

THE CONTRAS, 1980–1989

A Special Kind of Politics

R. Pardo-Maurer

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The Contras, 1980–1989

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Foreword by Edward N. Luttwak

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To the friends and mentors
who made history alive for me:
Sir Steven Runciman, Sir Harry Hinsley,
and Henry Ashby Turner

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Foreword

The reader of this examination of the internal and external politics of the Nicaraguan opposition-in-arms, the *contras*, is in for several surprises. First, the author combines an unfailingly rigorous analysis that satisfies all the normal criteria of scholarship with narrative skills of a high order. The division of the text into short segments each headed by a concise summary in the old novelistic style is an elegant device that works very well within the compass of this work, keeping the reader on track through complicated events. The language, too, is far different in texture and tone from the standard academic norm. The *contra* experience was replete with conflictual tensions and factional intrigue, and the author would have slighted both had he not been bold enough to adopt a frankly dramatic manner. The result is a text that even readers not especially interested in Nicaraguan affairs will find most attractive.

Second, this study of the peculiar politics of exiles succeeds very well as a study of politics as such and could indeed serve as something of a model. What others too often dysfunctionally isolate is here found successfully combined: personalities and personality conflicts as well as elective affinities, ideology as both a genuine frame of reference and as the vehicle of symbols and themes apt to be

manipulated by contending personalities and factions, and the organizational dimension. That politics is none of these things alone but rather precisely their combination is known to all. Yet their fusion into one many-layered account is far less common in the contemporary writings of political science than their arbitrary separation. In particular, it is not only historicists who are reluctant to contend with the role of personalities in politics, refractory as they are to systematic analysis. In this case, it would have been most misleading to record in merely procedural fashion the doings and undoings of the likes of Adolfo Calero and Oliver North.

Third, the author combines the intimate knowledge of an active participant with a dispassionate objectivity that is everywhere confirmed. That most unusual pairing of attributes is especially valuable in this case, for the contras and their American patrons were of course operating in secrecy, and only a participant could know of sayings and doings not otherwise recorded in the documentary evidence. Incidentally, the author's coldly disengaged manner only adds force to his observations on the role of U.S. policy and U.S. officials in the travails of the contras. It is with a devastating detachment that frivolous congressional reversals, irresponsible executive vacillations, and the disastrous operational incompetence of the CIA are noted at each remove.

Central America is both very near to the United States and very remote from its political culture. That the region's travails are of importance simply because they powerfully manifest themselves in our everyday life is by now a cliché. Yet any real knowledge of Central America and of its politics remains something of a rarity in the United States, so that many of our dealings with Central Americans and their lands are distorted by a profound ignorance unaccompanied by the modicum of humility that attends our dealings with more distant cultures. That is why the most outlandish notions of our own making have been projected onto Central American events during the past decade. One sustained

example is the Vietnam-inspired perspective so often imposed on El Salvador's war. Another is the persistent misperception if not misrepresentation of the Nicaraguan resistance as a mere artifact of the CIA. R. Pardo-Maurer's account reveals the complex realities of the Nicaraguan resistance as an autonomous political phenomenon, though one both promoted and undermined by incoherent U.S. actions. This valuable contribution to our understanding of an important episode in the history of Central America deserves our close attention, if only as a corrective to delusions of adequacy engendered by both ignorance and arrogance.

Edward N. Luttwak
The Arleigh Burke Chair in Strategy
The Center for Strategic and International Studies

September 1990

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About the Author

R. Pardo-Maurer joined the contras as a political officer in 1986, serving as special assistant to the Washington Office of the Nicaraguan Resistance until the Sapoa cease-fire of 1988. A national of both Costa Rica and the United States, he currently works at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C. Mr. Pardo-Maurer holds degrees from Yale and King's College, Cambridge.

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Principal Abbreviations

Contras

ARDE—Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática

BOS—Bloque Opositor del Sur

FARN—Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Nicaragüenses

FDN—Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense

FRS—Frente Revolucionario Sandino

MILPAS—Milicias Populares Anti-Sandinistas (Anti-Somocistas before 1980)

RN—Resistencia Nicaragüense

UNO—Unidad Nicaragüense Opositora

Indian Revolt

KISAN—Kus Indian Sut Asla Nicaragua ra

MISURA—Miskito, Sumo, Rama

YATAMA—Yapti Tasba Masraka Aslika Takanka

Sandinistas

BLI—Batallon de Lucha Irregular (Irregular Combat Battalion)

EPS—Ejército Popular Sandinista (Sandinista Army)

FLSN—Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional

GPP—Guerra Popular Prolongada (Prolonged Popular War—Tomás Borge's faction)

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Principal Persons Mentioned

Directors of Unidad Nicaragüense Opositora (UNO) or the Nicaraguan Resistance (the Contras) (Dates of participation in the resistance in parentheses)

Adolfo CALERO Portocarrero (1982–1989): Chairman of Milca bottling company; leader of the Conservative Party; member of the Broad Opposition Front against Somoza, 1978–1979

Alfredo CESAR Aguirre (1984–1989): General administrator of San Antonio sugar mill; secretary of the Sandinista junta, 1979; president of Central Bank (1980–1982)

Pedro Joaquin CHAMORRO Barrios (1987–1988): Journalist; coeditor of *La Prensa*, 1981–1984; political secretary of Social Democratic Party, 1983

Arturo CRUZ, Sr. (1985–1987): President of Central Bank, 1979–1980; member of Sandinista junta, 1980–1981; ambassador to Washington, 1981; presidential candidate, 1984

Azucena FERREY Echaverry (1987–1988): Student activist, Christian Democrat Party; vice president of the