# *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 "nonaligned" 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-

*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).*

*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 a satellite of the Soviet Union."*

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 DISCLAIM 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 Carrión Cruz, had attended Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire. Tomás Borge, the slight, intense son of a bookseller, had

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

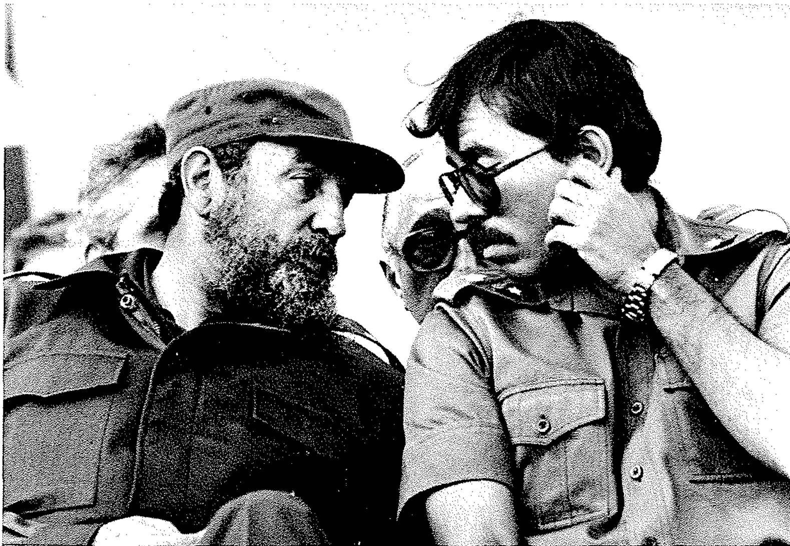
figure, Jorge Salazar Argüello, was killed by police.

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.*

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.

*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.

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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."

(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 statists, had created. A major irritant was the new Internal Trade Ministry, known as "Micoin." As a black market in basic consumer goods developed, Micoin 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.*

*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.

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.)

*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.

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

*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).

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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.

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."

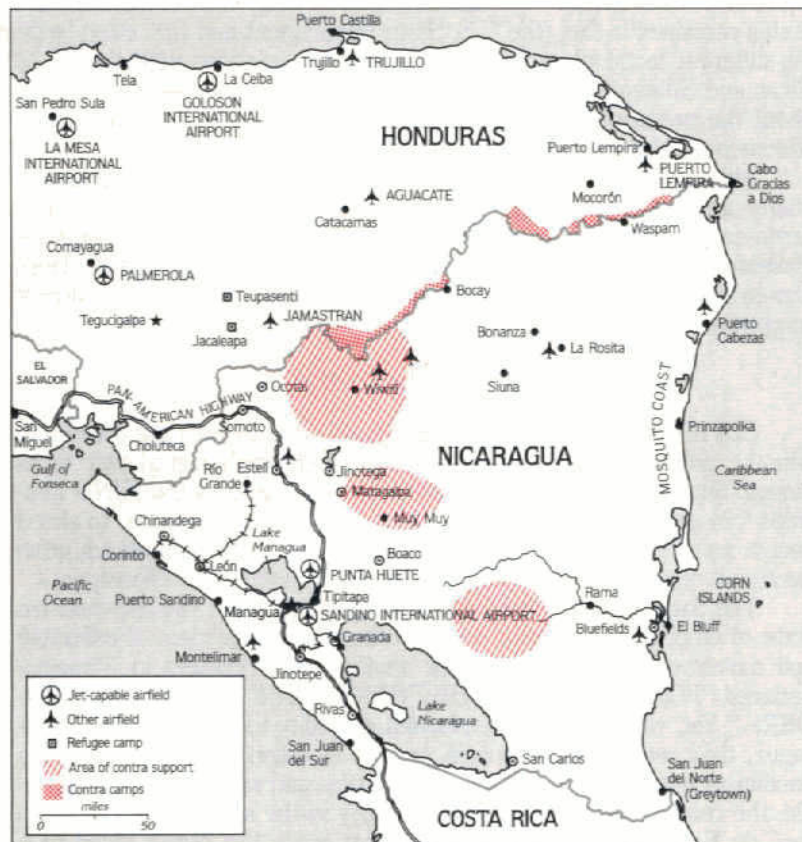
## Worms in the Cornmeal

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 Micoin 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 Micoin did not send trucks for the food.)

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

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

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."