2,170. Literacy: 88 percent. Major Exports: bananas, sugar, shrimp. One-quarter of national income generated by the Panama Canal, due to shift from U.S. to Panamanian control in 1999. Independence: 1821 from Spain, 1903 from Colombia; sovereignty over Canal Zone gained in 1979. U.S. Aid (1987): \$8,400,000 (economic), \$3,518,000 (military). Leader: General Manuel Antonio Noriega Morena, chief of Panama Defense Forces (formerly Guardia Nacional) since 1983. Nominally a representative democracy; real power has resided with the military since a 1969 coup.

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### EL SALVADOR

Population: 4,861,000. Size: 8,098 sq. mi. Pop. Density: 600 per sq. mi. Capital: San Salvador (pop. 520,000). Gross National Product: \$4 billion. Per Capita Income: \$820. Major Exports: coffee, cotton, sugar. Literacy: 72 percent. Independence: 1821 from Spain, 1840 from United Provinces of Central America. U.S. Aid (1987): \$452,100,000 (economic), \$11,521,000 (military). Leader: President José Napoleón Duarte Fuentes, elected 1984 to five-year term, amid civil war, following 52 years of military rule.

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Caribbean Sea

Sea

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miles

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troops to Cuba and the Philippines, and the United States became a nascent world power. U.S. relations with whoever ruled in Managua had been fairly cordial as long as Washington pondered building a canal through Nicaragua. But the canal issue was settled following the 1901 inaugural of President Theodore Roosevelt, the former Rough Rider in Cuba whose "Roosevelt Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine would bring an era of direct U.S. intervention in the Caribbean and Central America. Eventually, T.R. and the U.S. Congress awarded the prize to Panama.\*

Zelaya was enraged. There was talk that he discussed a canal with Japanese officials. The upshot was a Conservative revolt, encouraged by U.S. officials and saved by the 400 Marines that President Taft sent to Bluefields in 1909. Although a pro-U.S. government was installed, in 1912 Taft had to dispatch more than 2,000 Marines to ensure its survival. Even after calm was restored, more than 100 Marines were retained in Managua as a symbol of U.S. support for the minority Conservatives and U.S. determination to prevent further revolutions.

### Sandino's Rebellion

Pursuing "dollar diplomacy," the Taft administration persuaded the Conservatives to accept loans from U.S. bankers to refund Nicaragua's foreign debt and allow American officials to oversee customs receipts. (U.S.-aided "financial rehabilitation," said Taft, would bring "a measure of stability" to such countries.) The Bryan-Chamorro Treaty (1916) gave the United States rights over a Nicaraguan canal and an option to lease a naval base on the Gulf of Fonseca.

In all but name, and almost by default, Nicaragua was now a U.S. protectorate, but one which gave Washington no pride of ownership.

After a major distraction—World War I—U.S. officials began seeking a way out of Nicaragua. The Coolidge administration was particularly uncomfortable with the United States' role as the chief supporter of a minority regime. After a U.S.-supervised election, a new president backed by a coalition of Liberals and dissident Conservatives took office in Managua in 1925. Seven months later, the last Marines departed, happy to go home.

But then a revolt installed the Conservatives' leader, General Emiliano Chamorro, whereupon the *Liberals* rebelled.

As it happened, Washington—trying to *enforce* stability in Central America, to protect U.S. investments and deter Mexican ambitions in the area—sponsored a 1923 treaty providing that the region's nations

\*In 1904, Roosevelt claimed a U.S. right to exercise "international police power" in shaky Latin countries. That year, European banks threatened to foreclose on the Dominican Republic, whose government was in financial straits due to the chronic pilfering of customs receipts. Roosevelt said that "backward" states should be helped to pay their bills in order to keep the Europeans out. He thus sent a receiver-general to Santo Domingo. Soon revolts erupted, and the Marines went in—to stay until 1924. Other similar interventions followed in Haiti and Honduras, as well as Nicaragua. The Roosevelt Corollary, widely criticized, was formally repudiated by the U.S. State Department in 1930.



*Nicaragua was favored for a canal before U.S. senators, fearing volcanoes, made Panama a prime option in June 1902. Panama lobbyists sent them this stamp showing Nicaragua's Momotombo, a volcano that erupted that May.*

would recognize no regime that replaced a recognized government via “*coup d'état* or revolution.” The Conservatives were the traditional pro-American party, but Coolidge duly denied recognition to Chamorro.

Yet now the White House faced the delicate task of forcing Chamorro out of power without letting in the Liberals' man, former vice president Juan Bautista Sacasa, an exile in Mexico.

The leftist Mexican government, besides backing Sacasa and the Liberal generals in Nicaragua, was bitterly contesting ownership of some U.S. oil investments. The Mexicans, U.S. officials feared, had designs on their southern neighbors. In a 1927 memorandum, Undersecretary of State Robert Olds wrote that the Mexicans were attempting to undermine “our special relationship in Central America.” The region “has always understood that governments which we recognize and support stay in power, while those which we do not . . . fall. Nicaragua has become a test case.”

Finally, to avert a Liberal victory, Coolidge sent in the Marines—again. Henry L. Stimson, a former (and future) U.S. secretary of war, was dispatched to impose a peace settlement.

At that time, Nicaragua was a nation of only 700,000 people, mostly peasants. Few, as Stimson and McGeorge Bundy observed in the

former's memoir, *On Active Service in Peace and War* (1948), were "sufficiently educated or alert to be politically important." The struggle involved "rival oligarchic groups." It was typical of "backward countries; the armies on both sides were raised by impressment from the lower classes; the countryside was full of armed deserters; the fields were untilled; the already shaky national economy was being further weakened by the waste of war and civil unrest . . ."

"No prisoners were being taken by either side."

A plan was worked out—"The Peace of Tipitapa"—for disarming both sides, creating (under U.S. Marine supervision) a nonpartisan constabulary called the National Guard, and dividing cabinet and local government posts between Liberals and Conservatives. The 1928 and 1932 elections would be U.S.-supervised. But one of the rebel Liberal generals, Augusto César Sandino, the wiry, persuasive son (illegitimate, but recognized) of a landowner, would not go along.

Sandino would accept a government run by U.S. military men until the next election, he said, but not one led by a Conservative. Thereupon he took perhaps 150 armed followers into the hills. With an attack on a Marine post in Ocotal, a northern mountain town, he began what would be almost six years of raids and ambushes—not against Nicaraguan Conservatives, but against the National Guard, the Marines, and what he called "Yankee Imperialists."

Sandino had joined the Liberals after working as a staffer for a U.S. oil company in Mexico, a country whose labor movement impressed him. Abroad, his vow to have *patria libre o morir* ("a free fatherland or die") won him admirers in many quarters—including Latin American socialists and the Communist International. A division of the Communist army in China was named after him. On assignment for *The Nation*, U.S. journalist Carleton Beals visited Sandino and put him on a par with Robin Hood, Pancho Villa, and other "untamed outlaws who knew only daring and great deeds."

### ***Practicing Continuismo***

With little outside backing (Sandino was wary of Salvadoran and Mexican communist support), the revolt sputtered along nevertheless. Public and congressional pressure to bring the Marines home mounted.

By the 1930s, President Herbert Hoover was seeking to disengage the U.S. from Nicaragua. Sandino's persistence in a hit-and-run war that had cost the lives of 47 Marines was one reason. But at least as important were a Depression-bred need to cut military spending, and events in the Far East: Japanese officials rebuffed U.S. appeals to withdraw their forces from Manchuria by saying that they were only doing in China what the Marines were doing in Nicaragua.

The last Marines departed the day after the January 1933 inauguration of President Juan Bautista Sacasa, the Liberal exile against whom

### MUD, MARINES, AND QUICKSILVER, 1928

*Commentary on the hunt for Augusto Sandino in the New York Times of May 6, 1928, headlined "Campaigning in Nicaragua":*

The philosophy of our Marines in Nicaragua must be sorely tried by the climate. [The rain does not bother] the natives, but in campaigning against a piece of human quicksilver like Sandino, soaked khaki, rotting leather, rusting rifles and sulky mules are a trial . . . . The wasps and black stinging ants are afflictions not to be meekly borne. Malaria makes a long sick list . . . .

Thomas Belt, the English naturalist, [on] travel: "The road . . . was very bad, the mud deep and tenacious, the hills steep and slippery, and the mules had to struggle and plunge along through from two to three feet of sticky clay." Belt [also endured] a revolution . . . . "The poor Indians," he wrote, "toil and spin, and cultivate the ground, being the only producers, yet in the revolutionary outbreaks they are driven about like cattle and forced into the armies that are raised." Nicaragua has not changed greatly since his day.

[Author] Eugene Cunningham observed that the Nicaraguan women were even more hostile than the men. At León "we were almost within sight of the spot where two luckless Americans, machine gunners, [were captured,] flayed alive, and then hacked to pieces." There is no doubt that Sandino with the [aid] of the country people has been able to maintain a [fine] spy system.

The Marines [arrived] under an agreement providing for U.S. supervision of a national election. For the state of war Sandino is responsible . . . . In a report by Lieut. G. F. O'Shea occurs this incident of a fight in the jungle:

"We began to receive heavy fire from a hill to our right and rear, distant about 100 yards. Ten dynamite bombs were thrown close to us at this time from above. Men were yelling to those on the other hill to fire lower, and on the other hill there were directions to drop dynamite bombs on us . . . ."

There is no glory in field service in Nicaragua and the Marines will be glad to see the end of it.



*Leathernecks on a search for Sandino.*

the U.S. intervention had been directed. One detail remained: Who would command the 3,000-man National Guard?

There was only one candidate acceptable to Washington, to the outgoing president, General José María Moncada, and to Sacasa. This was Anastasio Somoza García, a young (36), English-speaking member of Moncada's cabinet. Besides being kin to Sacasa—the uncle of his wife—Somoza had been well known to the *Yanquis* since 1927, when he was Stimson's interpreter.

### III **SOMOCISMO**

"Tacho" Somoza was the son of a coffee farm owner, and a grand-nephew of Bernabé Somoza, a boisterous 19th-century Liberal politician-bandit (he once killed 20 men in a dispute over a cockfight). Tacho had learned English as a student at Philadelphia's Pierce Business School. There, he became an ardent baseball fan (under his rule, the game became Nicaragua's national sport), and met his future wife, Salvadora Debayle; a student at Beechwood (now Beaver) College, she was the daughter of a noted Liberal surgeon from León, and granddaughter of a former president, Roberto Sacasa. Back home, Tacho started out in a variety of jobs, including working as a toilet inspector for the Rockefeller Foundation's Sanitation Mission to Nicaragua.

A U.S. Marine report rated the military competence of the Guard's new commander as "practically none." But he had a talent that "in Nicaragua is much more important"—being "a shrewd politician." All in all, General Somoza was "energetic, clever, not too honest," a "pleasing personality," and "not believed to be over pro-American at heart."

Sandino soon reached a peace settlement with Juan Sacasa, but provisions allowing him to retain a small force under arms angered Guard officers. Pressed by his colleagues, Somoza sought U.S. Ambassador Arthur Bliss Lane's permission to arrest and exile Sandino, but Washington would no longer enmesh itself in Nicaragua's affairs. The new American president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, had long argued that such involvement should be ended "for all time."

Sandino was shot and killed with his two top generals after dining with Sacasa in Managua in February 1934. Sacasa's failure to take disciplinary action was a grave error. With Washington in a hands-off mood, Somoza, the man with the guns, plotted his ascent.

In most of Central America during the 1930s, *continuismo*—a technique of holding power indefinitely in a "legal" manner—came into style. Durable *caudillos* took power in Guatemala and El Salvador in



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1931, in Honduras in 1933. They would survive well into the 1940s. Somoza would start later, but exceed them all. Indeed, he would rule for nearly 20 years, and his sons would go on for 22 more.

Tacho consolidated his control of the Guard, then began building political support. Reminded that the Constitution barred the election of anyone related by blood or marriage to the president, he considered divorcing his wife, Sacasa's niece. Instead, in 1936, he forced Sacasa to resign and staged his own election. The Conservatives (who boycotted the vote) and Sacasa appealed to Washington. F.D.R.'s "Good Neighbor" policy, they were told, made U.S. intervention impossible.

### A Changing Country

Once in office, Somoza rapidly developed the political style that would mark his family's rule. He kept a tight grip on the Guard, which was usually commanded by a relative. Any hint of disloyalty to Somoza—or any hint of personal ambition—was fatal to an officer's career. With its wide reach—including control of customs, immigration, airports, and even the post office—the Guard had many ways of rewarding loyalty. Each duty assignment, always made by the Somozas, carried a specific monetary value, the amount by which an officer could expect to supplement his Guard salary with income from bribes, extortion, smuggling, and other such sources. The Guard, like so many Latin military forces built up during the Liberal Revolution, became, in effect, a kind of corporate entity, dedicated chiefly not to national defense but to self-preservation and self-aggrandizement.

Somoza carefully cultivated the impression that he had U.S. backing, which discouraged local opposition. Thus, in 1939, he secured an invitation from F.D.R. for a visit to Washington. Afterwards, he renamed Managua's main street *Avenida Roosevelt*, and made F.D.R.'s birthday a national holiday. He educated his three children in the United States, strongly supported the Americans during World War II, in the United Nations, and in the Organization of American States (OAS). When in 1954 the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency maneuvered (successfully) to oust Guatemala's pro-Soviet president, Jacobo Arbenz, Somoza allowed the CIA to base at Managua's Las Mercedes airport some aging P-47 fighters used in a brief attack on targets in Guatemala.

Somoza, a "simple farmer," bridled at being lumped with such bare-knuckled dictators as Rafael Trujillo, the Dominican Republic's durable (1930–61) boss. His style was more subtle. Controlling the Guard and the Liberal Party, he divided and co-opted his opponents, and persuaded his fellow upper-class Nicaraguans that he alone could ensure order, growth, and the Left's exclusion from power. (The peasants did not matter.) Hostile newspapers like *La Prensa*, owned by the Chamorros (the old Conservative clan), were tolerated, but censored whenever Somoza felt threatened. When members of elite families made trouble,

they were first imprisoned, then sent abroad, then allowed to return. (*La Prensa* publisher Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Zelaya spent part of the 1940s in exile in New York.) Police brutality and torture were largely reserved for those without social standing.

What Somoza's critics called his "kleptocracy" was efficient. Maintaining order had its rewards. Exacting the maximum from a poor country, Somoza amassed the largest fortune ever known in Nicaragua. He parlayed coffee *fincas* and cattle ranches bought from "heirs" into large holdings, including 10 percent of Nicaragua's farmland and interests in lumber, cement, air transport, and merchant shipping.\* When he died at age 60 in 1956, after being shot at a party in León by a young Nicaraguan poet, estimates of his net worth ranged as high as \$300 million.

There were doubts, as *Time* said, that "Tacho's sons can somehow reproduce his rare blend of ruthlessness and charm." Yet Luis Somoza Debayle, who as a student at Louisiana State University had learned politics by watching Louisiana's populist governor Huey ("Kingfish") Long, smoothly acceded to the presidency at age 34. Command of the Guard passed to his brother, Anastasio ("Tachito") Somoza Debayle, 32, an alumnus of West Point. (There, local wits said that he was the only cadet in the Point's history to get an army as a graduation gift.)

Managua had to endure a brief period of harsh, precautionary repression, but afterwards the Somozas allowed considerable personal freedom and public criticism.

Yet postwar Nicaragua was changing.

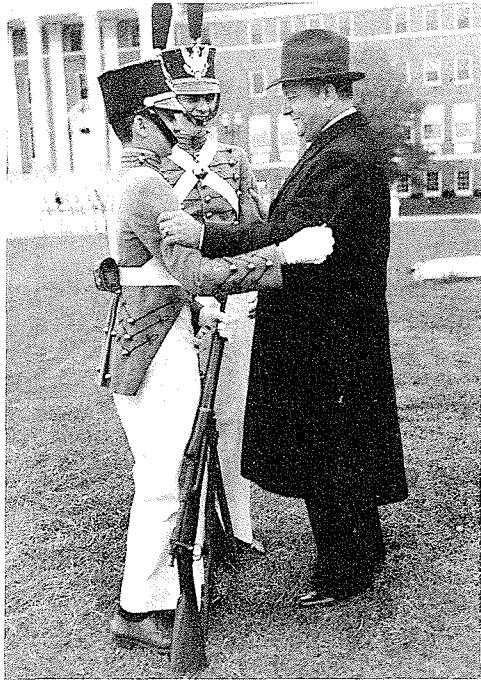
The country had never been like the Philippines, a land of almost feudal *haciendas* where 10,000 peasants might work for a single landowner. Nicaragua's economy developed along a different pattern. Much agriculture was small scale. In the Matagalpa coffee area, family farms prevailed. The old oligarchs, although big in rice and cotton (if not politics, since Zelaya's day), increasingly turned to banking and commerce.

### The Archbishop's Letter

Such trends were accelerated by a boom that developed during the 1960s. Among the spurs were increasing exports of cotton and other agricultural products, the new Central American Common Market, and the Alliance for Progress—the Kennedy administration's program to prime the Latin American economies with investments to meet the "revolution of rising expectations" being exploited by roving revolutionaries like Cuba's Ernesto "Che" Guevara. Alliance-authorized loans to Nicaragua totaled \$50 million during 1961–67; the Inter-American

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\*During World War II, Tacho bought seized properties of German and Italian owners at auctions where he was the sole bidder—the Guard kept others away. He got Montelimar, his beloved 40,000-acre Pacific coast estate, for only \$9,000 because he alone could develop it. Somehow, only he could get roads and rail lines built to the property, and have a sugar refinery and an alcohol distillery purchased abroad (in Cuba and Honduras) shipped in free by companies eager to help the new owner.



*Following a May 1939 meeting with President Franklin D. Roosevelt in Washington, D.C., a proud Tacho Somoza went to New York to visit his successors-to-be: his teenage sons Anastasio Jr. (left) and Luis, students at La-Salle Military Academy in Oakdale, Long Island. Another son, José Somoza, born of a youthful liaison between Tacho and a family maid, became an officer in the National Guard.*

Development Bank injected another \$50 million.

Some evidence of all this effort rose along the U.S.-financed Inter-American highway near Managua: a cluster of light industries, run by a new class of Nicaraguan entrepreneurs (some of them trained at the Harvard-affiliated Central American Institute for Business Management in Managua). Such firms helped to spawn a wage economy, which, in turn, changed Nicaragua's sociopolitical map. By the 1970s, Nicaragua had become the only Central American country in which half the population lived in cities and towns. Managua became a metropolis of 400,000.

Most Nicaraguans had known only *somocismo*: The nation's median age was a mere 14. But a system predicated on the bulk of population remaining rural "oxen" (as Tacho once described the farmers) was clearly outdated. It took some time for this reality to emerge.

Like Tacho, the younger Somozas valued close U.S. ties. In 1961, as the Central Intelligence Agency readied a force of Cuban émigrés for the Bay of Pigs invasion, facilities built at remote Puerto Cabezas by U.S. forces during World War II became the base for the ships and aircraft used in the ill-fated assault. But otherwise, the brothers' views differed.

Luis felt that the Somoza family should perpetuate its power via a one-party dictatorship; it would deflect domestic and foreign opprobrium by "changing the monkey" (the president) regularly. Tachito put *his*

faith in the Guard. In 1963, to Tachito's distress, Luis put a non-Somoza in the presidency. In 1967 Tachito sought the family title for himself, and won in a carefully rigged election. A coronary then killed Luis at age 44, removing a major restraint on the third President Somoza.

Ever since his West Point days (perhaps as a reaction to them), Tachito had indulged himself. He smoked big cigars, drank and gambled with cronies, went on shopping sprees in New York. Although married to a cousin, Hope Portocarrero, during the 1960s he took an auburn-haired mistress named Dinorah Sampson, whom he kept outside Managua. (Before the relationship became public, he traveled to her villa aboard a curtained mobile home. Hope eventually moved to London.)

The Somozas had long faced little armed resistance. But that changed after January 1959, when Fidel Castro's easy march to power in Cuba inspired many Latin would-be revolutionaries.

#### IV ENTER THE SANDINISTAS

There were many Nicaraguan visitors to Havana that year. One was Somoza's leading Conservative foe, *La Prensa* publisher Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal, who later organized the most serious armed challenge yet to *somocismo*.<sup>\*</sup> Another was Carlos Fonseca Amador, the illegitimate son of an administrator of some Somoza properties; he had visited the Soviet Union and East Germany in those days, and in a booklet called *A Nicaraguan in Moscow*, sketched out a bountiful Soviet-style future for Latin America.

Fonseca and two other veterans of Nicaraguan student movements, Tomás Borge Martínez and Silvio Mayorga, founded the FSLN—the Sandinista National Liberation Front—in Honduras in 1961. In their first foray, in 1962, some 60 Sandinistas set out from Honduras to occupy Wiwili, a Miskito settlement of shacks where Augusto Sandino had once had an arms cache. The Sandinistas were not the Viet Cong. They failed to find the town, and were instead bloodied by a strong National Guard force, then captured by Honduran troops. Other failures followed, and in 1967 Somoza declared that the Sandinistas no longer existed.

Like so many previous Nicaraguan dissidents, the Sandinistas had failed to stir a peasant revolt. The FSLN's goals, beyond the removal of *somocismo*, remained imprecise—perhaps intentionally. Although by the

<sup>\*</sup>Castro declined to help. But with aid from Venezuela—where Rómulo Bétancourt had recently restored democracy—Chamorro managed to secure military training (in Costa Rica) for more than 100 young anti-Somoza Nicaraguans. In 1959, the youths sneaked home to make several simultaneous harassing attacks on National Guard posts. But the expected mass uprisings failed to materialize, and 103 of the rebels were caught and jailed for up to a year.

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late 1960s some surviving Sandinistas were receiving training in Costa Rica, Cuba, and North Korea, a "Historic Program" issued by the FSLN in 1969 as the first important statement of its goals was quite vague. It mentioned redistribution of land and wealth, but called only for a "revolutionary structure" of government. Fonseca conceded in an article titled "Nicaragua: Zero Hour" that the FSLN had "vacillated in putting forward a clearly Marxist-Leninist ideology."

Nonetheless, during the early 1970s the anti-*somocismo* cause in general had attracted important new support from Catholic priests who urged "political commitment" among young college-age Nicaraguans, many from affluent families. In 1972 the church went public, with a pastoral letter by Managua Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo that criticized social conditions and called for "rulers who know how to rule and who are interested in their people."

Indeed, despite more than two decades of economic growth, new urban amenities like supermarkets and television, and a profusion of Mercedes-Benz cars (imported by Somoza's Caribe Motors Company), Nicaragua was still in some ways almost a Third World caricature.

### A Fateful Alliance

Only five percent of Nicaraguans were completing six or more years of education, and literacy was below even the official rate of about 50 percent. Disease rates were high, diets poor; rural Nicaraguans consumed an average of only 1,623 calories a day. (The U.S. average for young adults: 2,731.) Other signs of social malaise were alcoholism (the worst in Central America) and the homicide rate (highest in the *world*). Housing was wretched, even in cities. Only 20 percent of Managua's homes had running water, and only 18 percent had their own toilets.

What crystallized resentment over *somocismo*'s failings was an act of nature: a pre-dawn earthquake on December 23, 1972 that devastated Managua, killing 10,000 people and wrecking 80 percent of the city's structures.

Immediately after the disaster, only 100 members of the vaunted Guard could be found to police the city; the rest had fled in terror. Then Somoza, who had earlier turned his executive powers over to a three-member junta, including one Conservative, grabbed direct control of the government, claiming a need to personally direct relief efforts. Those, many Nicaraguans came to believe, all benefited Somoza or his regime.

The most damaging, if hardest to document, accusations involved the Guard's looting of foreign relief funds and supplies, which were managed by Somoza's son, a Guard captain. Other suspicions were raised by the heavy use of cement in the city's rebuilding (the Somozas owned the only cement plant), and the sale of land (thought to be Somoza-owned) to the National Housing Bank.

Such apparent greed outraged not only ordinary Nicaraguans, who



Patrick Oliphant's view of U.S. Nicaragua policy, early 1979. "Ah, yes, Senorita Sandinista, how beautiful you are when you're angry, yes, indeed! Him?... Hardly know the scoundrel... Ah, may I come in...?"

had gained little from the country's modest 1960s boom but also rich folk and members of the struggling, but still rising, urban middle class. Both had seen their prospects diminish as the Somozas' personal control of the fledgling economy spread. After the quake, Somoza family members extended their business activities into new areas, such as banking and construction. In part, this was to provide jobs for retired Guard officers. Although they continued to draw full salaries in their inactive status they had to forego the extra income from corruption. (More than half the directors of the Central Bank were ex-Guard brass.)

Capitalizing on the nation's sour mood, the Sandinistas resurfaced spectacularly in 1974 with their "Christmas Party Raid"—an assault by 13 Sandinistas (three of them women) on a dinner party at the Managua home of a wealthy businessman. The hostages they took, among them Somoza's foreign minister, were exchanged for \$1 million, freedom for 14 imprisoned Sandinistas (among them Daniel Ortega Saavedra), and a special airline flight to Cuba. Somoza imposed a state of siege, restricted opposition activities, and censored *La Prensa*.

As the Christmas Raid illustrated, the Sandinistas were able to draw on the support of offspring of the Establishment, such as it was. One of the raiders was a son of Joaquín Cuadra Chamorro, a leading corporate lawyer. Later, after a period of training in Cuba, the son became an advocate of the Sandinista cause among the Managua elite.

Although Somoza had himself duly re-elected in 1974, by then his hold on power was beginning to slip. The Church boycotted his inauguration. And as the economy soured, partly as a result of a worldwide

recession induced by the OPEC oil "shock," discontent spread.

Three events in 1977 perceptibly weakened Somoza. One was the arrival in the White House of Jimmy Carter. The U.S. president's emphasis on human rights encouraged Somoza's domestic foes by raising the possibility that U.S. aid to Nicaragua, amounting to a modest but useful \$3.1 million in military assistance and \$15.1 million in "humanitarian" economic help during fiscal year 1978, might be reduced or even ended. Then, in June, the portly, 52-year-old *jefe*, who now weighed 267 pounds, suffered a heart attack (at Dinorah Sampson's villa). Flown to a Miami hospital, he soon recovered, but even his supporters now began to wonder how much longer the dynasty could endure.

Finally, in October, a number of prominent Nicaraguan businessmen and intellectuals met with Humberto Ortega Saavedra, leader of one Sandinista group, to discuss the formation of a broad alliance of organizations to oppose the Somoza regime. After additional meetings, some of the conferees, who became known as *Los Doce* (the Twelve), began a propaganda campaign against Somoza.\*

### Leaving it to the OAS

The collapse began in January 1978, when *La Prensa* publisher Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, a leader of the anti-Somoza opposition, was gunned down on a Managua street. No evidence of direct Somoza involvement ever surfaced, but businessmen sponsored a nationwide general strike, riots broke out, and the FSLN increased its skirmishing with the Guard in the hinterland. Somoza weathered the initial storm and, under pressure from the Carter administration, made some token gestures at reform. He promised not to run for re-election and allowed political exiles, including *Los Doce*, to return.

In August, a Sandinista commando group headed by Edén Pastora Gómez, the celebrated Commander Zero, took the entire Nicaraguan Congress hostage at the National Palace in Managua. Again a ransom was paid (\$500,000) and Sandinista prisoners (about 50) were released, among them Tomás Borge, a fervent Marxist and the one surviving founder of the FSLN. The ex-captives and guerrillas rode to the airport through cheering crowds ("Somoza to the Gallows!") and flew to Venezuela and Panama, where Pastora was welcomed by presidents Carlos Andrés Pérez and Omar Torrijos. (About half of the Sandinistas continued on to Cuba for training and recuperation.)

Shortly thereafter, strikes and demonstrations occurred in cities all across Nicaragua—among them Masaya, where Indians set off the first

\*Among The Twelve were Nicaragua's current vice president, Sergio Ramírez Mercado, a writer and academic, its current foreign minister, Father Miguel d'Escoto Brockman, a Maryknoll priest, lawyer Joaquín Cuadra Chamorro, and Arturo Cruz, a Washington-based official of the Inter-American Development Bank, and a future leader of the opposition to the Sandinistas. Unbeknownst to Cruz and some others, the idea for forming *Los Doce* actually originated in a secret meeting between Ramírez and Sandinista leaders, including Humberto Ortega and his brother Daniel.

*mass* uprising in the country's history. Inept as rural counter-guerrilla fighters, Somoza's Guardsmen were quick to retaliate in the towns, frequently shooting any young men they encountered on the assumption that they were Sandinista sympathizers. Matagalpa, where young *muchachos* were taking pot shots at a Guard outpost, was raked with gunfire for three hours by government aircraft.

The death toll was mounting. (During the height of the war, the Red Cross later estimated, 10,000 Nicaraguans were killed, 90 percent of them civilian noncombatants.) For months the Carter administration, which had started out in 1977 viewing Nicaragua as a human rights problem, and not an urgent one at that, had had no plan for dealing with the rapidly unfolding events there. But, taken aback, as journalist Shirley Christian wrote later, the White House went "abruptly from having no plan . . . to one in which Somoza had to leave immediately, but for which the United States was not prepared to exert the necessary pressure." This job was to be left to an OAS-sponsored "mediation" between the government and its opponents. Four years after Vietnam, Carter did not want to be accused of "intervention" in another nation's politics.

#### 'Revolution of the Scarves'

The mediation was a fiasco. *Los Doce*, unofficially representing the Sandinistas, soon quit; Somoza used the exercise to play for time, hoping to force the Carter administration and Tachito's domestic opponents to choose between himself and the Marxist FSLN. The mediation collapsed after three months, early in 1979, when Somoza rejected the mediators' last proposal and, as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Viron P. Vaky later conceded, Washington "failed to react."

As a result, Vaky observed, "the Sandinistas and the opposition's supporting patrons in Venezuela, Costa Rica, Panama, and elsewhere concluded that either the U.S. was not serious [about removing Somoza or] that there was no solution to the crisis except by force of arms." Whether or not Washington "should have—or could have—exerted greater pressure and leverage to secure [Somoza's] agreement to a peaceful transition when that was relatively easy to accomplish," the lack of such an agreement was a "tragedy."

With Washington bereft of a policy, and the moderate opposition divided and discredited, Nicaragua's fate was left to an armed showdown between the Guard and the FSLN, whose patron saint was Fidel Castro.

In early 1979, with help—money and arms—from Venezuela, Panama, and Costa Rica, the FSLN built up its military strength to a claimed 3,000 guerrillas. Previously divided into three factions, the Sandinistas, at Fidel Castro's urging, created a unified leadership. Non-Marxists, such as Pastora, were excluded.

Nicaragua's economy was faltering, yet Somoza displayed confidence. Carter, he said, had told him that "the Shah will stay and I will



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go." But "the Shah has gone and I am still here."

Although Cuba had aided the FSLN since the mid-1960s, it was that May, when a military success came to seem possible, that Havana began to give the FSLN significant material support. That month, rebel leaders announced a "final offensive."

The ill-disciplined Guard, whose strength was brought to more than 10,000 men, faced a rebel force whose size never rose much over 5,000. But the Guard, badly led and short of transport, could not be everywhere. Although sustained Vietnam-style combat was rare, bands of Sandinistas brought insecurity and scattered gunfire to dozens of cities and towns, gaining young recruits along the way. (Their habit of hiding their faces from local authorities with bandanas gave the cause a romantic sobriquet, the "Revolution of the Scarves.")

By June, the Sandinistas had occupied León, the second largest city, and carried their hit-and-run war to Managua. Military casualties were light but Somoza's forces were low on ammunition. (U.S. supplies had long been cut off; the regime received some munitions from Guatemala and then, for a while, from Israel.) Once, street fighting neared the Bunker, Somoza's fortified headquarters. Yet the Guard was eventually able to push the ragtag FSLN forces out of town, with the help of firepower and aircraft—little twin-engine Cessnas and a "Puff the Magic Dragon" C-47 gunship—which shot up rebel positions in slum districts.

As the shooting continued, an emergency meeting of the OAS ignored a U.S. call for a peace-keeping force in Nicaragua and demanded Somoza's ouster. It was suddenly clear that Somoza had few friends left at home or abroad. In San José, Costa Rica's capital, the Sandinistas announced a provisional government, including prominent non-Marxists, and U.S. officials, belatedly involved, began talks with its members. U.S. Ambassador Lawrence Pezzullo conferred with Somoza on ways to ease his departure. On July 17, the last Somoza transferred his power to a longtime supporter, Francisco Urcuyo, and departed for Miami.

Urcuyo, supposedly at Somoza's urging, and in violation of the agreement worked out with Pezzullo, refused to yield power to the Sandinistas. U.S. threats to return Somoza to Nicaragua changed Urcuyo's mind, but by then the demoralized Guard had collapsed. Urcuyo and any Somoza supporters or Guard officers who could fled the country or sought refuge in Managua's foreign embassies.

On July 19, 1979, the Sandinistas re-entered Managua in triumph. One cruel, confused era in Nicaraguan history had ended, another was about to begin.

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## DEMOCRACIA

by Clifford Krauss

The memories are faded and tarnished now, but during that precious month of July 1979, virtually every Nicaraguan proudly called himself a Sandinista. As the despised National Guard collapsed on the 19th, and some 300 *muchachos* in fatigues and berets marched into Managua, the poor and privileged alike rejoiced with laughter and tears. In sublime catharsis, a crowd tore down an equestrian statue of Anastasio Somoza García, the first of three Somozas to call himself *el presidente*.

Businessmen went on the air to pledge support for the Revolution. Jimmy Carter's envoy, William Bowdler, joined a victory parade in Managua. Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo delivered a blessing at the "Plaza of the Revolution" upon the arrival (aboard a red fire engine) of the five-member Junta of National Reconstruction, Managua's putative new leaders. Signs waved by many of the 50,000 celebrants hailed not Marx or Lenin but Augusto Sandino, the nationalist guerrilla who 50 years before had fought the U.S. Marines while resisting Salvadoran and Mexican communist influence.

The *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) exuded moderation. Daniel Ortega Saavedra, the only one of the nine top FSLN *comandantes* on the Junta, hoped for "friendly, respectful and noninterventionist" U.S. policies. The Sandinista radio urged respect for private property, and ordered exuberant militiamen to stop firing rifles in the air: "The people have won peace and they deserve to have it."

That peace was as bracing as the tropical downpours that steam the 90 degree heat out of Managua's July afternoons—and as ephemeral.

The turmoil that followed the FSLN triumph would exceed that which preceded it. Managua's relations with Washington—and with Venezuela, Panama, and other nations that had aided the FSLN—would sour as the Sandinistas backed Salvadoran rebels and moved easily toward the Soviet orbit. Domestic unity would fade. "Contras" would begin a sputtering civil war that was fraught with dialectical ironies.

Ex-National Guard officers, far from becoming exiled creatures of a dark past, would take up residence in the upland jungles. Former guerrillas would become colonels defending a new status quo against former colonels now serving as frontline guerrillas under the Reagan Doctrine. Sandinistas would become anti-Sandinistas—e.g., the celebrated Edén Pastora, who in 1981 would quit the FSLN and become a contra, protesting the "Cubanization" of the Revolution. *La Prensa* (circ. 75,000), the daily scourge of Somoza, would be closed by his nemesis, the FSLN.

Another Somoza foe, Archbishop (later Cardinal) Obando y Bravo,

would become the Sandinistas' most effective domestic critic—"the voice," he said, "of those who have no voice"—and, in 1987, the nation's cease-fire negotiator.

And President Ronald Reagan, hanging a portrait of Calvin Coolidge in the Cabinet Room, would vow to make the Sandinistas "say uncle"—only, like Coolidge, to find Nicaragua a festering problem, which would give him great difficulties both in Central America and on Capitol Hill.

But all that would come later.

### Poems in Prison

First came the dashing of hopes (held by the Carter administration and European and Latin American Social Democrats, among others) that power in Managua would pass to "moderates."

Eight days after Somoza's fall, a *Cubana de Aviacion* jet landed to deliver doctors, nurses, and teachers from Havana—and to pick up ranking Sandinistas to help Fidel Castro mark the 26th anniversary of the start of *his* revolution. Within two months, a Venezuelan offer of military aid was rebuffed; the Sandinistas had ample supplies from Cuba. Within three months, the Soviet Bloc contingent in Nicaragua included 1,000 Cuban teachers, broadcasting technicians, and military cadres.

It was soon clear that the new voice of Managua was not the Junta but the FSLN—namely, Daniel Ortega, a long-haired former seminarian and alumnus, at age 33, of seven years in Somoza's prisons.

Ortega declared that the FSLN would "stay" in power until its "program is fully accomplished." By autumn, in a fashion reminiscent of Fidel Castro a generation earlier, he was on the road—attending a "non-aligned" conference in Havana, going to the United Nations (after a meeting with President Carter) to denounce "imperialist" America, touring New York City's *barrios* in a civilian suit, visiting Warsaw Pact capitals in his soon-to-be-familiar olive drab fatigues.

A December 1979 cabinet shuffle completed the FSLN's takeover. Six of the nine leading *comandantes* now held key government positions. Ortega, as the dominant member of the Junta, led the bureaucracy. His brother Humberto, age 32, commander of the new Sandinista Popular Army, became defense minister (just as Fidel Castro's brother Raúl had become chief of Cuba's armed forces). Humberto succeeded an ex-National Guard officer who had been given the post to meet the Carter administration's demand for a broad-based regime.

Interior Minister Tomás Borge Martínez, age 49, the FSLN's sur-

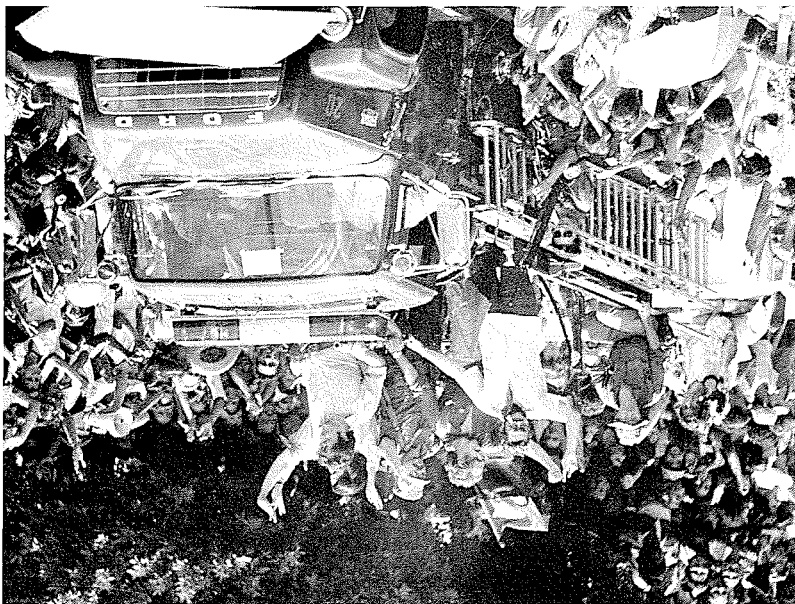
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*Clifford Krauss, 34, Central America correspondent for the Wall Street Journal between 1984 and 1987, is the Edward R. Murrow Press Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. Born in New York City, he received a B.A. from Vassar College (1975), an M.A. from the University of Chicago (1976), and an M.S.J. from the Graduate School of Journalism, Columbia University (1977).*

viving founder and most ardent Marxist, headed, with help from Cuban and East German advisers, the internal security apparatus. By 1987 his police (whom the regime styled as "Sentinels of the People's Happiness") would have perhaps 10,000 political prisoners in custody. Although the new rulers had won popular support by promising *democracia* (a 1978 *Washington Post* headline: SANDINISTAS DIS-CLAIM MARXISM), it was becoming clear that they had grandiose plans to impose (at the very least) socialism on their country—a small nation of farmers, small entrepreneurs, and a very narrow circle of politically active citizens. Events would remind outside observers that Nicaragua is, as Arturo Cruz, Jr., son and namesake of the regime's first Central Bank president, said, "a country of families, all of whom know one another, or at least all about one another."

Ortega and his comrades were in the tradition of Latin American revolutionaries: not *campesinos* (peasants) or working people, but radicalized sons of the middle class, much like Cuba's Fidel Castro, a lawyer, and his ally, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the Argentine ex-medical student. Of the nine *comandantes* who made up the Sandinista leadership, one, Luis Carrion Cruz, had attended Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire. Tomas Borge, the slight, intense son of a bookseller, had

July 20, 1979: The five-member Junta of National Reconstruction enters Managua. Nine months later, two quit. Said one, businessman Alfonso Robelo: "Nicaragua had become "a satellite of the Soviet Union."



been a law student in León when his "political consciousness" emerged.

Arrested after the 1956 slaying of Tacho Somoza, Borge spent two and a half years in jail. In 1961, after fleeing to Honduras, he helped establish the FSLN. Later captured, he was one of the Sandinistas freed when Edén Pastora took the National Assembly hostage in 1978.

The Ortega brothers' parents had once been supporters of Sandino. Their father had been an accountant and owner of an export-import business in Managua. The brothers attended the same private Christian Brothers school as the sons of Tachito Somoza's brother Luis. Daniel also studied for the priesthood in a seminary in El Salvador, where one instructor was Miguel Obando y Bravo, then a priest. He was a Sandinista as a student at Managua's Jesuit-run Central American University. Jailed in 1967, he was held there, writing poems (one title: "I Never Saw Managua When Miniskirts Were in Fashion"), until 1974. Then he became one of the 14 rebels freed as a result of the Christmas Party Raid. (Obando y Bravo directed the hostage negotiations.)

### 'Diversifying Dependency'

While Humberto spent much of the Revolution in Costa Rica, and directed the FSLN's strategic alliance with the business/middle-class opposition to Somoza, Daniel studied ideology and tactics in Cuba.

The first year of Sandinista rule was one of improvisation. "Political pluralism exists here," Borge assured visitors. Like the National Palace's newsstand, which displayed *Cosmopolitan* next to the works of Lenin, the Revolution would not neatly define itself. Like a Picasso portrait, the regime tended to show two faces, as its leaders sought to follow their Castro-inspired socialist dreams and face political and economic realities.

Showing its socialist face, in its first week the government nationalized Nicaragua's banks and its foreign trade. All coffee (the chief export, mostly produced by family farmers), sugar, and cotton had to be sold to the government. Insurance and mining firms were nationalized. So was all property of the Somoza family and other *somocistas*—perhaps one-quarter of Nicaragua's cultivated land, some 130 businesses and factories, plus houses, cars, and other possessions. A new Sandinista labor federation carried out some free-lance seizures of factories. And the FSLN, besides controlling the armed forces, set up Cuban-style "Sandinista Defense Committees" (CDS) to extend its reach into every town and urban *barrio*. Along with such tasks as the routing of food supplies, the committees were charged with reporting on "internal enemies."

Journalists were told that "freedom of the press" was for "the press that supports the revolution." The Somoza-owned *Novedades* (News) became *Barricada* (Barricade), a Sandinista paper. The two TV networks were rechristened the Sandinista Television System.

Even so, Nicaraguan moderates who did not belong to the FSLN, such as Arturo Cruz, continued—for a time—to play important roles in

the Junta and Cabinet. The Sandinistas made a point of pledging to meet the government's obligations to Western commercial banks. (The Somoza regime left foreign debts exceeding \$1.5 billion, and only \$3.5 million in foreign exchange; an infusion of \$8 million in U.S. funds eased Managua's cash squeeze.) The government was lenient with imprisoned National Guardsmen, tough on labor agitators from Nicaragua's small Communist and Trotskyist parties (which the Somozas had more or less tolerated). Financing was guaranteed for private farmers, who still accounted for 80 percent of agricultural output. Foreign exchange was promised for firms needing to import parts and raw materials.

In foreign policy, the Sandinistas endorsed the Palestinian cause, abstained from a United Nations vote condemning the Soviets' 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, and established relations with the Soviet Communist Party. While "diversifying dependency," Managua sought help not only from the Soviet Bloc, but also from the United States, the Middle East, and Western Europe. (U.S. loans, grants, and food aid accounted for \$63 million of the \$580 million given the regime during its first year; Spain and other European democracies were major donors.)

But Western-style *democracia* was not vital to the Sandinistas once they gained power. Said Junta member Sergio Ramírez Mercado: "An electoral system is not a priority." (Eventually, even independent public opinion polls were banned.) Instead, on the Cuban pattern, the men in Managua mounted well-publicized attacks on long-neglected social problems where it would be easy to show progress.

### Soviet Bloc Trampoline

A nationwide Literacy Crusade (Cuban teachers helped) raised literacy rates to a claimed 87 percent. (More than just ABCs were taught. Read one literacy pamphlet: "The popular Sandinista revolution initiated true democracy. The privileged classes are finished.")

The Sandinistas won the goodwill of many poor peasants by organizing farm cooperatives that gave them a stake in the society for the first time. New rural health clinics appeared; polio, a scourge in many communities at the outset of the Revolution, was eradicated.

But 1980 also brought disillusionment. The Revolution's July 19 anniversary brought a state visit by Castro and a military parade in Managua featuring some of the regime's burgeoning stock of Soviet Bloc weaponry. Popular hopes that elections would finally be announced went unfulfilled. And with that, the honeymoon ended.

Authoritarianism set in. In August 1980, the Sandinistas banned uncensored news stories relating to economic problems or state security. November brought a distinctly Stalinist chill.

First, the Nicaraguan Democratic Movement, a liberal opposition party, was forbidden to hold a rally, and youthful Sandinistas sacked its Managua headquarters. Then, the country's most charismatic opposition

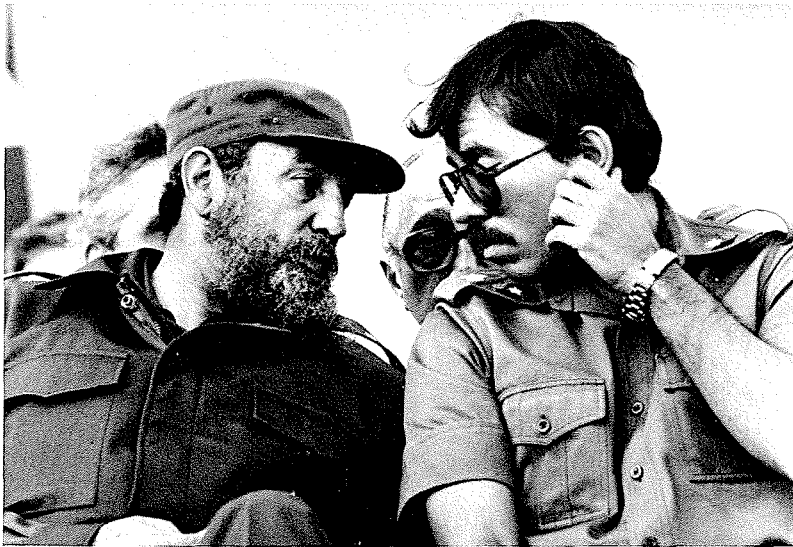
figure, Jorge Salazar Argüello, was killed by police.

Salazar was organizing an anti-Sandinista movement among the farmers of coffee-growing Matagalpa province. He was approached through third parties by a Sandinista army officer named Nestor Moncada. Presenting himself as a dissident, Moncada told Salazar that there were army units ready to rebel against the most radical Sandinistas; they wanted to return the Revolution to its original democratic path. Moncada urged Salazar to get arms from abroad for his sympathizers.

Salazar agreed, and met with leaders of the first significant contra groups, then organizing (with aid from Argentina's anticommunist military regime) in Miami and Honduras.

On November 18, Salazar was to meet Moncada at a gas station outside Managua. There, police shot the unarmed Salazar seven times. (Sandinista officials said he died in a crossfire with a co-conspirator who had fired first.) Moncada was captured unharmed, tried by a military court, and somehow freed without spending a day in prison.

Also that year, the Sandinistas concluded, fatefully, that a tide of revolution was running in Central America. They backed El Salvador's faction-ridden Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), which set up training camps and a headquarters in Nicaragua. The country became a trampoline for Soviet Bloc arms, which were airdropped near the border to be moved to El Salvador by truck and boat.



*Daniel Ortega and Fidel Castro in January 1985 at Timal, a sugar mill built with Cuban help. It is the largest government facility of its kind in Central America, but is uneconomical. As it was built, sugar prices fell.*

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As the Sandinistas saw it, a "final offensive" by 10,000 FMLN guerrillas in January 1981 would greet the conservative new Reagan administration with a revolution in El Salvador. A second Marxist-Leninist regime would rise in Central America, with more to come.

But the offensive failed. And then came a turning point in relations between Managua and Washington.

### Coupons with Che

The Carter administration, in its final days, had suspended an economic assistance program, hoping thereby to "moderate" the Revolution. The Sandinistas thought that U.S. aid would resume if they stopped supporting the FMLN, and in early 1981 they began to urge the rebels to seek a political settlement in El Salvador. But the incoming president not only ended U.S. aid altogether; Ronald Reagan also, in late 1981, endorsed a \$19 million CIA program to organize, train, and supply the contras, ostensibly to help them cut the flow of Soviet Bloc supplies to the Salvadoran rebels (although those supplies were, by all accounts, no longer flowing in significant quantities via Nicaragua).

A last chance for a Managua-Washington accommodation came in August 1981. Thomas O. Enders, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, forged a tentative agreement in Managua: In return for the Sandinistas' promise to curtail their military buildup and stop backing Marxist rebellions elsewhere, Washington would not use force against Nicaragua. But, back in Washington, suspicious administration conservatives undercut the deal.

At about this time, meanwhile, Soviet officials began having Second Thoughts about Central America's revolutionary potential. Soviet hardware and Cuban advisers would continue to reinforce what soon became the largest armed force in the region.\* However, heeding warnings from Washington not to increase Nicaragua's aerial might beyond that provided by its Mi-24 HIND helicopter gunships, Moscow would repeatedly deny Sandinista requests for MiG jet fighter-bombers.

By then, the FSLN's popularity was eroding. Pastora had quit, the economy had turned sour. The suspension of U.S. aid, and of a line of credit from the Inter-American Development Bank, had hurt. But even more damaging were the Sandinistas' own economic policies. It was as if the men in Managua had learned nothing from unhappy "socialist" experiments in other Third World countries since the early 1960s.

Massive printing of Nicaraguan *córdobas* began a surge of inflation.

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\*The Sandinistas, who inherited from the Somoza regime only three tanks (all WWII vintage) in operating condition and 25 antiquated Staghound armored cars, had, by 1987, at least 250 armored vehicles as well as about 60 heavy artillery pieces and 50 helicopters (including the advanced HIND model). Today, the 120,000 Nicaraguans that Managua has under arms include 37,000 Sandinista Popular Army regulars and some 74,000 reserves and militiamen—a force of locally-based part-time troops that grew out of the bands of young, bandana-sporting *muchachos* who helped the FSLN in the late stages of its anti-Somoza campaign. Initially, the Sandinistas left the task of countering the contras largely to rural militia units.



### THE VIEW FROM MOSCOW

An event of "colossal international importance . . . that demand[s] reexamination of established conceptions." That was how one leading Soviet commentator described the Sandinistas' 1979 triumph in Nicaragua.

The Sandinistas had seized power with little help from Moscow. Since the 1960s, Soviet leaders had dismissed Che Guevara's strategy of fomenting guerrilla revolution in the "backyard" of the United States as hopeless. But Cuba's Fidel Castro, subsisting on some \$3 billion in annual Soviet aid, had insisted on backing the Sandinistas and other Latin American guerrillas. Now, the Soviets were quick to revise "established conceptions."

Within a few weeks of Somoza's ouster, five Soviet generals visited Managua. During the next year, the Kremlin and Daniel Ortega signed a series of military, economic, technical, and party-to-party agreements. And, even before the contra resistance took shape, the Soviets began shipping a \$2 billion array of tanks, artillery, anti-aircraft missiles, and other weapons to Nicaragua—some of them consigned to the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador, which the Soviets now actively supported.

The failure of the FMLN's January 1981 "final offensive" apparently soured the Kremlin on the prospects for exporting revolution to the rest of Central America. But the buildup in Nicaragua continued. By 1981, some 2,000 Soviet Bloc advisers, mostly Cubans, had arrived to help train and direct the growing Sandinista Army. Airfield runways were lengthened to accommodate Soviet MiG fighters (not yet delivered, thanks in part to U.S. warnings). The arrival of more than 100 Soviet T-55 tanks and 30 amphibious tanks—by far the largest armored force in Central America—stirred fears among Nicaragua's weakly-defended neighbors that the Sandinistas sought an *offensive* capability. One reaction: a series of joint U.S.-Honduran maneuvers (involving up to 7,000 U.S. troops) near the Nicaraguan border in 1981-87.

Moscow has no bases of its own in Nicaragua. But the new Punta Huete airfield, built with Cuban aid, can handle "any aircraft in the Soviet-bloc inventory," according to a U.S. government report. Harbor improvements will allow Soviet warships to call at the ports of El Bluff and San Juan del Sur.

Along with bases in Cuba, such outposts could complicate the U.S. task (in wartime) of guarding the Caribbean sea lanes that carry half of all U.S. trade. Only 12,500 U.S. troops are posted in Panama and elsewhere in the region.

Yet political scientist Robert Leiken suggests that the Soviets may not want another expensive Latin client. One Cuba is enough. Daniel Ortega's frequent pilgrimages to Moscow, and his salutes to "the extraordinary efforts that the Soviet Union carries out in favor of peace," have not yielded as much help as he wants. The Soviet Bloc each year sends Managua some \$585 million in economic aid; military assistance totals \$590 million. Currently, "Moscow provides only enough military aid to make [any] United States military intervention costly and save the Soviet 'revolutionary' reputation," Leiken concludes, but "not enough to guarantee [Sandinista] survival."

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(Eventually, the annual rate would exceed 1,000 percent, which the government dealt with by overprinting extra zeros on existing *córdoba* notes.) Price controls on food helped keep Nicaragua's city dwellers calm. But farmers were hard hit, and agricultural output declined. Meanwhile, world coffee prices fell; foreign exchange became even scarcer. Result: shortages (even of food and auto tires) and rationing, which continue. (In 1987 the allowance for gasoline, bought with coupons bearing the image of Che Guevara, was 17 gallons per month. The government-subsidized rice allowance: *one* pound per month per person.)

### Interrupting the Pope

Few new jobs had been created by the big state-run projects (e.g., a government sugar refinery) on which the early foreign aid was spent. Nor could Nicaraguans see much benefit in the unresponsive, Soviet-style bureaucracy that the Sandinistas, obsessive statist, had created. A major irritant was the new Internal Trade Ministry, known as "Micoín." As a black market in basic consumer goods developed, Micoín put up roadblocks on the highway approaches to Managua; buses piled up in long lines while inspectors searched for "contraband" (sometimes taking small amounts of food that old women hid under their aprons).

Meanwhile, the *comandantes* moved into villas seized from the *somocistas*, and officials savored the pleasures of riding in the deposed regime's Mercedes-Benz cars (marked "Property of the People").

Further causes of discontent arose during 1983.

To man its growing military machine, the regime announced that males aged 18 to 40 were subject to a draft, Nicaragua's first, for a two-year stint that could be extended. (Movie attendance and bus-ridership fell because youths feared they would be conscripted on sight.) Then came some Sandinista missteps with the church.

Notably through the appointment of leftist clergymen to high posts (e.g., the Foreign Ministry was headed by Maryknoll priest Miguel d'Escoto Brockman), the regime promoted a "Popular Church." This was a network of neighborhood groups espousing "liberation theology," the Latin social reform doctrine embraced by many Catholic clergy and laymen. Nicaragua's adherents, as Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa observed, were "intellectually militant members of the middle class." They viewed the Catholic hierarchy, headed by Cardinal Obando y Bravo, as a threat to the Revolution. Indeed, via its newspaper and radio station (both eventually shut down by the Sandinistas), the hierarchy criticized the Popular Church (a "fifth column") and the government.\*

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\*The Church-state sparring began with Somoza's fall. Sandinista leaders slighted the faith. (Dead guerrillas, said the virulently Marxist Tomás Borge, were real "saints.") The Catholic faithful displayed new religiosity. Reported apparitions of the Virgin Mary proliferated. Late in 1982, the Church decided to consecrate the nation to the Virgin in a series of open-air masses—actually intended, the FSLN feared, to spur rebellion.

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The feuding came to a head during Pope John Paul II's March 1983 visit to Nicaragua. An outdoor mass in Managua drew half a million people, some waving yellow and white Vatican flags, others black and red Sandinista flags. The Pope criticized the Popular Church, championed parochial schools, embraced Obando y Bravo, and omitted any criticism of U.S. policy and the contras. But microphones had been placed among Sandinista militiamen and CDS members. During the Pope's homily, cries of "People's Power" and "We want peace" erupted. Daniel Ortega and other *comandantes* rose to lead the jeers.

John Paul, red-faced, ordered "Silence!" Thousands of the faithful began chanting "*El Papa, El Papa*"—The Pope.

### The 'Overt Covert' Route

Anti-Sandinista sentiments also flared on the Atlantic coast. Upon its proud minorities—Miskito and Sumo Indians in the north, Creole blacks and mulattoes in the south—the Sandinistas imposed both Cuban teachers and the FSLN's own radical rhetoric and take-charge ways; army troops bivouacked in churches, a practice accepted in Catholic areas elsewhere but irritating to the largely Moravian Protestant Miskitos. By late 1981, Miskito leader Steadman Fagoth Müller, who had strong ties to the CIA and former National Guardsmen in Honduras, called on his "nation" to rebel, and then helped lead raids into Nicaragua from sanctuaries in Honduras. The Sandinistas, surprised, moved thousands of Miskitos from 42 villages along the border to settlements 50 miles to the south. A Miskito-Sandinista war has simmered ever since.

But the FSLN had no monopoly on political blunders. When the Reagan administration decided in 1981 to support the contras, CIA Director William J. Casey persuaded General Leopoldo F. Galtieri, then the Argentine Army's chief of staff, to send officers to train and lead them. Not only were the Argentines better at teaching torture than guerrilla tactics, but having done Washington a favor, the Argentine junta was fatally emboldened to invade *Las Malvinas* (the Falkland Islands).

The contra war was begun in March 1982 by the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), established in Honduras by Enrique Bermúdez, a former National Guard colonel who had been Somoza's military attaché in Washington, and several civilians who have since resigned. The FDN blew up two bridges in Nicaragua; the Sandinistas declared a state of emergency, further curbing civil liberties.

The contras' ranks expanded. American-provided light weapons, uniforms, and other supplies helped the expansion. (The daily cost of U.S. support is \$90,000, or roughly \$6 per contra; the troops are unpaid, although contra leaders and commanders receive monthly stipends.) The FDN, the largest and best organized of what would become a half-dozen rebel groups, started out with 600 fighters; by early 1985 it claimed 12,000. The growth came from Indians, small landholders, and peasants

(many of them members of evangelistic Christian sects), who trekked to the ever-more-crowded refugee camps in Honduras and Costa Rica.

Nonetheless, what evolved tended to be low-intensity, low-frequency combat in the classic Latin tradition.\* Clinging to their Honduran and Costa Rican bases, the contras ventured into Nicaragua only sporadically. Pitched battles between rebel and Sandinista Popular Army (or even militia) battalions were rare. So was fighting in cities, and head-to-head combat in general. Nicaragua—like El Salvador—was not Vietnam.

Although the “war” became one of desultory small-unit skirmishes, the contras (and, less often, the Sandinista troops) gained a reputation for human rights abuses. Short on training and discipline, they pillaged, raped, and murdered, executed prisoners, and attacked “soft” targets—government health clinics, schools, farm cooperatives. The fighters hailed by the Reagan administration as “lovers of freedom and democracy” became, to critics like House Majority Leader Thomas P. O’Neill, “butchers and maimers.”

Popular fears of the contras tended to strengthen the Sandinistas’ hold on power at home and, remarkably, on public opinion abroad. While Daniel Ortega cited the contra threat to excuse economic failures and political crackdowns, most of Latin America and Western Europe condemned Washington’s “overt covert” policy.

### Fury Over Firecrackers

In 1982 the U.S. Congress passed the first of several different Boland Amendments—sponsored by Representative Edward Boland (D.-Mass.)—limiting permissible U.S. aid to the contras. Nonetheless, the administration’s commitment to the rebels deepened.

That year, seeking to change the contras’ image as a National Guard in exile, CIA staffers went to Miami to interview candidates for a new FDN board of directors. The new chairman: Adolfo Calero Portocarrero, ex-manager of a Coca-Cola plant, Conservative Party stalwart, Somoza foe, and long-time U.S. intelligence “asset” in Managua.

But the more the CIA became involved, the worse became the contras’ “image problem.” During early 1984, a separate CIA-directed Latino force laid “firecracker” mines in Corinto and two other Nicaraguan harbors—to scare ships away and impress Nicaraguans with the power of the anti-Sandinista cause. When at least five foreign vessels hit mines without suffering much damage, the contras were instructed to take credit for an operation they had not even been aware of.

The firecrackers caused more damage in Washington. On Capitol Hill, even contra supporters like Senator Barry Goldwater (R.-Ariz.)

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\*The contra war, like the Sandinista guerrilla campaign during the 1970s, was bloodier than Fidel Castro’s much-touted 1953-59 campaign against the Batista regime in Cuba, during which no more than 2,000 people died on both sides. But of the nearly 22,500 Nicaraguans slain during 1980-87, a high percentage have been civilians. El Salvador’s civil war has cost over 60,000 lives, mostly civilians, in eight years.

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worried about an out-of-control CIA duping the congressional intelligence committees. That year, Congress cut off contra funds entirely. (Subsequently, the committees discovered a 1983 psychological warfare manual, written by a CIA contract employee who called himself the "Priest of Death," which included instructions on "neutralizing" local Sandinista officials, evidently by execution.)

Meanwhile, tensions arose between the northern front contras led by Bermúdez and the Costa Rica-based rebels led by Edén Pastora (who later retired from the struggle). But by late 1984, contra units were beginning to find support in a few Nicaraguan provinces, such as Boaco and Chontales, home to many politically conservative cattle ranchers.

### Watching from Windows

In early 1985, I took a three-day hike in northern Nicaragua's Par Par Valley with a 17-man contra scouting party. Five hours of mountain climbing from the Honduran border led us to some adobe shacks in a jungle clearing called Par Par Abajo. Food was scarce, as the swollen bellies of parasite-stricken children showed. But the rebels did find sustenance, physical and moral. Antonia Vallejo, a shriveled woman of 42, supplied corn on the cob. Of the Sandinistas, she complained, "They wanted us to study, to dance, to march. They said God was a guerrilla."

Villagers told how they had driven out a Sandinista teacher who took a stick to slow-learning children. Later, troops came to order residents to put their small plots into a cooperative. Again, the peasants balked. Similar stories were heard in other hamlets.

Most of the patrol members were also poor peasants. They said they joined the contras because they were being forced into cooperatives and suffering from the government-fixed crop prices. Several fighters, like 22-year-old "Genio," joined up to avoid and resist the draft.

As Genio told it, on November 8, 1982, a local peasant ran into his town, Santa Maria de Cedro, warning that 40 Sandinista troops were coming, apparently to press gang youths into the army or militia. Genio spread the alarm from door to door and led 200 youths into the mountains. They were chased by government forces—whom the contras and their sympathizers call *piris*\*—for 31 days before they joined the rebels in Honduras. "We didn't want to take orders" from the Sandinistas, Genio explained. "We already knew what communism is: all the harvests become one for rationing."

The Sandinistas were too wise to believe their own claims that the contras were only "CIA mercenaries" who kidnapped their recruits. By

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\*Short for *piriquaco*, or "mad dog." The term *contra*, popularized by the Sandinistas (the rebels themselves did not care for it), is a contraction of *contrarevolucionario* ("counterrevolutionary"). The Sandinistas' equivalent of "comrade" is *compañero* (literally, a person whom one breaks bread with); a short form is *compa*. Toughs who do strong-arm chores for the Sandinistas are *turbas divinas* ("divine mobs"), a term that has roots in the French Revolution. Contributions to the vernacular by U.S. military men in Central America include nicknames for government forces: "Sandys," "Hondos," "Guats," "Salvos."

### THE STRUGGLE IN THE U.S.

On April 27, 1983, Ronald Reagan told Congress that the "national security of all the Americas is at stake in Central America." But the president did not urge the dispatch of U.S. troops ("They are not needed"). Rather, he sought congressional assent to \$281.8 million in aid for war-torn El Salvador—and other aid for the anti-Sandinista contras in Nicaragua.

By late 1984, the election of El Salvador's moderate president, José Napoleón Duarte, a drop in assassinations by right-wing "death squads," and the apparent decline of the Cuban-backed Farabundo Martí guerrillas had quieted controversy over the modest U.S. involvement (55 military advisers) in *that* country. Another "Vietnam" no longer seemed imminent; the news media focused on Nicaragua.

Since then, outside Washington, D.C., public debate over Nicaragua has occasionally been intense, but never widespread.

On the Left, mass protests against Reagan policy have been rare. Nevertheless, Ortega & Co. have won the sympathy of Jesse Jackson, some congressional Democrats (including former House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill), many academics, church groups, and pacifists. A "Nicaragua Network," founded in 1979, links some 300 local committees, sponsors Sandinista speaking tours, and recruits volunteers for work in Nicaragua; U.S. Representative Ronald Dellums (D.-Calif.) is an adviser. Last November, Quest for Peace, a 400-group coalition led by Detroit's Roman Catholic Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, reported raising \$100 million in humanitarian aid in 1987. Under such auspices, perhaps 60,000 Americans have gone on work-study visits to Nicaragua. For its part, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has steadily opposed contra aid. To help out, the Sandinistas hired Fenton Communications, a Washington D.C. publicity firm (previous clients: Angola, Grenada).

On the Right, the grassroots focus has been on fund-raising for the contras, especially when Congress cut U.S. aid. Perhaps \$10 million was received through 1987. Retired Army Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub, fund-raiser Charles ("Spitz") Channell, *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, TV evangelist Pat Robertson, brewery tycoon Joseph Coors, and singer Wayne Newton—all were involved, some with the help of the White House's Oliver North of Iran-contra fame. In 1986 the State Department hired a conservative public relations firm to squire visiting contra leaders, and to seek public support for their cause.

Since 1984, the debate, such as it is, has consisted largely of the Left's attacks on the contras (their atrocities, alleged fascist tendencies, venality) and the Right's attacks on the Sandinistas (Soviet ties, atrocities, Cuban-style repression). Most newspaper editorials have tended to favor "negotiations"; Pentagon leaders have opposed any U.S. military intervention that lacks popular backing. Citing polls, *Public Opinion's* Everett Ladd noted recently that most Americans remain ambivalent; they want to "curb pro-Soviet forces in Central America and extend democracy [but] without armed conflict." If current negotiations fail to achieve this result, he added, the debate may intensify.

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mid-1985, the Par Par Valley people, like others in the northern border region, were forcibly resettled so they could not shelter the contras.

The resettlement campaign was a tacit admission that not all poor peasants hailed the Revolution. But a certain Sandinista "moderation" prevailed in some matters, beginning with the 1984 election.

That was no model election. CDS-organized *turbas divinas* broke up rallies for Arturo Cruz, who had left the regime and become the chief opposition candidate, though he would later decline to run. And a few Sandinista foes were arrested or drafted. Even so, opposition parties, weak as they were, did have a chance to organize and air their views.

On a typical campaign Sunday, Virgilio Godoy Reyes, the Independent Liberal Party's presidential candidate, donned a peasant straw hat and marched through the cobblestone streets of León, a generally pro-Sandinista city. While many watched warily from their windows, 500 citizens came out to hear the candidate. He complained about the draft, and about the Sandinistas' foreign friends. "There are hundreds of East Germans here, to teach our children to be spies."

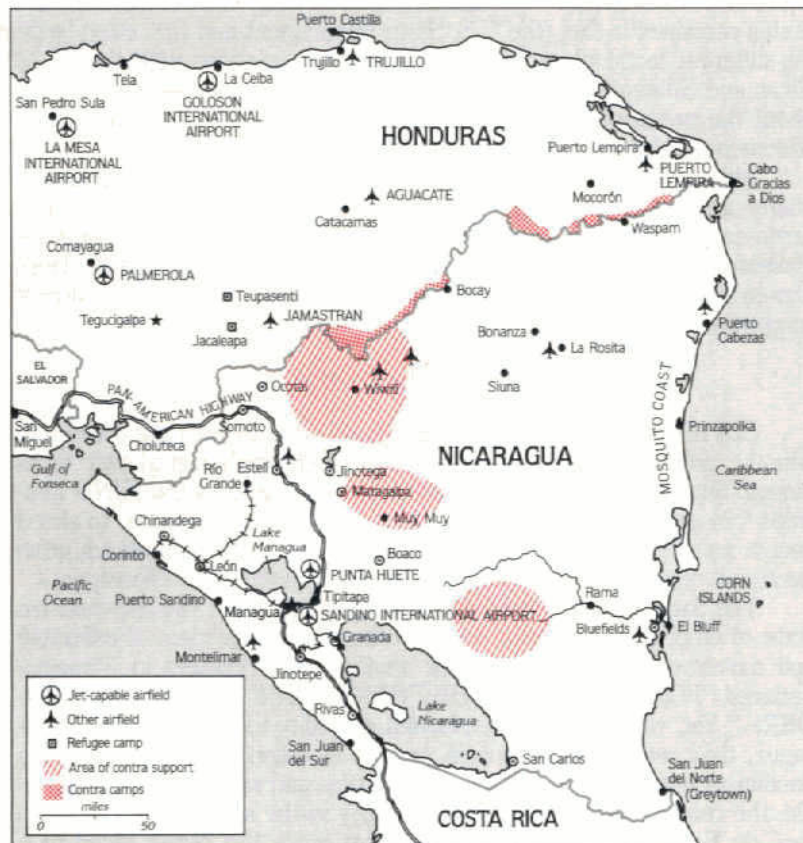
### Worms in the Cornmeal

Nonetheless, the opposition (bereft of Cruz) was divided, and the Sandinistas won nearly 70 percent of what most Western observers believe was a fair vote count. Besides installing Daniel Ortega as president and Sergio Ramírez as vice president, the voters chose a 96-member legislature, with opposition representation, which in 1986 adopted a new constitution. Most important, the election set a precedent; those bent on turning the Sandinista Revolution into an unfettered Marxist-Leninist regime on the Cuban model would find it hard to repeal.

The Constitution (Nicaragua's 11th) upheld private property and freedoms of religion, assembly, and speech. Ortega, citing "sabotage and political destabilization," continued curbs on many civil liberties, but the Sandinistas took other steps to bolster their popularity.

Draftees were allowed to go home after two years. Austerity measures were imposed to deal with what Ortega now called a "hellish" economy, but regulations on commerce were relaxed. To woo the farmers, the Sandinistas began allowing consumer food prices to rise, paying hard currency (e.g., U.S. dollars) rather than only *córdobas* to growers meeting crop quotas, and modifying land reform. Where they had once emphasized state and cooperative farms, the Sandinistas now swallowed socialist principle by turning vast acreage over to small private farmers.

The Reagan administration in 1985 embargoed U.S. trade with Nicaragua, closing a market that used to absorb about half of the country's exports. The Soviet Bloc did little to take up the export slack, as it had done earlier in the case of Cuban sugar. And while no West European countries joined the U.S. embargo, the flow of economic assistance from Spain, France, and West Germany had been shrinking since 1981,



*Among the Sandinistas' new military assets is a 10,000 foot runway—Central America's longest—at Punta Huete, not far from their principal air base at Managua. Most Soviet ships berth at Corinto; Cuban vessels unload at El Bluff or Rama. In Honduras, where U.S. troops exercise, the main air base is at Palmerola. Contra aid moves via dirt airstrips near the border.*

offset only partially by more aid from the Scandinavian countries. (Sweden sent not only cash, \$25 million in 1986, but also technicians to help operate gold mines abandoned by U.S. owners.)

The export slump forced more austerity. Real wages sank further; by 1987, the average Nicaraguan's purchasing power was below one-fifth of what it was in 1980. Discontent was such that Micoín staffers looking for black market goods needed police help to enter some urban bazaars. And distribution snarls continued. (Last May, 700,000 pounds of bagged cornmeal were spoiled by worms at a state-owned Managua factory because Micoín did not send trucks for the food.)

But the contras' difficulties persisted too. The rebels' civilian lead-



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ership remained in flux (the U.S. State Department and CIA often backing different factions), worsening the contras' relations with the Costa Rican and Honduran governments—both democratically elected, uneasy about the presence of rebel camps on their territory, and increasingly unconvinced that the contras could win their war.

Although the "Iran-contra scandal" in the United States unfolded in stages after October 1986—when the Sandinistas shot down a C-123 arms-cargo plane and captured an American crewman, Eugene Hasenfus—the flow of U.S. aid to the rebels continued. Indeed, 1987 was to be the year in which the contras, flush with \$100 million in new congressional funding, were going to show what they could do.

### **Risking Their Grip?**

CIA men and U.S. Army Green Berets were to train the contras to win the political war with "civic action" and psychological war techniques. Shoulder-fired Redeye missiles were to counter the HIND gunships that enabled the Sandinistas, with command of the skies, to shred contra units. Freshly uniformed, possessing new communications gear, nearly all of the 12,000 contras in Honduras moved into Nicaragua.

The Sandinistas braced for trouble. In early 1987, the five-year-old state of emergency (curbing, among other things, freedom of assembly and movement) was extended for another year. Posters in Managua declared "FORWARD WITH THE FRONT. HERE NO ONE SURRENDERS." Yet, while the contras showed an ability to operate inside Nicaragua, they were unable to gain ground in urban areas or to engage Sandinista regulars or militia in major battles and win. In July, for example, the rebels claimed a significant victory in the northern town of San José de Bocay. U.S. newsmen found that while the rebels killed nine Sandinistas, they had also slain a pregnant woman and three children, and did not attack the Sandinista airstrip and headquarters in the town.

Nonetheless, the contra effort, inconclusive as it was, combined with deepening economic woes (including a foreign debt today exceeding \$6 billion) and Moscow's growing reluctance to expand its aid, put heavy pressure on the Managua regime. (The Sandinistas were shocked when, in the spring of 1987, the Soviets denied an appeal for increased oil shipments.) Geography did not help. Nicaragua was not an easily controlled island, like Castro's Cuba; the neighbors were hostile, not friendly. Concerned that the new "correlation of forces" might set them back for years, the Sandinistas sought a diplomatic settlement. And so, to the great surprise of most Central American leaders, Daniel Ortega agreed to the peace plan sponsored by Costa Rica's president, Oscar Arias Sánchez, at a conference in Guatemala City in August.

Although the state of emergency remained in effect, Ortega consented to some liberalization steps, including a limited amnesty for contras, a limited cease-fire, and freedom (with restrictions) of domestic

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press and broadcasting. Perhaps most significant, Ortega agreed to negotiate a permanent cease-fire with the contras—through Cardinal Obando y Bravo, the regime's most prestigious critic, who would also head a commission to oversee compliance with the Guatemala accord. In return, Nicaragua's neighbors agreed to end their aid to the contras, who would thus lose their Honduran camps. All in all, the Sandinistas seemed ready to risk some of their grip on political power for peace, breathing space, and better relations with their apprehensive neighbors.

Nicaragua's domestic political opposition, after almost eight years of near silence, warily came alive. *La Prensa* reappeared.

In contrast to their counterparts in Cuba or Vietnam, the Sandinistas had often surprised their foreign Marxist supporters. The series of Soviet ambassadors who had served in Managua since 1979 must have found their hosts baffling. Although the U.S. administration was supporting a rebellion against the Sandinista regime, trade between the two countries continued (until 1985), and diplomatic relations were never severed. Indeed, all along Nicaragua had admitted a steady stream of American visitors—not only sympathetic academics, journalists, peace activists, and Hollywood celebrities (e.g., Kris Kristofferson), but also political figures of varying ideological hues (Jeane Kirkpatrick, New York's Mayor Edward I. Koch) and even a Reagan cabinet member, Education Secretary William Bennett.

The Sandinista leaders seldom clarified matters, swaying as they did between the rhetoric of reality and that of Castro-style revolution. In October, for example, *comandante* Jaime Wheelock Román was quoted as saying the accord “will demand changes in attitudes, styles, emphasis, structures and tasks,” while *comandante* Tomás Borge insisted that “We are not going to make concessions on principles.”

Ambivalence is nothing new to Nicaraguans. For more than a century, it has suffused their domestic politics (the Liberal-Conservative wrangling), their views of the region (Are one's Central American neighbors colleagues to be joined, or rivals to be subverted?), and their views of the Colossus of the North. Nicaragua's premier man of letters, Rubén Darío (1867–1916), in a celebrated poem, “To Roosevelt,” warned against a United States that had “join[ed] the cult of Mammon to the cult of Hercules”—but chose to spend many years in the comfortable capitals of Europe and South America. Yet, during the 1970s, Nicaraguans, with rare unanimity, did agree on one thing, that it was time for genuine *democracia*. And during the late 1980s, most also seemed to agree that, as Costa Rica's Arias put it, “after more than 40 years of the Somoza dictatorship, the Nicaraguan people deserve something better than another dictatorship of the opposite extreme.”

## ‘INSTITUTIONALIZED STALEMATE’

*by Henry A. Kissinger*

*As an episode in Soviet-American global competition, the conflict in Nicaragua has served to illuminate a recurring problem in American governance: the difficulty of getting Capitol Hill and the White House together on a coherent U.S. foreign policy. Since the Vietnam debacle, the zigzags in U.S. policy overseas have intensified. The War Powers Act (1973) and Congress's initial refusal to fund anti-Communist guerrillas in Angola (1976) were just two early symptoms of the same distrust that led both to the Boland Amendments and to the White House's schemes that skirted them. Last summer's Iran-contra hearings focused on a congressional ban on military support of the contras by U.S. intelligence agencies in effect from September 1984 to December 1985. What should have been examined, contends Henry Kissinger, were "the balance between the executive branch and Congress," and each side's ambivalence.*

The conventional wisdom that modern presidents and their agents in the executive branch have a tendency to break laws is too simple, too denigrating. Most public officials endure the pressures of official life because they want to make a contribution to a better world.

The real issue is not whether officials may substitute their judgment for that of Congress—not even the most zealous White House staffer would claim that—but whether our system of checks and balances is moving toward the former with ever less concern for balance between the coequal branches of government. Nearly insoluble constitutional and personal dilemmas arise when each branch acts on the premise that the other is causing disaster and must be thwarted at all costs.

There were serious errors of judgment in the Iran-contra affair, ranging from the decision to ransom hostages with arms, to the arming of a country whose victory would imperil the interests of the industrial democracies, to pursuing covert policies totally contradictory to publicly stated positions. But these do not amount to a crisis of institutions.

These arise when each branch pushes its prerogatives to the limit, destroying the restraint without which the system cannot work. The funding of contra operations clearly falls into this category.

On the formal level, the case is obvious. The executive branch cannot be allowed—on any aim of national security—to circumvent the congressional prerogative over appropriations by raising its own funds through the sale of government property. But equally, Congress has an



*If the U.S. Congress has been ambivalent about the contras, U.S. cartoonists have not. In his satiric Doonesbury strip, Garry Trudeau has frequently targeted both the Nicaraguan resistance and its American supporters.*

obligation to put forward a clear-cut expression of what it desires. And both branches must seek to settle controversial issues not by legalisms and subterfuge, but by a serious national debate setting forth premises, opportunities, and risks. This is emphatically not what has happened.

The Reagan administration is of the view—which I share—that Sandinista rule in its current form is a long-term threat to the stability of Central America and hence to the United States' security. It has thus sought to bring pressure on the Sandinista regime, to induce it to become more democratic or, failing that, to overthrow it (though that latter objective has never been made explicit). The administration considers the contras a key element of a new political structure in Nicaragua.

Congress has been ambivalent. The Vietnam-born reluctance to be drawn into a conflict in Nicaragua has been matched by a hesitation to assume blame for a collapse of the Nicaraguan anti-Communist resistance. The result: a series of compromises, which is how Congress decides on legislation. This process in foreign policy tends to combine the disadvantages of all policy choices. Thus the impression created by the Iran-contra hearings—that the administration violated a clear congressional mandate—is misleading. The mandate was anything but clear.

There have been at least six versions of legislation affecting contra aid, each of them authorizing aid but encumbering it with restrictions that varied from year to year, and that largely contradicted congressional consent to the principle of support for the Nicaraguan resistance:

- From December 21, 1982 to December 7, 1983, there was a

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prohibition against using funds to “overthrow” the Nicaraguan government; by implication other contra activities were permitted if not encouraged, and the term “overthrow” was never defined.

- From December 8, 1983 to October 3, 1984, there was a ceiling of \$24 million on intelligence support for military or paramilitary activity inside Nicaragua, thus blessing as well as financing these enterprises.

- From October 3, 1984 to December 19, 1985, Congress reversed course, barring military or paramilitary support. For nine months *no* new funds were provided, though existing ones could be used. After August 15, 1985, humanitarian aid (\$27 million) was reinstated.

- From December 19, 1985 to October 1986, intelligence support was again permitted, though it was limited to advice and communications equipment. At the same time, the State Department was authorized to solicit humanitarian assistance from third countries.

- On October 18, 1986, Congress appropriated \$100 million in humanitarian and military assistance after a 10-week hiatus, while a meeting to reconcile technical differences between the versions of the two houses was stalled by opponents of contra aid.

What message was Congress sending? What was the rationale for approving contra aid, but constantly changing the amounts and the conditions for its use? How was the administration to interpret a congressional intent that changed so often? Did Congress approve of aid to the contras, debating only the scale of support? Or was it seeking to destroy the Nicaraguan resistance while being unwilling to assume responsibility?

Clearly Congress provided neither continuity nor criteria to which even the most scrupulous administration could orient itself. And all the while the contras in the field were in danger of collapsing before a new appropriation could be passed. Of such stuff are institutional crises made.

This in no way seeks to justify the measures the Reagan administration took to deal with its very real problem of how to keep the contras alive from one congressional cycle to another. Neither self-financing nor lies to Congress can be excused. Nor were the administration requests to Congress free of disingenuousness. For example, were the sums requested by the executive branch based on an achievable strategy, or did they reflect a judgment of what the traffic would bear? Be that as it may, to focus exclusively on administration transgressions is one-sided; congressional incoherence and ambivalence require comparable attention.

The Reagan administration's basic error was to try to achieve by

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*Henry A. Kissinger, 64, a consultant and counselor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., served as Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (1969-75) and as Secretary of State (1973-77). He is a former trustee of the Wilson Center (1971-77). Born in Fuerth, Germany, he received a B.A. (1950), an M.A. (1952), and a Ph.D. (1954) from Harvard University. Among his many books are The Necessity for Choice: Prospects of American Foreign Policy (1961), and White House Years (1979). Copyright © 1987 Los Angeles Times Syndicate.*

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indirection what it should have faced head on. It should have bent every effort to bring about a national debate on the choices before the country with regard to Nicaragua, and to force a congressional vote on the minimum means required to achieve its view of U.S. objectives.

There were at least three choices:

- To coexist with the Sandinista regime unless it introduced high-performance Soviet military equipment into Nicaragua.
- To bring pressure on Nicaragua to return to the inter-American system by expelling foreign—especially Cuban—advisers and reducing its military forces to traditional Central American levels, in return for the United States' not challenging the Sandinista political structure.
- To overthrow the Sandinista regime or, at a minimum (and improbably), to change its character so that the Sandinistas became one party in a pluralistic process in which the contras also participated.

The only option achievable without military pressure—contra or United States—was acceptance of the Sandinistas with no conditions other than the exclusion of certain Soviet high-performance arms. The overthrow of the Sandinistas, the third option, would almost certainly require U.S. troops.

The irony of the American political process is that each of the two coequal branches of the government chose an option at the opposite end of the spectrum, but supplied means inconsistent with its choices. A large militant minority in Congress pursued the illusion that diplomacy was an alternative to pressure. But while one can debate the nature of the pressure, and of reasonable objectives, diplomatic success presupposes a balance of penalties and incentives. In the end, a hesitant majority recognized this reality and voted for some aid, though never enough for even minimum objectives. This institutionalized ambivalence.

On the other hand, the administration's real objective has been the overthrow of the Sandinista political structure. This is unachievable by the means it has requested, which at best are enough for the second option: the expulsion of foreign advisers and the reduction of Nicaraguan military forces. This institutionalized stalemate.

I make these criticisms with diffidence, for the administration in which I served reacted with similar ambivalence to comparable congressional challenges. In retrospect, the Nixon administration's crucial mistake in the Vietnam War (which it inherited) was not to insist on an up-or-down vote regarding its judgment on how to conclude it. This would have required Congress to assume responsibility for its actions, would have avoided prolonged national anguish, and would have brought a clear-cut resolution one way or the other.

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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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### NICARAGUA

Why is Central America so troubled?

Tulane historian Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr., rounds up the usual suspects—old Spanish rivalries, the tropical climate, “Indian lethargy,” “European or North American imperialism.” But “single-cause analyses,” he argues in **Central America: A Nation Divided** (Oxford, 1976), are inadequate.

Among other ills, Indian wars began a “tradition of disunion” continued by the Spanish. Moreover, the mountains limited trade, and slash-and-burn farming ruined “millions of acres of arable land.”

Woodward’s is the most lucid all-round history of the region in English. Useful surveys include Robert C. West and John P. Augelli’s **Middle America: Its Lands and Peoples** (Prentice-Hall, 1976) and Franklin D. Parker’s **Central American Republics** (Oxford, 1964). Cornell’s Walter LaFeber, in **Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America** (Norton, 1984), approaches his subject from the Left, but acknowledges that early on, the Central American leaders themselves sought a U.S. presence. They thought “the Yankees could be played off against Mexico, Britain, or even Guatemala,” which long dreamed of ruling its neighbors.

The region pops up in many U.S. histories, such as Samuel Flagg Bemis’s **Latin American Policy of the United States: An Historical Interpretation** (Harcourt, 1943), Charles Morrow Wilson’s **Empire in Green and Gold** (Holt, 1947), Allan R. Millett’s **Semper Fidelis: The History of the U.S. Marine Corps** (Free Press, 1982), and Lester D. Langley’s **Banana Wars: An Inner History of American Empire, 1900–1934** (Univ. of Kentucky, 1983).

There is no *general* history of Nicaragua in English. **Nicaragua: A Country Study** (U.S. Govt., Dept. of the Army,

1982), prepared by American University’s Foreign Areas Studies program, helps fill the gap. So do David I. Folkman, Jr.’s **Nicaragua Route** (Univ. of Utah, 1972), concerning the canal issue; **Filibusters and Financiers** (Macmillan, 1916; Russell, 1969), William O. Scroggs’ portrait of William Walker; Harold Norman Denny’s **Dollars for Bullets: The Story of America’s Rule in Nicaragua** (Dial, 1929); Neill Macaulay’s **Sandino Affair** (Quadrangle, 1967); Richard L. Millett’s **Guardians of the Dynasty** (Orbis, 1977), a history of the National Guard and the Somoza family; and Bernard Diederich’s **Somoza** (Dutton, 1981).

Nicaragua’s latest rulers are scrutinized by Princeton’s Forrest D. Colburn, who argues that the bloom was off the Sandinistas even before the contra war began. Very early, he notes in **Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua: State, Class and the Dilemma of Agrarian Policy** (Univ. of Calif., 1986), the rural poor became “sharply critical” of failures to raise living standards and “the continuing call for sacrifices.” The peasant view of the new regime: “A different bone, the same dog.”

In **Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua** (Princeton, 1987), Robert A. Pastor, director of Latin American and Caribbean affairs in Jimmy Carter’s National Security Council, concedes that U.S. fumbles helped the Sandinistas. In December 1978, Somoza sounded out the State Department on his chances of being granted U.S. exile; that news never reached White House officials, who thus missed the “best moment” to ease Somoza out of power when a moderate successor regime in Managua was possible. Carter, says Pastor, was also ill-served by U.S. intelligence: The flow of arms to the Sandinistas via Cuba and

other nations in 1979 was not detected.

Shirley Christian notes the cost of such errors in **Nicaragua: Revolution in the Family** (Random, 1985). To realize the *democratic* goals of the anti-Somoza revolt now "implies more intervention than the United States has been willing to tackle" since Vietnam.

Intervention has become a pejorative word, she says. "The basic tenets of international relations since World War II have been nonintervention and self-determination, though most Third World governments have been more concerned with advocating nonintervention . . . than with practicing self-determination." Cuba and the Soviet Union avoid "intervention" by using another term, "internationalism."

And that, as John Norton Moore's **Secret War in Central America** (Univ. Publications of America, 1987) details, is on the rise in the Latin American region. There, mostly in Cuba and Nicaragua, the Soviets had 50 times more military advisers in 1981 than did the United States (which then fielded 70 advisers, versus 516 at the start of the 1970s).

White House interest in the region has fluctuated wildly, as Abraham F. Lowenthal observes in **Partners in Conflict: The United States and Latin America** (Johns Hopkins, 1987). John F. Kennedy, president when Fidel Castro was trying to stir up Venezuela, Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia, saw Christian Democratic regimes as the answer to "violent revolution." Later U.S. presidents (e.g., Richard Nixon, with his "Mature Partnership" policy) saw less need for urgency.

Indeed, as Lowenthal notes, Communist Cuba, a "highly personal autocracy," is now "not as appealing a model in any country of South America as it was in

1960." Since Castro's debut, the Left's "main revolutionary triumph" has been Nicaragua—and the Sandinistas have not (yet) emulated Cuba to the extent of all but outlawing the private economy.

After World War II the old conservative triumvirate of Oligarchy, Church, and Army began eroding in Latin America. But what would fill the vacuum?

Outside Cuba and Nicaragua, Lowenthal observes, ventures on the "socialist path" have been few and ill-fated: Chile under Salvador Allende (elected 1970, toppled 1973), Grenada under the New Jewel Movement (1979–83) and, to a degree, St. Lucia, Jamaica, Guyana, and Surinam. As for the military "bureaucratic authoritarian" path, the generals have bowed out in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. Nor has leftist "military populism" (Peru, Bolivia) survived.

That leaves "reformist democracy," in Lowenthal's analysis "the most successful Latin American experience." Colombia, Venezuela, and Costa Rica are the familiar examples. But another is the Dominican Republic.

During the 1960s, it epitomized the "politics of chaos." In 1965 Lyndon B. Johnson dispatched more than 22,000 Marines and Army paratroopers there—the first such episode since Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1934 pledge to end unilateral U.S. armed intervention in Latin America—to forestall what he perceived as a possible Communist coup.

The Dominican Republic, says Lowenthal, has since had "six consecutive, regularly scheduled, contested presidential elections. At no previous time in [its] history had even two such elections been held without a coup intervening."

Perhaps *that*, rather than Cuba, is the model that Nicaraguans may one day try to emulate.