

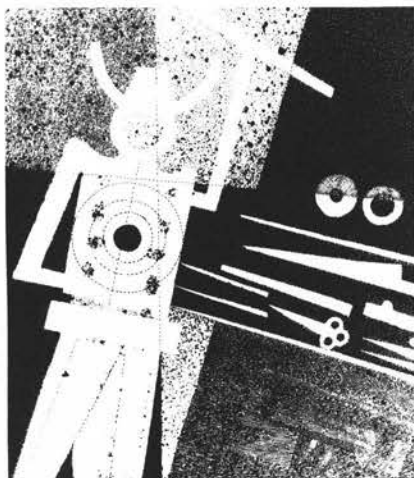
Reagan versus the Sandinistas

The Undeclared War on
Nicaragua

Edited by
Thomas W. Walker



Reagan versus the Sandinistas





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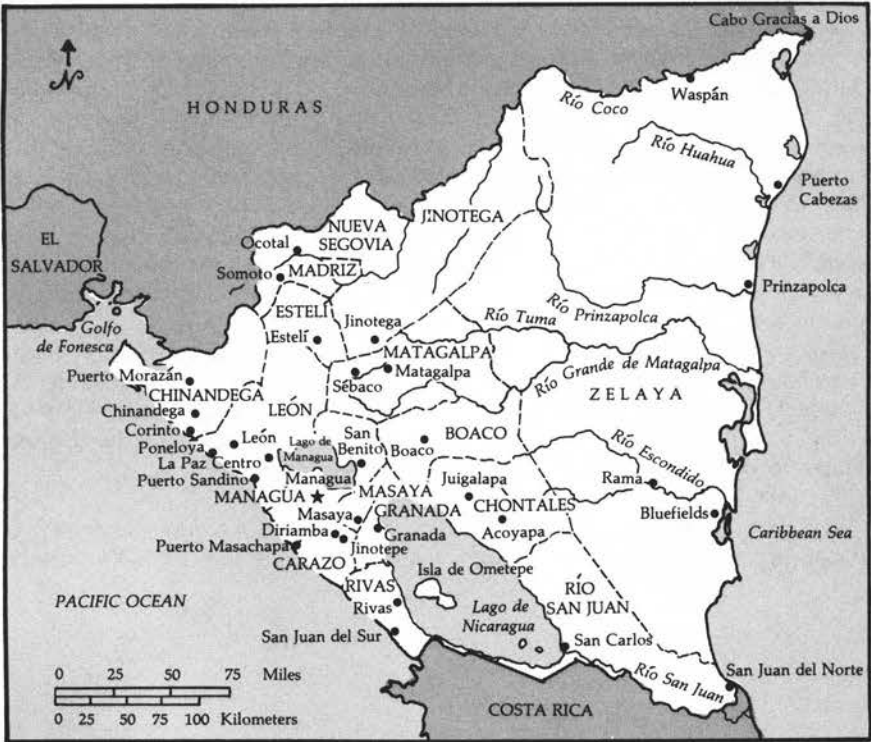
About the Book and Editor

The product of research and investigation by a team of sixteen authors, *Reagan versus the Sandinistas* is the most comprehensive and current study to date of the Reagan administration's mounting campaign to reverse the Sandinista revolution. The authors thoroughly examine all major aspects of Reagan's "low-intensity war," from the U.S. government's attempts at economic destabilization to direct CIA sabotage and the sponsorship of the contras or freedom fighters. They also explore less-public tactics such as electronic penetration, behind-the-scenes manipulation of religious and ethnic tensions, and harassment of U.S. Nicaraguan specialists and "fellow travelers." The book concludes with a consideration of the impact of these activities and their implications for international law, U.S. interests, U.S. polity, and Nicaragua itself.

Reagan versus the Sandinistas is designed not only for courses on Latin America, U.S. foreign policy, and international relations, but also for students, scholars, and others interested in understanding one of the most massive, complex efforts—short of direct intervention—organized by the United States to overthrow the government of another country.

Thomas W. Walker, professor of political science at Ohio University, is the author of *Nicaragua: The Land of Sandino* (second edition, 1986, Westview).

Nicaragua



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**THE UNDECLARED WAR
ON NICARAGUA**

edited by Thomas W. Walker

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by the rich and powerful
at the expense of the poor



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Preface

In mid-1986, both branches of the U.S. Congress voted approval of \$100 million worth of overt, mainly military, aid to the counterrevolutionary (contra) forces fighting to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. The money itself was not important. Since November 1981 when the Reagan administration first decided to create a surrogate army to harass the Sandinistas, it had been quite successful in channeling hundreds of millions of dollars to the "freedom fighters," as Reagan would come to call them. Some of this money had been initially allocated by the U.S. Congress to help interdict an alleged flow of arms from Nicaragua to the Salvadoran rebels. (The contras, in fact, never interdicted anything.) Some may have come through unmonitored CIA slush funds. Other assistance appears to have been laundered through Israel and pro-U.S. military establishments in the region. Large quantities of U.S. military supplies were simply left behind to be picked up by the contras following each of a series of joint U.S.-Honduran military maneuvers close to the Nicaraguan border. Finally, a very successful "private" contra fund-raising campaign had been organized under the close supervision of an office in the White House. What was important about the \$100 million, if not the money itself, was the fact that passage of that appropriation gave formal bipartisan approval to Ronald Reagan's longstanding crusade to overthrow the Sandinistas. It was essentially a declaration of war. From this point onward, a long, bloody conflict—with unspeakably tragic consequences for both the United States and Central America—seemed very likely. For those of us who had studied the Sandinista revolution from within, the possibility that Nicaragua could be subdued without tremendous bloodletting was essentially zero. Yet congressional approval was sure to give legitimacy and virtually irreversible momentum to the anti-Sandinista program already in advanced stages of implementation by the CIA, the Pentagon, the Department of State, and others. Though the situation in Nicaragua would not be identical to that in Vietnam—history rarely repeats itself exactly—it seemed destined to rank as one of the great human tragedies of the second half of the twentieth century.

If not yet fully guaranteed, this scenario had loomed as a clear probability from early in the Reagan presidency. Even then, it appeared extremely unlikely that Washington would agree to a negotiated peace—though that option was always tantalizingly present. Therefore, against this backdrop in mid-1985 I began mulling over ways of systematically documenting and disclosing what had already become the most massive effort—short of direct intervention by U.S. troops—ever mounted by the United States to overthrow the government of another country. The urgency of the matter and the need to research simultaneously a bewilderingly wide range of topics led finally to a decision to organize a group effort. Accordingly, within the next few months I designed a chapter outline, enlisted authors—most of them researchers already at work on their topics—and signed a contract with the publisher. By late that fall the book was under way. This volume, the manuscripts for which were completed in mid-1986, is the product of that team effort.

This book is designed to examine systematically the undeclared war on the Nicaraguan revolution. Part 1 examines the direct assault on Nicaragua: the covert war, military encirclement, economic strangulation, electronic penetration, the manipulation of religious and ethnic tension, and the diplomatic assault. Part 2 looks at the waging of the war in the United States: the use of deceptive analysis, the management of the U.S. media and Congress, and the harassment of Nicaraguanist scholars and fellow travelers. Part 3 focuses on impact and implications—for Nicaragua, international law, U.S. foreign policy, and the U.S. polity and society.

Thomas W. Walker

Introduction

THOMAS W. WALKER

Background

Located at the geographic center of Central America, Nicaragua is the largest country in the region. Even so, its 91,943 square kilometers of surface make it only slightly larger than the state of Iowa. And its population of a little over 3 million is also only slightly greater than Iowa's 2.8 million. Given Nicaragua's low population density, abundant natural resources (good land, timber, gold, petroleum), access to two oceans, and long-recognized potential as a site for a transoceanic waterway, one would expect Nicaraguans in general to be prosperous. In fact, however, when the Sandinistas overthrew Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979, the social conditions of the majority of Nicaraguans ranked that country with the two or three most backward of Latin America. The explanation for this apparent paradox lies in Nicaraguan history—one of the most unfortunate of the hemisphere.¹

Two major factors had combined to produce this situation: (1) elite irresponsibility flowing out of a highly unequal social system and (2) endemic foreign intervention or manipulation. The inegalitarian nature of Nicaraguan society had its roots in the Spanish conquest in the early sixteenth century. In contrast to neighboring Costa Rica where the Spaniards either killed or expelled the Indians, the conquerors of Nicaragua drastically decimated, but did not completely destroy, the native population. As a result, in Nicaragua there was an underclass of nonwhites who could be used as virtual slaves in the income-concentrating economic activities of the European minorities. In Costa Rica, the Europeans had no ethnically distinct underclass to exploit. Thus, over the centuries, Costa Rica developed the relatively more egalitarian society that gave birth in the twentieth century to liberal democracy whereas Nicaragua and the other Central American countries to the north—with which it shared sociohistorical characteristics—produced an endless chain of elite-run dictatorships. Although the natural resources of the country were exploited by the elite to produce export products to generate wealth for its members, the human condition of the bulk of the population actually declined as the country's rulers used law and brute military force to promote

their already lopsided class advantage. In Nicaragua, the last of these income-concentrating regimes were those of the Somoza dynasty—Anastasio Somoza García (1937–1956), Luis Somoza Debayle and puppets (1956–1967), and Anastasio Somoza Debayle (1967–1979). By the time Anastasio Somoza Debayle (with a net worth estimated well in excess of US\$0.5 billion) was finally overthrown, the poorer 50 percent of his country's people were struggling to make do on a per capita income of around US\$250 per year.

Parallel to, and often intimately connected with, this history of elite exploitation was a long experience of foreign intervention and meddling. During the colonial period, the Spaniards on the Pacific Coast and later the British in the Atlantic region exercised control over what is now Nicaragua. Although Spanish rule in the west came to an end in 1822, the British were only finally expelled from the east in the 1890s.

Decades before, the Americans had also begun meddling in Nicaraguan affairs.² In the 1850s a U.S. filibuster, William Walker, briefly imposed himself as president of Nicaragua and actually won diplomatic recognition from Washington. Later, in 1909, the United States encouraged and assisted the minority Conservative party in overthrowing Liberal nationalist president José Santos Zelaya. Subsequently, to keep elite pro-American governments in power, U.S. troops occupied Nicaragua from 1912 to 1925 and from 1926 to 1933. In return, these client regimes signed treaties giving away Nicaragua's right to have its own transoceanic waterway (which would have meant competition for the U.S. canal in Panama) and relinquishing its claims to San Andrés and other offshore islands (which Colombia demanded in apparent compensation from the United States for its involvement in engineering the independence of the Colombian province of Panama in 1903). During the second occupation, the United States created the Nicaraguan National Guard to preserve pro-American stability. After the U.S. troops departed, the National Guard's first Nicaraguan commander, Anastasio Somoza García, wasted little time in creating a pro-American dictatorship, which with abundant U.S. assistance was to last until 1979. By the time the dynasty was finally overthrown, its National Guard—one of the most corrupt and exploitative military establishments in the hemisphere—was also the most heavily U.S.-trained in all of Latin America.³

Not surprisingly, the centuries-old themes of elite exploitation and foreign meddling produced numerous incidents of grass roots or nationalist resistance. Several heroic Indian leaders resisted the Spanish conquistadores. Centuries later, in 1881, thousands of Indians lost their lives in the War of the Comuneros in futile resistance to the seizure of their ancestral lands by Nicaraguan coffee planters. In 1912, Liberal nationalist Benjamín Zeledón lost his life after leading an unsuccessful revolt against the U.S.-imposed Conservative regime. From 1927 to 1932, Augusto César Sandino led a long guerrilla campaign to liberate his country from both the U.S. occupiers and the client regime they had imposed. Though his effort was partially successful in that it forced the United States to withdraw its troops, Sandino—who had signed a peace agreement with titular president Juan B. Sacasa—was subsequently murdered by Anastasio Somoza's National Guard.

The final—this time successful—resistance began in 1961. That year, frustrated with the lack of nationalism of the Nicaraguan Socialist party (PSN)—the local pro-Soviet Communists—several young Marxists split from the PSN to form the Sandinist Front for National Liberation (FSLN). Relatively unsuccessful in their initial guerrilla activities of the 1960s, the Sandinistas gained popularity and strength in the 1970s as Somoza rule became harsher and even Catholic clergy—following the suggestion of the Latin American bishops at their second international conference at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968—began organizing and raising the social and political awareness of the masses. Finally, after an unprecedented eighteen-month War of Liberation in 1978 and 1979, Somoza's army was defeated and the Nicaraguan revolution came to power.

The War of Liberation had cost Nicaragua around 50,000 lives, or approximately 2 percent of its people. In the United States, that would be the equivalent of a loss of around 4.5 million people, or over seventy-five times the U.S. death toll in the entire Vietnam conflict. But as Nicaraguans reminded me on my trip there a few days later, freedom, justice, and national dignity are sometimes worth such a price.

The First Seven Years of the Revolution

The new system was inevitably controversial both at home and abroad. Though ardently nationalist and in many cases deeply religious, most Sandinistas were also openly Marxist or Marxist-Leninist in that they found the writings of Marx and Lenin useful in understanding the history of Latin America. Consequently, they were automatically viewed with suspicion both by Nicaragua's middle- and upper-class minority—who feared the immediate imposition of a Soviet-style state and economy—and by foreign-policy makers in Washington—who were worried about the specter of a “second Cuba.” Internally, these fears led to a rapid class polarization, rumor mongering, and a notable lack of cooperation in the reconstruction effort on the part of the private sector. Internationally, especially after the election of Ronald Reagan in the United States, these perceptions produced a multifaceted program to destroy the Sandinista revolution, including a campaign of propaganda and disinformation⁴ depicting the government of Nicaragua as a grim, totalitarian Communist regime and an instrument of Soviet expansionism in the Americas. Although most of these allegations were either completely groundless or very nearly so, the U.S. mass media and opposition politicians (perhaps fearing to appear “naive,” “liberal,” or “biased”) rarely challenged the carefully cultivated “conventional wisdom.” Reagan's tactics for dealing with the Sandinistas could be criticized but not the administration's picture of the Nicaraguan regime itself.

For U.S. scholars who did research in Nicaragua during this period, the discrepancy between what was heard in the United States and what was seen in Nicaragua proved stark and frustrating. Far from being a coterie of wild-eyed ideologues, the Sandinistas behaved in a pragmatic and indeed

moderate fashion throughout the first seven years. Although they were forced increasingly to rely on the Socialist Bloc for trade and aid, they did not impose a Soviet-style state or a Communist, or even socialist, economic system. They succeeded in carrying out innovative and highly successful social programs without inordinately straining the national budget. And contrary to the "conventional wisdom," their performance in the area of human rights—though not flawless—would probably rank Nicaragua at least in the top third of Latin America states.⁵

The Sandinistas enjoyed a number of political assets at the time of their victory, but their power was not limitless. Their greatest asset was the fact that their victory had been unconditional. The old National Guard had been defeated and disbanded. The new armed forces were explicitly Sandinist—that is, revolutionary and popularly oriented. Moreover, the mass organizations created in the struggle to overthrow the dictator gave the Sandinist Front of National Liberation (FSLN) a grass roots base that dwarfed the organized support of all potential rivals. Finally, the new government enjoyed broad international support. Nevertheless, the country's new leaders were well aware that their revolutionary administration faced certain geopolitical and economic constraints. The Soviet Union had made it clear that it was not willing to underwrite a second Cuba. Hard currency would not be forthcoming from that source, nor would military support in the event of a U.S. invasion. Furthermore, unlike Cuba, Nicaragua was not an island. Its long borders were highly vulnerable to paramilitary penetration, and any attempt to impose a dogmatic Marxist-Leninist system would certainly have generated a mass exodus of people. Finally, the Catholic Church in Nicaragua was so important and Catholics had played such a crucial role in the War of Liberation that the Sandinistas were neither inclined nor well situated to attack the Catholic traditions of their country. For these reasons, it is not surprising that for the next seven years the Sandinistas, in fact, attempted to govern in a pragmatic, nonideological fashion.

Sandinista rule was marked by a high degree of consistency and continuity—owing at least in part to the fact that the overall political trajectory of the revolution was set during these years by the same nine-person Sandinista Directorate (DN). Decisions made by the DN were based on consensus or near consensus. Reportedly, important decisions were never made on a five to four vote. This inherently conservative style of revolutionary stewardship meant that domestic and international policy, though adaptive in detail, remained consistent in overall characteristics and goals. During the entire seven years, the Sandinistas promoted (1) a mixed economy with heavy participation by the private sector, (2) political pluralism featuring interclass dialogue and efforts to institutionalize input and feedback from all sectors, (3) ambitious social programs, based in large part on grass roots voluntarism, and (4) the maintenance of diplomatic and economic relations with as many nations as possible regardless of ideology.

However, in spite of such overarching continuity, it is possible to divide this period into three subperiods that were clearly conditioned by the

country's international environment. The first, which lasted until the election of Ronald Reagan in November 1980, was a time of euphoria and optimism. The second, spanning the nearly two years from that election to spring 1982, was a period of growing awareness of, and concern with, the hostile intentions of the new administration in Washington. In the third, during the little over four years that had elapsed from spring 1982 through summer 1986, Nicaragua would meet the full brunt of an unprecedentedly massive surrogate invasion, direct Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sabotage, and economic strangulation.

THE QUIET BEFORE THE STORM

The first year (1979–1980) was the quiet before the storm. Jimmy Carter was still president of the United States. Though not pleased with the Sandinista victory, his administration had decided to make the best of it, offering economic aid with strings attached in the hopes of manipulating the Sandinistas in a direction acceptable to Washington. During this period, the FSLN consolidated the revolution politically by promoting the growth of grass roots organizations, reorganizing the Sandinista armed forces, and reequipping them with standardized military materiel. Much of the latter was obtained from the Socialist Bloc: The United States had earlier refused an arms purchase request by the Sandinistas. Nevertheless, the Sandinista Army was quite small (15,000 to 18,000 soldiers) and the civilian militia—little more than an association of patriotic marching units—hardly constituted a credible addition to the country's defensive force.

In economic affairs, the Sandinistas decided to honor Somoza's foreign debt in order to maintain Nicaraguan creditworthiness in Western financial circles. Lengthy negotiations with the international banking community led to concessionary terms for repayment. Public loans and aid poured in from a wide variety of countries. And, although the government immediately confiscated properties owned by the Somozas and their accomplices, it respected the rest of the private sector and even offered it substantial financial assistance (in the form of reactivation loans, preferential access to foreign exchange, and so on).

In line with the decision to preserve a large private sector, the revolutionaries created an interim government in which all groups and classes in society, including the privileged minority, could have a voice. The plural executive (Junta of National Reconstruction), created shortly before the victory, included wealthy conservatives as well as Sandinistas. The interim legislative body (Council of State) gave corporate representation to most parties and organizations of significance in Nicaraguan society. This was also a time of ambitious social programs—most notably the 1980 Literacy Crusade, which was carried out at relatively low cost to the government owing to its ability to mobilize massive voluntary participation.

The period was not without tension, however. Class polarization had set in almost immediately. Many in the minority privileged classes were certain that totalitarian communism was just around the corner. Accordingly, some

fled immediately to Miami whereas others first illegally decapitalized their industries, transferred money abroad, and then fled. Moreover, a crisis of sorts occurred early in 1980, when conservatives on the Junta resigned in a pique over the fact that the organizations representing their class had been given representation on the new Council of State that was only slightly larger than the equivalent of the minority percentage that they represented in the population as a whole. At the same time, the independent daily, *La Prensa*, was taken over by a conservative wing of the Chamorro family and from then on took a critical position, playing on the fears of the privileged classes.

On balance, however, these were not bad times. Other conservatives were found to replace those who had resigned from the Junta. Human rights in general were respected. And *La Prensa* was allowed to make scurrilous and frequently false attacks on the system with virtual impunity. Former Somoza military personnel and accomplices were subjected to legal investigation and trial rather than execution. Indeed, the death penalty itself was immediately abolished.

THE GATHERING STORM

The second period, one of growing concern and apprehension, began in fall 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan. That summer the Republican party platform had "deplor[ed] the Marxist-Sandinista takeover of Nicaragua" and had promised to end all aid to that country. Campaign aides to Reagan had advised using on Nicaragua the full gamut of techniques (e.g., economic destabilization, surrogate invasion) employed by the United States in the past to destroy Latin American regimes of which Washington did not approve. In fact, the new administration wasted little time in implementing these suggestions. Early in 1981, U.S. economic assistance to Nicaragua was terminated and the administration began to allow anti-Sandinista paramilitary training camps to operate openly in Florida, California, and the Southwest.⁶ That December, President Reagan signed a directive authorizing the CIA to spend \$19.8 million to create an exile paramilitary force in Honduras to harass Nicaragua.⁷ Although some counterrevolutionary (contra) attacks occurred as early as 1981, such activity increased markedly in 1982, as bridges, oil-refining facilities, and other crucial infrastructure, in addition to civilian and military personnel, were targeted. That same year, the United States used its central position in the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) to cut off the flow of badly needed multilateral loans to Nicaragua (see Chapter 4).

This growing external threat was clearly reflected in Nicaragua in increased class polarization, greater emphasis on austerity and defense, and some—albeit still relatively mild—government infringements on human rights. The acceleration of class polarization began almost immediately after the Reagan victory. Many in the privileged classes then apparently saw even less need than before to accommodate themselves to the new revolutionary system. Within days of Reagan's victory, representatives of the Superior Council of

Private Enterprise (COSEP) walked out of the Council of State. On November 17, Jorge Salazar, vice-president of COSEP and head of the Union of Nicaraguan Farmers (UPANIC), was killed in a shootout with state security forces while allegedly meeting with gun runners in preparation for armed counterrevolutionary activities. Even though the government televised highly damaging evidence against him, Salazar immediately became a martyr for the privileged classes.

From then on, tension mounted steadily as the conservative church hierarchy, the opposition microparties, COSEP, and *La Prensa*—all working in obvious coordination with the U.S. Embassy—showed less and less inclination to engage in constructive dialogue and an ever greater tendency to obstruct and confront. This behavior, in turn, generated resentment in the masses. In March 1981, for instance, Sandinista Defense Committees (CDSs) “in effect challenged the authority of the Ministry of the Interior by [staging demonstrations] blocking plans by the opposition MDN [Nicaraguan Democratic movement] to hold a political rally [at Nandaime] that had been presented by the government as proof that pluralism was still viable in Nicaragua.”⁸

In addition, an increased emphasis was placed on military preparedness. The Sandinista Army was almost immediately expanded to around 24,000 persons, the level at which it would stay until 1983. Recruitment and training for members of the militia were stepped up markedly and obsolete Czech BZ-52 ten-shot rifles were imported to arm them. Socialist Bloc tanks, anti-aircraft equipment, helicopters, and troop transport vehicles were also imported. Moreover, there was talk of obtaining Soviet MiG fighter jets. This buildup, however, was clearly defensive, as noted in a staff report of the House Committee on Intelligence, when, in September 1982, it chastized the U.S. intelligence community for making dramatic public statements about Nicaragua’s offensive intentions and capabilities while at the same time secretly briefing high-level administration officials to the contrary.⁹ Meanwhile, there was a general belt tightening as the importation of nonessential goods was restricted and salaries were held down.

All government social programs were continued. Indeed, in 1981 over 70,000 young people participated in a voluntary primary health crusade. But, overall, the people of Nicaragua were beginning to feel the negative effects of the Reagan assault on their country.

As is true in all states in time of war or threat of war, certain human rights were gradually infringed upon in the name of national security. Late in 1981, in response to contra activity in the region, the government ordered the involuntary evacuation of some 8,500 to 10,000 Miskito Indians from isolated communities along the Rio Coco. Although careful investigations into this matter indicate that the evacuation itself was carried out in a humane fashion, in isolated incidents during subsequent security activities on the Miskito Coast individual commanders or soldiers disobeyed orders to respect the lives of prisoners and were apparently responsible for the execution or permanent “disappearance” of as many as 150 individuals.¹⁰

Also apparent was a deterioration in the right to due process for political prisoners in general and on the Miskito Coast in particular.

Finally, on a half-dozen occasions, *La Prensa* was closed for two-day periods. This action was taken under the terms of a press law decreed by the original Junta (of which, ironically, *La Prensa* owner Violeta Chamorro had been part)—a law calling for such action in the event that an organ of the media was found to have disseminated material that was not only false but also destabilizing. However, even with these shutdowns, *La Prensa* continued to operate freely and in bitter opposition to the government more than 95 percent of the time. Moreover, at no point during this period did human rights infringements in Nicaragua even remotely approach the wholesale abuses prevalent in a number of other Latin American countries. In fact, late in 1982, the U.S. ambassador to Nicaragua, Anthony Quainton (a Reagan appointee), admitted candidly to a group of which I was a part that the human rights situation there was better than that in El Salvador or Guatemala—ironically two countries that Washington was then trying to portray as having made great strides in this respect.

WEATHERING THE STORM

The third period, from early 1982 through mid-1986, might aptly be labeled “weathering the storm.” The storm, in this case, was the Reagan administration’s massive and multifaceted campaign to destabilize and overthrow the Sandinista government, which, by the onset of this period, was covert in name only. The CIA-coordinated recruitment, training, arming, and disgorging of contras into Nicaragua had escalated rapidly from the force of 500 originally envisioned in the CIA finding of late 1981 to over 15,000 by 1984 (a proportionately equivalent invasion of the United States would number over 1,280,000) (see Chapter 2). Direct involvement by CIA personnel was also evident in the destruction of Nicaraguan oil-storage facilities late in 1983 and the mining of Nicaraguan harbors early in 1984 (see Chapter 2). Furthermore, an ever-larger number of U.S. military personnel participated in nearly continuous, highly menacing joint military maneuvers in Honduras and in naval “exercises” off both Nicaraguan coasts.

Accompanying these military and paramilitary efforts was an escalating program of economic strangulation. Washington continued to block approval of Nicaraguan loan requests before the World Bank and the IDB. U.S. trade was at first drastically curtailed (the Nicaraguan quota for exporting sugar to the United States was cut by 90 percent in May 1983) and then, in May 1985, embargoed completely. Washington also made an effort—though only partially successful—to pressure its allies to follow suit.

These activities had a clear impact on Nicaragua, though not always one that U.S. policy makers would have desired. In economic matters the country was hurt but by no means brought to its knees. Although the economy grew steadily during the first four years of Sandinista rule (except in 1982, when a severe flood occurred, followed by drought), problems inherited from Somoza, combined with a sharp decline in the world prices of

Nicaragua's export commodities and the enormous direct and indirect cost of the contra war, meant that by this third period Nicaragua was having increasing problems in servicing its debt. Accordingly, Venezuela ceased (1983) and Mexico drastically curtailed (1984) supplies of oil to the country. As a result, by 1984 and 1985 the Sandinistas were forced to turn to the USSR for most of their petroleum needs. The scarcity of foreign exchange also meant severe shortages of imported goods or of products manufactured in Nicaragua from imported materials or with imported machinery. Of course, such shortages also triggered rampant inflation and spiraling wage demands, which could not be satisfied given the tremendous diversion of government revenues into defense.

Social services were also negatively affected. As increased emphasis was placed on defense, government spending on health, education, housing, food subsidies, and so on had to be cut back. Further, the contras were deliberately targeting the social service infrastructure. Many government employees in health, education, and cooperatives were kidnapped, tortured and killed; schools, clinics, day-care centers and grain-storage facilities were destroyed. However, if all of this activity was designed to so damage the living standards of most Nicaraguans that they would become angry with their government and ultimately overturn it, someone had badly miscalculated. Although the human condition did decline during this later period, support for the government actually appears to have grown—as measured by levels of membership in pro-Sandinista grass roots organizations.¹¹ In the aftermath of the Triumph (1979–1980), such membership reached a peak of about 250,000 to 300,000 persons. Thereafter, it declined for a few years—as a result, perhaps, of apathy or a sense of lack of fulfillment of unrealistically high expectations for the revolution. However, by late 1982, grass roots membership had begun to climb again, and by 1984 it had doubled or tripled over the previous highwater mark. By then, around half of all Nicaraguans aged sixteen or older were in such voluntary support organizations.¹² In my opinion, the intervening variable was the contra war, the effects of which really began to hit home late in 1982. Simply put, Nicaraguans had come together to support their government in this time of national emergency and foreign threat.

During the same period, the military underwent a significant buildup. Nicaragua stepped up its purchase of military hardware such as helicopters, propeller-driven aircraft, artillery, anti-aircraft equipment, troop transports, and light weaponry—mainly from the Socialist Bloc (the United States had applied pressure to dissuade other potential suppliers such as France). By 1983 or 1984, the Sandinista Army, which had held constant at around 24,000 strong since 1981, was increased to over 40,000; in addition, a military draft was instituted. At the same time, the Sandinista Militia—a lightly trained body of over 60,000 civilian volunteers who had previously been armed with liberated Somoza-era weaponry and obsolete Czech BZ-52 rifles—was largely reequipped with Socialist Bloc AK-47 automatic rifles.

At first, the political response of the Sandinistas to the external threat was predictably defensive. In spring 1982 following contra attacks on

important Nicaraguan infrastructure and the disclosure in the U.S. media of President Reagan's earlier authorization of funding for CIA-sponsored paramilitary operations against its country, the government declared a state of prewar emergency under which certain civil and political rights were temporarily suspended. Some measures (such as the short-term preventive detention of suspected subversives) had actually begun during the previous period; others (such as precensorship of the printed media) were new. The implementation of these measures was relatively mild. The short-term preventive detention measure affected only a few hundred persons at any one time. And *La Prensa*, though now heavily censored, continued to function until June 1986, when it was finally closed in the wake of the House approval of the \$100 million. (In El Salvador the only real opposition papers had long since been driven completely out of business through the murder or exile of their owners.)

Another new political measure, decreed in July 1982, was the massive decentralization of government. Under it, the country was divided into six regions and three special zones for all governmental functions. The main purpose of this reform was to avoid the stifling effects of centralized bureaucratic control by creating institutions for local decision making and public policy implementation; another important objective was to institute a system of government that could continue functioning even if communications were badly disrupted or if Managua were occupied by enemy troops.

Eventually, however, as more and more Nicaraguans rallied around their government, the Sandinistas came to show renewed confidence in the people and to take a more relaxed approach to domestic politics. Late in 1983, the government actually passed out many tens of thousands of automatic weapons to civilians so that they could help defend their families, farms, villages, and neighborhoods.¹³ Meanwhile, the government, in consultation with all political parties and groups that chose to enter into dialogue, had been working to create a mechanism to implement the Sandinistas' oft-repeated promise to hold general elections. Eventually, in September 1983, with considerable opposition input, a political parties law was hammered out and enacted. Three months later the government announced that the elections would be held in 1984. Early in 1984, November 4 of that year was set as the election date, and in March an electoral law modeled after "key components of the French, Italian, Austrian, and Swedish electoral systems"¹⁴ was enacted. The Reagan administration denounced the Nicaraguan election in advance as a "Soviet-style farce," hyped businessman Arturo Cruz (whom they apparently knew had no intention of running) as the only viable opposition candidate, and reportedly pressured certain other candidates to withdraw from the contest at the last moment.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the election was held as scheduled, and, though either ignored or panned by the U.S. media, it was certified as being a meaningful, clean, and relatively competitive election (given the difficult circumstances under which it was held) by a number of observer delegations representing Western European parliaments

and governments, the U.S.-based Latin American Studies Association, and so on.¹⁶ Although voting was not obligatory, 75 percent of those registered (93.7 percent of the voting-age population had registered) cast ballots. Although six opposition parties—three each to the Right and the Left of the FSLN—appeared on the ballot, the Sandinistas captured 63 percent of the vote. That gave the presidency and vice-presidency to Daniel Ortega and Sergio Ramírez, and sixty-one of the ninety-six seats in the new (constituent) National Assembly to the FSLN.

The National Assembly had a variety of functions but clearly the most important was that of producing a constitution. U.S. citizens familiar with President Reagan's description of Nicaragua as a "totalitarian dungeon" might imagine that the FSLN would simply have written a constitution and presented it to the National Assembly to be rubber-stamped. But this did not happen. The people who had designed the electoral law had deliberately selected a Western European system of proportional representation that tended to overrepresent minority parties. In addition, they had included a provision whereby all losing presidential candidates would get seats in the National Assembly. The end result was that although the Sandinistas got sixty-one seats, the six opposition parties got a substantial thirty-five. This division meant that the FSLN had just barely the 60 percent necessary to pass the constitution. Furthermore, the same practical considerations that had caused the Sandinistas to pursue dialogue, feedback, and pluralism during the Government of National Reconstruction were very much present as the constitution was being written.

In 1985 and 1986 the National Assembly proceeded with the task of producing a constitution. Subcommittees—in which minority opposition parties were deliberately overrepresented—were set up to deal with the different subject areas. Heated debate developed on a variety of issues. Finally, early in 1986 a preliminary draft constitution was produced, and a process of national and international consultation began. Seventy-eight open meetings—organized according to geographical region or interest identification (women, labor, small farmers, Christians, the military)—were held throughout Nicaragua to elicit feedback. And, as this process of "national consultation" was taking place, the draft constitution was submitted to international scrutiny. Large multiparty delegations from the National Assembly went to various countries to seek expert advice on that document. For instance, at a National Conference on the Nicaraguan Constitution (co-sponsored by Rutgers University, the City University of New York, the *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*, and others), hundreds of prominent experts on U.S. constitutional law, human rights, and Nicaraguan affairs, organized into workshops concerned with eleven principal themes, met for three days to examine and criticize that document. When all of the data from both the national and international consultations were gathered, the original document underwent extensive rewriting and, in January 1987, a final constitution was formally promulgated. Though it drew heavily on the legal traditions of Western Europe and the United

States, the new basic law was also very "Nica" in that it was very much in tune with the social, cultural, and economic characteristics of Nicaragua.

Ironically, though Nicaraguans had ample reason to be proud of both the elections of 1984 and the very open constitution-drafting process that followed, very few people in that war-torn country found these years to be a time of joy. The war itself was destabilizing the Nicaraguan economy and inflicting death, destruction, and suffering on the Nicaraguan people. And the Reagan administration pushed for—and eventually got—congressional approval for a vastly accelerated war. Virtually the entire U.S. media by the mid-1980s had adopted a "patriotic agenda"¹⁷ in covering events related to the president's chosen enemy. In the wake of the 1984 election almost no U.S. media coverage was given to the generally positive reports produced by the various prestigious international election observer teams previously mentioned. Instead, for the next several weeks, the United States was gripped by war hysteria sparked by a series of skillfully timed (though utterly groundless) Reagan administration "leaks" to the effect that Soviet-built MiGs were en route by sea to "Communist" Nicaragua.¹⁸ Thereafter, since the Reagan portrayal of the Nicaraguan elections as a Soviet-style farce was never seriously contradicted, the constitution drafting process could be ignored (though invited, the U.S. media were conspicuous in their absence from the New York Conference on the Nicaraguan Constitution) or, more ironic still, portrayed as an obstacle to peace (the United States, which arbitrarily broke off bilateral talks with Nicaragua in 1985, arrogantly insisted that these negotiations could not be resumed until Nicaragua stopped the constitution-drafting process and began negotiations with the contras).

Low-Intensity War and Historical Precedents

U.S. behavior toward Nicaragua in the 1980s was by no means an aberration either from traditional patterns in the U.S. treatment of Latin American countries or from the behavior of great powers in general. It appears to be a sad truism of international relations that hegemonic powers have always displayed the least creativity, sensitivity, and humanity in dealing with signs of change emanating from smaller countries within their spheres of influence. Certainly in twentieth-century Latin America, the United States—despite high-sounding rhetoric to the contrary—has consistently been an obstacle to change. Fearing the uncertain outcome of autonomous change Washington has instead advocated guided "moderate" reformism under the auspices of traditional client elites, which in fact have clung stubbornly to the status quo. The failure of the Alliance for Progress in the 1960s is only one dramatic example of the futility of such reformism.

Further, in those few cases where autonomous change began to develop in spite of U.S. policy, Washington has consistently worked to reverse such processes. U.S. troops made incursions into Mexico during the early years of its populist revolution. And, though President Franklin Roosevelt had the good sense to resist the idea, the U.S. Congress actually approved an

invasion of that country when the "Mexican Bolsheviks" had the audacity to nationalize their country's own subsoil resources in 1938. The United States recruited and prepared the surrogate exile invasion forces that helped overthrow the democratically elected, mildly revolutionary government of Guatemala in 1954 and that attempted to reverse the Cuban revolution in 1961. It trained the local military establishment that gave the coup de grace to the middle-class revolutionary experiment in Bolivia in 1964. It sent U.S. Marines to the Dominican Republic in 1965 to block the return to power of centrist social democratic forces that it mistook for "Communists." And it used economic destabilization and CIA covert action to prepare the "ambient" for the military coup that overthrew the democratically elected government of Chilean socialist Salvador Allende in 1973.

Because of its actions, the U.S. government bears a heavy burden of responsibility for the negative impact of many of them. Where U.S. efforts were successful—in Guatemala, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, and Chile—the defeat of progressive forces was followed by oppressive dictatorship and campaigns of demobilization featuring the murder or disappearance of thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of civilians at the hands of government security forces, associated "death squads," or both.¹⁹ Also, in each of these cases the movement toward greater social justice was immediately and indefinitely halted. Where the United States failed—in Mexico and Cuba—Washington's counterrevolutionary behavior contributed to popular resentment against the United States, and in my opinion such behavior in the case of Cuba may have been a significant contributing factor in the restriction of traditional civil liberties in the name of national security.

U.S. techniques for the containment and destruction of chosen enemies underwent considerable change in the twentieth century. The direct use of U.S. troops—common until the early 1930s—was seldom seen thereafter. In the first three decades of this century, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Nicaragua all suffered U.S. occupation as part of an expanded interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine first popularized by Teddy Roosevelt in his "big stick" policy. However, by the early 1930s, Sandino's patriotic resistance in Nicaragua had so delegitimized the idea of direct intervention that President Franklin Roosevelt finally declared a "good-neighbor" policy. Subsequently—with the notable exceptions of the Dominican Republic (1965) and Grenada (1983)—U.S. combat troops seldom set foot in Latin America.

Nevertheless, though it did come to practice relative restraint in the use of U.S. troops, Washington would continue to work in other ways to destroy its perceived enemies in the hemisphere.²⁰ Some of the many devices it employed were legal and above board; others were not. Usually both types were used in combination. Covert devices—usually employed by the CIA—included planning assassinations; conducting dirty tricks; inventing and disseminating "black propaganda"; funding or bribing opposition groups (church, labor, press, party); training and arming of surrogate native "rebel" forces; and carrying out of selective acts of sabotage often in the name of those "freedom fighters." More overt activities took the form of official

warnings or expressions of displeasure, diplomatic maneuvers aimed at isolating the target regime, and a variety of devices designed to cause economic collapse (the cutting of normal U.S. trade and aid relationships, pressure to restrict the flow of funding from multilateral lending agencies, the use of travel bans to curtail tourism, etc.).

Often, the particular combination of techniques employed appeared to be chaotic, ad hoc, and poorly thought out. The amateurish and comical surrogate invasion of Guatemala in 1954 succeeded only through bluff and because the regular Guatemalan army was not loyal to the elected president. Having "succeeded" on that occasion the United States then mounted the ill-fated surrogate invasion of Cuba in 1961. The latter failed not, as some have argued, because President Kennedy refused to provide sufficient air cover but rather because a couple of thousand surrogate troops—no matter how well armed or protected—simply cannot overthrow a mass-based revolutionary government.

By the mid-1980s, however, indirect strategies for the destruction of "enemy" regimes had undergone considerable refinement. Indeed, a whole school of thought concerned with "low-intensity warfare" had come into being and was very much in vogue among the ultraconservative policy planners and advisers of the Reagan administration.²¹ Advocates of low-intensity (as opposed to atomic or conventional) warfare argued that the war in Vietnam had been lost not because the United States failed to send sufficient human resources and materials but rather because it chose to fight a conventional war in a situation calling for low-intensity techniques. The heavy use of U.S. troops and equipment not only alienated the Vietnamese people but, equally important, exhausted the patience of the U.S. electorate. The employment of low-intensity techniques using native (surrogate) troops and a careful program of covert and overt activities aimed at building grass roots support and discrediting the enemy could, they argued, have been sustained indefinitely at relatively low cost and would ultimately have led to victory.

When the Reagan administration came to office in 1981 there was a clear cold war consensus that "communist" incursions into the Third World—especially into "our back yard"—should be rigorously combated. However, there was no immediate agreement on techniques. Secretary of State Alexander Haig seemed to advocate a crudely conventional military approach. Advising the president that Central America was "one [he could] win,"²² Haig talked of "go[ing] to the source,"²³ and in El Salvador, U.S.-trained and -advised security forces used brutal search and destroy techniques, thus greatly alienating the rural population.

By 1983, however, Haig and many other early Reagan administration advisers were out, and advocates of a more subtle low-intensity approach were in. In El Salvador, security forces were being trained in civic action, the CIA was reportedly disseminating disinformation about the insurgents,²⁴ and a patina of democracy was being applied to a system that, in fact, remained extremely repressive and nondemocratic.²⁵ In Nicaragua, too, the

dream of a quick military victory—possibly directly using U.S. troops—was apparently abandoned by the mid-1980s. In its place was a strategy of prolonged low-intensity conflict involving propaganda and disinformation, surrogate “insurgency,” economic strangulation, and so forth. Since the human and material expense to the United States—and, therefore, the political costs—were expected to remain low, it was felt that a war of this sort could be carried out indefinitely.

Notes

1. For more detailed information about Nicaragua's early history than can be presented in this book, see John A. Booth, *The End and the Beginning: The Nicaraguan Revolution*, ed. 2 (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985), and Thomas W. Walker, *Nicaragua: The Land of Sandino*, ed. 2 (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1986).

2. The best study of the 150-year history of U.S. interference in Nicaraguan affairs is Karl Bermann, *Under the Big Stick: Nicaragua and the United States Since 1948* (Boston: South End Press, 1986).

3. Richard Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty: A History of the U.S.-Created Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua and the Somoza Family* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1977), p. 252.

4. For some specific examples of the use of disinformation against Nicaragua see Thomas W. Walker, “The Nicaraguan-U.S. Friction: The First Four Years, 1979–1983,” in Kenneth M. Coleman and George C. Herring, eds., *The Central American Crisis* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1985), pp. 181–186.

5. Throughout the first seven years, the Nicaraguan government invited various human rights monitoring organizations to conduct investigations in Nicaragua. Consequently, there are a number of extensive reports on human rights under the Sandinistas. Most are critical of certain violations, but the abuses they identify are relatively mild compared to those of many other Latin American states. See Amnesty International (AI), “Nicaragua Background Briefing: Persistence of Public Order Law Detentions and Trials” (London: AI, 1982); Amnesty International, “Prepared Statement of Amnesty International USA on the Human Rights Situation in Nicaragua Before the Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations,” U.S. House of Representatives, September 15, 1983 (mimeograph); Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Organization of American States (OAS), *Report on the Situation of Human Rights of a Segment of the Nicaraguan Population of Miskito Origin* (Washington, D.C.: OAS, 1984); and Americas Watch, *Human Rights in Nicaragua* (New York: Americas Watch, 1984). Americas Watch eventually confronted the stark discrepancy between what the Reagan administration was charging and what these reports state, in Americas Watch, *Nicaragua: Reagan, Rhetoric and Reality* (New York: Americas Watch, 1985).

6. The story of the contra training camps first became public in Eddie Adams, “Exiles Rehearse for the Day They Hope Will Come,” *Parade Magazine* (March 15, 1981), pp. 4–6.

7. “U.S. Plans Covert Operations to Disrupt Nicaraguan Economy,” *Washington Post*, March 10, 1982, and “U.S. Said to Plan 2 C.I.A. Actions in Latin Region,” *New York Times*, March 14, 1982.

8. Jack Child, “National Security,” in James D. Rudolph, ed., *Nicaragua: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1982), p. 202.

9. Staff Report, Subcommittee on Oversight and Evaluation, Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, *U.S. Intelligence Performance on Central America: Achievements and Selected Instances of Concern*, September 12, 1982, (mimeo.), p. 43.

10. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights*.

11. My estimates of grass roots organization memberships are rough. They are based on conversations held during eleven visits to Nicaragua with individuals working in mass mobilization and on Luis H. Serra, "The Sandinista Mass Organizations," in Thomas W. Walker, ed., *Nicaragua in Revolution* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982), pp. 95-114, and Luis H. Serra, "The Grass Roots Organizations," in Thomas W. Walker, ed., *Nicaragua: The First Five Years* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1985), pp. 65-89.

12. Interestingly, this estimate is essentially corroborated by an in-house U.S. Embassy estimate for late 1984, which places grass roots membership at 7 to 8 hundred thousand. This information was revealed by an official in the U.S. Embassy to a group of which I was a part on June 25, 1985.

13. Mary Vanderlaan states that the campaign to hand out rifles to civilians began in 1984 and that by 1986 "nearly 300,000 rifles" had been distributed (Mary B. Vanderlaan, *Revolution and Foreign Policy in Nicaragua*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1986), p. 272. My conversation with Sandinista officials and other informed Nicaraguans would generally confirm these observations. The only minor correction I would make concerns Vanderlaan's starting date: During a visit to the northern war zone in December 1983, I was informed—and could readily observe—that this program had already begun.

14. Latin American Studies Association (LASA), *The Electoral Process in Nicaragua: Domestic and International Influences*, Report of the Latin American Studies Association Delegation to Observe the Nicaraguan General Election of November 4, 1984 (Austin, Tex.: LASA, 1984), p. 29.

15. LASA, *The Electoral Process*, p. 29-32.

16. LASA, *The Electoral Process*; Thom Kerstiens and Piet Nelissen (official Dutch government observers), "Report on the Elections in Nicaragua, 4 November, 1984" (photocopy); Irish Inter-Party Parliamentary Delegation, *The Elections in Nicaragua, November, 1984* (Dublin: Irish Parliament, 1984); Parliamentary Human Rights Group, "Report of a British Parliamentary Delegation to Nicaragua to Observe the Presidential and National Assembly Elections, 4 November, 1984" (photocopy); and Willy Brandt and Thorvald Stoltenberg, "Statement [on the Nicaraguan elections in behalf of the Socialist International]," Bonn, November 7, 1984.

17. This term was apparently coined by Edward S. Herman in his excellent article, "'Objective' News as Systematic Propaganda: The New York Times on the 1984 Salvadoran and Nicaraguan Elections," *Covert Action Information Bulletin*, Spring 1984, no. 21, pp. 7-13

18. See *Washington Post* and *New York Times* from November 6 through late November 1984.

19. These and other demobilization operations elsewhere in Latin America (Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, etc.) bore some resemblance to the CIA-coordinated Phoenix program in Vietnam, which in 1969 alone took the lives of over 20,000 alleged Viet Cong suspects. The fact that the United States had extensive police and security force training programs in each of the countries involved suggests that those similarities may not have been accidental.

20. For an introduction to the techniques (short of direct U.S. invasion) that the United States has employed in the past to destroy chosen enemies throughout the

world and in Latin America in particular see Philip Agee, *Inside the Company: CIA Diary* (London: Bantam Books, 1976); Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982); Seymour M. Hersh, "The Price of Power: Kissinger, Nixon and Chile," in *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1982, pp. 31–58; Victor Marchetti and John D. Marks, *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1975); Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1982); John Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies: A CIA Story* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978); U.S. Congress, Senate, Staff Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to United States Intelligence, *Covert Action in Chile* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, December 18, 1975); and Armando Uribe, *The Black Book of American Intervention in Chile* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974).

21. For the best discussion of low-intensity warfare as applied to Central America see the entire April/May 1986 issue of *The NACLA Report on the Americas*. For other source material on the subject see Deborah Barry, "Los conflictos de baja intensidad: Reto para los Estados Unidos en el Tercer Mundo (El Caso de Centroamérica)," in *Centroamérica: La Guerra de Baja Intensidad* (Managua: Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales [CRIES], 1986); Tom Barry and Deb Preusch, *The Central America Fact Book* (New York: Grove Press, 1986); Arthur H. Blair, Jr., et al., "Unconventional Warfare: A Legitimate Tool of Foreign Policy," *Conflict* 4, no. 1 (1983):59–81; Richard A. Hunt and Richard H. Schultz, Jr., *Lessons From Unconventional War: Reassessing U.S. Strategies for Future Conflicts* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982); Bill Keller, "Essential, they say, but 'repugnant'" (Department of Defense conference on little wars—"low intensity conflict"), *New York Times*, January 20, 1986, p. 12ff.; F. Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, Peace-Keeping* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1971); Brad Knickerbocker, "U.S. Military Surveys Central America Turf; Some Officers Say U.S. Unready for Demands of 'Low-Intensity Conflict,'" *Christian Science Monitor*, May 15, 1985, p. 1; James Berry Motley, "Grenada: Low Intensity Conflict and the Use of United States Military Power," *World Affairs*, 146, no. 3 (Winter 1983–1984):221–238; G. Reed, "Low Intensity Conflict: A War for All Season," *Black Scholar* 17, no. 1 (1986):14–22; Sam C. Sarkesian, *The New Battlefield: America and Low Intensity Conflicts* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986); Sam C. Sarkesian and William L. Scully, *U.S. Policy and Low Intensity Conflict* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1981); Raúl Vergara, José Rodolfo Castro, and Deborah Barry, "Nicaragua: Escalada agresiva y movilización defensiva: Informe final del proyecto 'Violencia, Derechos Humanos y Sobrevivencia Cultural en América Latina.'" Unpublished manuscript (Managua: Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales [CRIES], 1986); Caspar W. Weinberger, "Low Intensity Warfare," *Vital Speeches*, February 15, 1986, p. 258.

22. Lawrence Barrett, *Gambling With History* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), p. 207.

23. William M. LeoGrande, "The United States and Nicaragua," in Thomas W. Walker, ed., *Nicaragua: The First Five Years* (New York: Praeger, 1985), p. 428.

24. "America's Secret Warriors," *Newsweek* 102 (October 10, 1983):39.

25. For a brief discussion of the flaws of the Salvadorean elections as opposed to those carried out in Nicaragua see Walker, *Nicaragua: The Land of Sandino*, pp. 116–119.



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The Assault on Nicaragua

Introduction

The Reagan administration's attack on Nicaragua was thorough and multifaceted. First and most obvious was the paramilitary war. In Chapter 2, Peter Kornbluh describes the history of the U.S.-sponsored contra war as well as the various sabotage actions carried out directly by the CIA—often in the name of the contras. Eva Gold in Chapter 3 details the military encirclement of Nicaragua: the tremendous U.S.-sponsored armed buildup in Costa Rica and particularly in Honduras from 1981 onward, a buildup that, though obviously designed in part to alarm the Nicaraguans and make them act “paranoid,” could not be completely discounted as a possible prelude to direct U.S. invasion. Michael Conroy turns in Chapter 4 to the economic war, demonstrating how the destruction and dislocation caused by the contra war were used to intensify the negative effects of other more traditional forms of economic aggression including the severance of U.S. trade and aid and the blocking of badly needed loans from international lending agencies such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. Next, in Chapters 5 and 6 Martin Diskin and Betsy Cohn/Patricia Hynds provide descriptions of the U.S. manipulation of ethnic and religious tensions in Nicaragua. The authors demonstrate that, as the Reagan administration and various like-minded “private” groups were distorting and propagandizing about real and imaginary Sandinista abuses against the Church and ethnic minorities, they were also extremely active behind the scenes in promoting and exacerbating the conflicts they were publicly denouncing. In Chapter 7 on electronic penetration Howard Frederick describes the ever expanding radio and television infrastructure—clandestine, commercial, and governmental—used by the Reagan administration and its private and public allies to inject anti-Sandinista propaganda across Nic-

aragua's borders. He shows that the revolutionary government with its primitive and weak telecommunications infrastructure was at a clear disadvantage in the electronic war of words. Finally, in Chapter 8 William Goodfellow details the history of the U.S. effort to "coopt [the] negotiations issue" in order to avoid any peaceful settlement of its dispute with Nicaragua.

The Covert War

PETER KORNBLUH

It is much easier and much less expensive to support an insurgency than it is for us and our friends to resist one. It takes relatively few people and little support to disrupt the internal peace and economic stability of a small country.

—CIA Director William Casey
March 13, 1982¹

As the Sandinista revolution triumphed in Nicaragua on July 19, 1979, the U.S.-sponsored counterrevolution began. A DC-8 jet, disguised with Red Cross insignia, landed in Managua to evacuate commanders of the Nicaraguan National Guard, a force the United States had created more than fifty years before. Over the next few days, U.S. operatives airlifted remnants of Anastasio Somoza's praetorian army to Miami from where they could reorganize to renew their fight against the Sandinistas in the future.² Unnoticed at the time, this operation marked the opening salvo in what would eventually become the paramount symbol of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua—the CIA's "covert war."

Genesis of the Covert War

By the time Ronald Reagan assumed office in 1981, the Carter administration had already expended \$1 million in covert funds to organize and bolster internal opposition groups in Nicaragua. Nevertheless, Carter's limited efforts to manipulate the course of the Nicaraguan Revolution were considered insufficient by the new administration hardliners who viewed the Sandinistas' very existence as a challenge to U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. Achieving a modus vivendi with the Sandinist Front of National Liberation (FSLN) was all but ruled out from the beginning. Instead, the new team in Washington decided to make Nicaragua a test case of the Reagan Doctrine of taking the offensive against revolution in the Third World.