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*: President José Simeon Azcona Hoyo, elected 1985 to four-year term. Present constitution (1982) ended decade 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 Saavedra, 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.

## 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.

## 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).

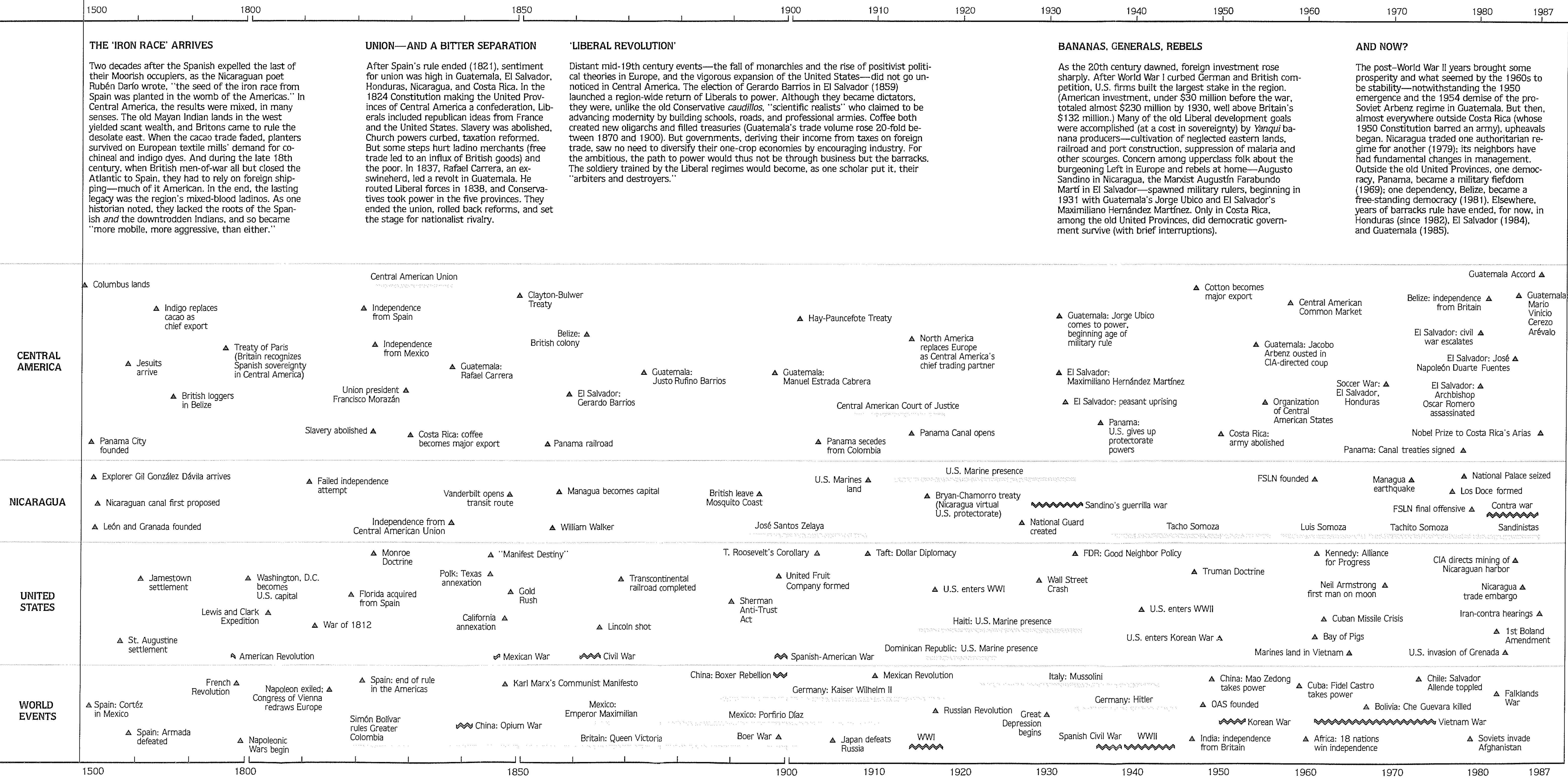
## GUATEMALA

*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 Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo, elected 1985 to five-year term, ending 15 years of military rule.

## 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), $111,521,000 (military). *Leader*: President José Napoleón Duarte Fuentes, elected 1984 to five-year term, amid civil war, following 52 years of military rule.

# A CENTRAL AMERICAN CHRONICLE, 1500-1987




## THE 'IRON RACE' ARRIVES

Two decades after the Spanish expelled the last of their Moorish occupiers, as the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío wrote, "the seed of the iron race from Spain was planted in the womb of the Americas." In Central America, the results were mixed, in many senses. The old Mayan Indian lands in the west yielded scant wealth, and Britons came to rule the desolate east. When the cacao trade faded, planters survived on European textile mills' demand for cochineal and indigo dyes. And during the late 18th century, when British men-of-war all but closed the Atlantic to Spain, they had to rely on foreign shipping—much of it American. In the end, the lasting legacy was the region's mixed-blood ladinos. As one historian noted, they lacked the roots of the Spanish *and* the downtrodden Indians, and so became "more mobile, more aggressive, than either."

## UNION—AND A BITTER SEPARATION

After Spain's rule ended (1821), sentiment for union was high in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. In the 1824 Constitution making the United Provinces of Central America a confederation, Liberals included republican ideas from France and the United States. Slavery was abolished, Church powers curbed, taxation reformed. But some steps hurt ladino merchants (free trade led to an influx of British goods) and the poor. In 1837, Rafael Carrera, an ex-swineherd, led a revolt in Guatemala. He routed Liberal forces in 1838, and Conservatives took power in the five provinces. They ended the union, rolled back reforms, and set the stage for nationalist rivalry.

## 'LIBERAL REVOLUTION'

Distant mid-19th century events—the fall of monarchies and the rise of positivist political theories in Europe, and the vigorous expansion of the United States—did not go unnoticed in Central America. The election of Gerardo Barrios in El Salvador (1859) launched a region-wide return of Liberals to power. Although they became dictators, they were, unlike the old Conservative *caudillos*, "scientific realists" who claimed to be advancing modernity by building schools, roads, and professional armies. Coffee both created new oligarchs and filled treasuries (Guatemala's trade volume rose 20-fold between 1870 and 1900). But governments, deriving their income from taxes on foreign trade, saw no need to diversify their one-crop economies by encouraging industry. For the ambitious, the path to power would thus not be through business but the barracks. The soldiery trained by the Liberal regimes would become, as one scholar put it, their "arbiters and destroyers."

## BANANAS, GENERALS, REBELS

As the 20th century dawned, foreign investment rose sharply. After World War I curbed German and British competition, U.S. firms built the largest stake in the region. (American investment, under $30 million before the war, totaled almost $230 million by 1930, well above Britain's $132 million.) Many of the old Liberal development goals were accomplished (at a cost in sovereignty) by *Yanqui* banana producers—cultivation of neglected eastern lands, railroad and port construction, suppression of malaria and other scourges. Concern among upperclass folk about the burgeoning Left in Europe and rebels at home—Augusto Sandino in Nicaragua, the Marxist Augustín Farabundo Martí in El Salvador—spawned military rulers, beginning in 1931 with Guatemala's Jorge Ubico and El Salvador's Maximiliano Hernández Martínez. Only in Costa Rica, among the old United Provinces, did democratic government survive (with brief interruptions).

## AND NOW?

The post–World War II years brought some prosperity and what seemed by the 1960s to be stability—notwithstanding the 1950 emergence and the 1954 demise of the pro-Soviet Arbenz regime in Guatemala. But then, almost everywhere outside Costa Rica (whose 1950 Constitution barred an army), upheavals began. Nicaragua traded one authoritarian regime for another (1979); its neighbors have had fundamental changes in management. Outside the old United Provinces, one democracy, Panama, became a military fiefdom (1969); one dependency, Belize, became a free-standing democracy (1981). Elsewhere, years of barracks rule have ended, for now, in Honduras (since 1982), El Salvador (1984), and Guatemala (1985).

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'ètat* 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

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.

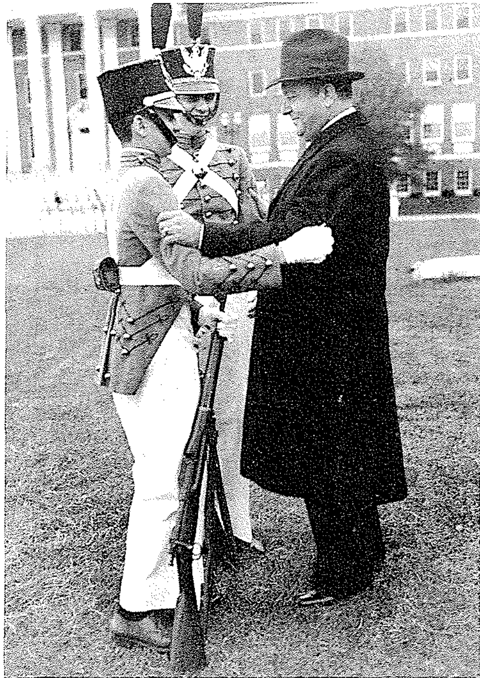
Yet postwar Nicaragua was changing.

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

*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*.* 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 Wiwilí, 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

*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.

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

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.