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Recent History, Part 1

The Somoza Era and the Sandinista Revolution

In the Latin American context, Nicaraguan history since 1933 is unusual in at least two respects. First, though many other countries have suffered dictatorial rule, Nicaragua's forty-two-and-a-half-year subjugation to the Somozas was unique not only in its duration but also in its dynastic character. Nowhere else in Latin America has dictatorial power passed successively through the hands of three members of the same family. Second, Nicaragua is one of only a handful of Latin American countries to have seriously attempted social revolution.

THE RISE OF ANASTASIO SOMOZA GARCÍA: 1933–1937

The founder of the Somoza dynasty, Anastasio Somoza García, was a complex and interesting individual. Born on February 1, 1898, the son of a moderately well-to-do coffee grower, "Tacho" Somoza was just short of thirty-five years old when the departing Marines turned over to him the command of the National Guard. His early ascent to this pivotal position of power was no mere accident. Intelligent, outgoing, persuasive, and ambitious, he was an unusual young man. He received his early education at the Instituto Nacional de Oriente and went on for a degree at the Pierce School of Business Administration in Philadelphia, where he perfected his English

and met and married Salvadora Debayle, a member of one of Nicaragua's important aristocratic families. Upon his return to Nicaragua, he joined the Liberal revolt in 1926. Though he and his troops were ingloriously routed, he subsequently worked his way up in Liberal party politics, eventually serving as minister of war and minister of foreign relations. A beguiling, gregarious young man with an excellent command of English, he got along well with the U.S. occupiers and was involved in the creation of the National Guard.

In the years immediately following the departure of the Marines, Somoza worked efficiently to consolidate his control over the Guard. In the wake of real or apparent anti-Somoza conspiracies, he purged various officers who might have stood in his way. Also, on February 21, 1934, he gave his subordinates permission to capture and murder Augusto César Sandino. In doing so, he not only eliminated a potential political rival but also endeared himself to many of the guardsmen, who harbored an intense hatred of the nationalist hero who had frustrated them for so long. Sandino's execution was followed by a mop-up operation in which hundreds of men, women, and children living in the semiautonomous region previously set aside for the former guerrillas were slaughtered. Finally, he encouraged guardsmen at all levels to engage in various forms of corruption and exploitative activities, thus isolating them from the people and making them increasingly dependent on their leader.

By 1936, Somoza was sufficiently sure of his control of the Guard—and hence Nicaraguan politics—to overthrow the elected president, Juan B. Sacasa, and stage an "election" in which he was the inevitable winner. His inauguration on January 1, 1937, confirmed a fact that had long been apparent: In the wake of the U.S. occupation, the National Guard and its chief had become the real rulers of Nicaragua.

THE RULE OF ANASTASIO SOMOZA GARCÍA: 1937–1956

Somoza García was the dictator of Nicaragua for the next nineteen years. Occasionally, for the sake of appearance, he ruled through puppets, but for most of the period, he chose to occupy the presidency directly. In these years he developed an effective style of rule that was to characterize the Somoza dynasty until the late 1960s. The Somoza formula was really rather

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A sinister embrace: Anastasio Somozo García (left) and Augusto C. Sandino (right) a few days before Somoza's National Guard carried out the assassination of Sandino in 1934. (Photo courtesy of *Barricada*)

simple: maintain the support of the Guard, cultivate the Americans, and co-opt important domestic power contenders.

The Guard's loyalty was assured by keeping direct command in the family and by continuing the practice of psychologically isolating the guardsmen from the people by encouraging them to be corrupt and exploitative. Accordingly, gambling, prostitution, smuggling, and other forms of vice were run directly by guardsmen. In addition, citizens soon learned that in order to engage in any of a variety of activities—legal or not—it was necessary to pay bribes or kickbacks to Guard officers or soldiers. In effect, rather than being a professional national police and military force, the Guard was a sort of mafia in uniform, which served simultaneously as the personal bodyguards of the Somoza family.

Somoza also proved to be very adept in manipulating the Americans. Though Washington did occasionally react negatively to his designs to perpetuate himself indefinitely in power, the beguiling dictator was always

able in the end to mollify U.S. decision makers. In addition to personal charm, he relied heavily on political obsequiousness in maintaining U.S. support. His regime consistently backed U.S. foreign policy. Washington's enemies were automatically Somoza's enemies, be they the Axis powers in the late 1930s and early 1940s or the Communists thereafter. The United States was allowed to establish military bases in Nicaragua during the Second World War and to use the country as a training area for the CIA-organized counterrevolution against Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. Somoza even offered to send guardsmen to fight in Korea. In return, Somoza was lavishly entertained at the White House and received lend-lease funds to modernize the National Guard.

The dictator was also clever in his handling of domestic power groups. After the murder of Sandino and his followers, he adopted a more relaxed policy toward the opposition. Human rights and basic freedoms—for the privileged at least—were more generally respected. Whenever possible, the Conservative leadership was bought off—the most notable example being the famous "pact of the generals" in which the Conservative chiefs agreed to put up a candidate to lose in the rigged election of 1951 in return for personal benefits and minority participation in the government.

In addition, Somoza pursued developmentalist economic policies that emphasized growth in exports and the creation of economic infrastructure and public agencies such as the Central Bank, the Institute of National Development, and the National Housing Institute. Although the unequally distributed growth produced by this developmentalism did little for the common citizen, it did benefit Somoza significantly. In addition to providing opportunities to expand his originally meager fortune to around $50 million by 1956, it also created vehicles for employing and rewarding the faithful.

The rule of Anastasio Somoza García came to an abrupt and unexpected end in 1956 as the dictator was campaigning for "election" to a fourth term as president. On September 20, a young poet named Rigoberto López Pérez infiltrated a reception honoring the dictator and pumped five bullets point-blank into Somoza's corpulent hulk. In a letter he had sent to his mother, with instructions that it be opened only in the event of his death, López explained, "What I have done is a duty that any Nicaraguan who truly loves his country should have done a long time ago."[1]

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try of Somoza rule, he was sadly mistaken. Although he died a few days later (in spite of the very best emergency medical assistance the Eisenhower administration could provide), Somoza already had taken steps to ensure a smooth transition of rule within his immediate family. His sons, Anastasio and Luís, had been educated in the United States, the former at West Point and the latter at Louisiana State University, the University of California, and the University of Maryland. The more politically oriented Luís, president of the Congress at the time of his father's death, was constitutionally empowered to fill the presidency in the case of an unexpected vacancy. His more militarily inclined brother, Anastasio, had been head of the National Guard since 1955. When their father was killed, Luís automatically assumed the presidency, while his brother used the National Guard to seize and imprison all civilian politicians who might have taken steps to impede the dynastic succession. In 1957, Luís was formally "elected" to a term that would expire in 1963.

LUÍS SOMOZA AND THE PUPPETS: 1957–1967

The decade 1957–1967 bore the mark of Luís Somoza Debayle, a man who seemed to enjoy "democratic" politics and appeared to be committed to the modernization and technical and economic development of his country. The older and wiser of the two Somoza sons, Luís was convinced that in order to preserve the system and protect the family's interests, the Somozas would have to lower their political and economic profile. His ideas and principles fitted neatly with the underlying philosophy and stated objectives of the U.S.-sponsored Alliance for Progress, which was being inaugurated with great fanfare in those years. Many of the programs Luís promoted in Nicaragua—public housing and education, social security, agrarian reform—coincided with the reform projects of the Alliance for Progress.

In politics, Luís attempted to modernize the Liberal party, encouraging dissident Liberals to return to the fold and new civilian leaders to emerge. In 1959 he even had the constitution amended to prevent any member of his family—in particular his intemperate and ambitious younger brother, Anastasio—from running for president in 1963. From the end of his term until his death from a heart attack in 1967, Luís ruled through puppet presidents, René Schick Gutiérrez and Lorenzo Guerrero.

In spite of appearances, however, all was not well during this period. Alliance for Progress developmentalism, while creating jobs for an expanded

bureaucracy and providing opportunities for the further enrichment of the privileged, had little positive impact on the lives of the impoverished majority of Nicaraguans, and "democracy" was a facade. Elections were rigged, and the National Guard, as always, provided a firm guarantee that there could be no real reform in the political system.

Not surprising, therefore, were a number of attempts to overthrow the system through armed revolt. Some of these attempts were made by younger members of the traditional parties, one was led by a surviving member of Sandino's army, and—from 1961 on—a number of operations were carried out by a new guerrilla organization, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). In response to these "subversive" activities, the dictatorship resorted to the frequent use of the state of siege, and Washington helped increase the National Guard's counterinsurgency capabilities.

Though there is no doubt that Luís Somoza disapproved strongly of his younger brother's ambition to run for president in 1967, it is equally clear that there was little he could have done to block it. Anastasio was, after all, the commander of the National Guard. Therefore, in June 1967—after a blatantly rigged election—Anastasio Somoza Debayle became the third member of his family to rule Nicaragua. Luís's death a few months earlier and the bloody suppression of a mass protest rally shortly before the election symbolized the end of an era of cosmetic liberalization and the return to a cruder and harsher style of dictatorship.

ANASTASIO SOMOZA DEBAYLE'S FIRST TERM: 1967–1972

Anastasio differed from his older brother in several important respects. First, whereas Luís had attempted to build up a civilian power base in a rejuvenated Liberal party, Anastasio felt much more comfortable relying simply on military power. As chief of the Guard, he relied on the old tradition of encouraging corruption and protecting officers from prosecution for crimes committed against civilians. In addition, whereas Luís and the puppets had surrounded themselves with a group of highly trained developmentalist technicians (*los minifaldas*, the miniskirts), Anastasio soon began replacing these skilled administrators with essentially unqualified cronies and political allies, many of whom were Guard officers Somoza wanted to pay off or co-opt. Finally, whereas Luís had felt that, for the sake of image, the family should consolidate rather than expand its already vast

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fortune, his younger brother exercised no such restraint in using public office for personal enrichment. The result of all this was that by 1970 Somoza's legitimacy and civilian power base were evaporating rapidly, and the government was becoming increasingly corrupt and inefficient.

According to the constitution, Anastasio was to step down from the presidency when his term expired in 1971. The dictator, however, was not bothered by such technicalities. Once in office he quickly amended the constitution to allow himself an additional year. Then, in 1971, with the advice and encouragement of U.S. Ambassador Turner Shelton, he arranged a pact with the leader of the Conservative party, Fernando Agüero, whereby he would step down temporarily and hand power over to a triumvirate composed of two Liberals and one Conservative (Agüero, of course), who would rule while a new constitution was written and an election for president was held. The transfer of power, which took place in 1972, was more apparent than real, as Somoza retained control of the Guard. The inevitable result was that, in 1974, Somoza was "elected" to another term of office that was formally scheduled to last until 1981.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END: 1972–1977

The half decade following the naming of the triumvirate in 1972 was a time of mounting troubles for the Somoza regime. Most of the responsibility for the growing systemic crisis lay in the excesses and poor judgment of the dictator himself. Somoza's first major demonstration of intemperance came in the wake of the Christmas earthquake of 1972, which cost the lives of more than 10,000 people and leveled six hundred blocks in the heart of Managua. Somoza might have chosen to play the role of concerned statesman and patriotic leader by dipping into the family fortune (which, even then, probably exceeded $300 million) in order to help his distressed countrymen. Instead, he chose to turn the national disaster to short-term personal advantage. While allowing the National Guard to plunder and sell international relief materials and to participate in looting the devastated commercial sector, Somoza and his associates used their control of the government to channel international relief funds into their own pockets. Much of what they did was technically legal—the self-awarding of government contracts and the purchasing of land, industries, and so on that they knew would figure lucratively in the reconstruction—but little of it was ethically or morally uplifting.

It was at this point that open expressions of popular discontent with the Somoza regime began to surface. Although the triumvirate was technically in power when the quake struck, Somoza lost no time using the emergency as an excuse to push that body aside and proclaim himself head of the National Emergency Committee. There were many high-sounding statements about the challenge and patriotic task of reconstruction, but it soon became apparent that his corrupt and incompetent government was actually a major obstacle to recovery. The promised reconstruction of the heart of the city never took place. Popular demand for the building of a new marketplace to replace the one that had been destroyed went unheeded. Emergency housing funds channeled to Nicaragua by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) went disproportionately into the construction of luxury housing for National Guard officers, while the homeless poor were asked to content themselves with hastily constructed wooden shacks. Reconstruction plans for the city's roads, drainage system, and public transportation were grossly mishandled. As a result, there was a series of strikes and demonstrations as the citizens became increasingly angry and politically mobilized.

It was at this point, too, that Somoza lost much of the support that he had formerly enjoyed from Nicaragua's economic elite. Many independent businessmen resented the way he had muscled his way into the construction and banking sectors. And most were angry at being asked to pay new emergency taxes at a time when Somoza—who normally exempted himself from taxes—was using his position to engorge himself on international relief funds. As a result, from 1973 on, more and more young people with impressive elite backgrounds joined the ranks of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, and some sectors of the business community began giving the FSLN their financial support.

The second wave of excess followed a spectacularly successful guerrilla operation in December 1974. At that time, a unit of the FSLN held a group of elite Managua partygoers hostage until the government met a series of demands, including the payment of a large ransom, the publication and broadcast over national radio of a lengthy communiqué, and the transportation of fourteen imprisoned FSLN members and themselves to Cuba.[2] Enraged by this affront to his personal dignity, Somoza imposed martial law and sent his National Guard into the countryside to root out the "terrorists." In supposed pursuit of that objective, the Guard engaged in extensive pillage, arbitrary imprisonment, torture, rape, and summary execution of hundreds of peasants.

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Unfortunately for Somoza, many of the atrocities were committed in areas where Catholic missionaries happened to be stationed. As a result, the priests and brothers could—and did—send detailed information about these rights violations to their superiors. The Catholic Church hierarchy—already displeased with Somoza's decision in the early 1970s to extend his term of office beyond its original legal limit—first demanded an explanation from the dictator and then denounced the Guard's rights violations before the world.

Somoza's flagrant disregard for human rights earned him considerable international notoriety. His excesses became the subject of hearings of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on International Relations[3] and a lengthy Amnesty International investigation.[4] In all, by the middle of the decade, Somoza stood out as one of the worst human rights violators in the Western Hemisphere.

The year 1977 was a time of mounting crisis for the Somoza regime. That winter, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nicaragua devoted its New Year's message to a ringing denunciation of the regime's violations of human rights; the U.S.-based International Commission of Jurists expressed concern over the military trial of 111 individuals accused of working with the guerrillas; and Jimmy Carter, who had advocated in his campaign that the United States begin promoting human rights internationally, was inaugurated as president of the United States. Throughout 1977, the Carter administration pressed President Somoza to improve his human rights image. James Theberge, a right-wing, cold war warrior, was replaced as U.S. ambassador to Nicaragua by the more humane and congenial Mauricio Solaún, and military and humanitarian aid was used as a prod in dealing with the client regime. In response to the changing mood in Washington, Somoza early that year ordered the National Guard to stop terrorizing the peasantry. In September, he lifted the state of siege and reinstated freedom of the printed press.

Somoza's problems had been compounded in July, when the obese, hard-drinking dictator suffered a near fatal heart attack—his second—and had to be transported to the Miami Heart Institute, where he spent the next one and a half months. This episode stimulated Nicaraguans of all political stripes to consider anew their country's political future. Even Somoza's aides, convinced that he would not return from Miami, began looting the treasury and plotting openly over the succession. As a result, when the dictator did recover, he was faced, upon his return to Nicaragua,

with very serious problems within his own political household. Over the next three months he purged many of his former top advisers, including Cornelio Hüeck, president of the National Congress and national secretary of his own Liberal party.

By the last quarter of 1977, the Somoza regime was in deep trouble. Many Nicaraguans were frustrated and disappointed that nature had not been allowed to accomplish a second *ajusticiamiento* the previous summer. With the lifting of the state of siege and the reinstatement of freedom of the press, they could vent their feelings. Newspapers such as Pedro Joaquín Chamorro's *La Prensa* were free to cover opposition activities and discuss in vivid detail the past and present corruption and rights violations of the Somoza regime. In a single week that coauthor Walker spent in Nicaragua early in December, *La Prensa* ran articles on opposition meetings, a successful guerrilla action in the north, the fate of "missing" peasants in guerrilla areas, Somoza's relationship with a blood-plasma exporting firm (Plasmaféresis de Nicaragua), and the apparent embezzlement of USAID funds by Nicaraguan Housing Bank officials. As a result, the regime's popular image dropped to an all-time low, and Managua was alive with gossip and speculation about the impending fall of the dictator.

This situation undoubtedly emboldened the opposition. In October, FSLN guerrillas attacked National Guard outposts in several cities and towns, and a group of prominent citizens—professionals, businessmen, and clergy who subsequently became known as The Twelve—denounced the dictatorship and called for a national solution, which would include FSLN in any post-Somoza government. While several opposition groups spoke of a dialogue with Somoza, many, if not most, Nicaraguans felt, as The Twelve did, that

> there can be no dialogue with Somoza . . . because he is the principal obstacle to all rational understanding. . . . Through the long and dark history of *Somocismo,* dialogues with the dictatorship have only served to strengthen it . . . and in this crucial moment for Nicaragua, in which the dictatorship is isolated and weakened, the expediency of dialogue is the only political recourse that remains for *Somocismo.*[5]

Even that expediency was to evaporate shortly thereafter in the reaction to the assassination of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro.

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THE WAR OF LIBERATION: 1978–1979

On January 10, 1978, as he was driving to work across the ruins of old Managua, newspaper editor Pedro Joaquín Chamorro died in a hail of buckshot fired at close range by a team of professional assassins. This dramatic assassination was the final catalyst for a war that culminated in the complete overthrow of the Somoza system eighteen months later. Though this struggle is often referred to as a civil war, many Nicaraguans are quick to point out that the term does not fit because it implies armed conflict between two major national factions. The Nicaraguan war, they maintain, was actually a "war of liberation" in which an externally created dictatorial system supported almost exclusively by a foreign-trained personal army was overthrown through the concerted effort of virtually all major groups and classes in the country. Somoza, they say, was simply "the last marine."

The assassination of Chamorro—a humane and internationally renowned journalist who, little over three months before, had received Columbia University's María Moors Cabot Prize for "distinguished journalistic contributions to the advancement of inter-American understanding"—enraged the Nicaraguan people. Though it is possible that Somoza may not have been directly responsible for the crime, few of his countrymen took that possibility seriously. Immediately after the assassination, angry crowds surged through the streets of Managua burning Somoza-owned buildings and shouting anti-Somoza slogans. Later, when it became apparent that the official investigation of the murder was to be a cover-up, the chambers of commerce and industry led the country in an unprecedented general strike that lasted for more than two weeks with 80 to 90 percent effectiveness. Strikes of this sort had almost always proven fatal to Latin American dictatorships; but it was not so in the case of Anastasio Somoza, for he had the firm support of a thoroughly corrupt military establishment that simply could not afford to risk a change of government. When it became clear that it was hurting the Nicaraguan people more than their well-protected dictator, the strike was called off.

The fact that the strike was over, however, did not mean that Somoza's troubles had ended. To the contrary, Nicaraguans of all classes had experienced the thrill and surge of pride that came with defying the dictator and were, therefore, in no mood to let things slip back to normal. For the next several months, acts against the regime came in various forms. There were

daring and quite successful FSLN attacks on National Guard headquarters in several cities, mass demonstrations, labor and student strikes, and—a new factor—civil uprisings in urban areas.

The events of February in Monimbó—an Indian neighborhood in Masaya—were a preview of what was to happen in most Nicaraguan cities that September, when poorly armed civilians rose up against the dictatorship only to be brutally pounded into submission. Fighting in Monimbó broke out between the local inhabitants and the Guard on February 10, the one-month anniversary of the Chamorro assassination, and again on February 21, the forty-fourth anniversary of Sandino's assassination. On the second occasion, the inhabitants set up barricades, hoisted banners declaring Monimbó to be a free territory, and held the Guard back for almost a week with a pathetic assortment of weapons consisting of homemade bombs, .22-caliber rifles, pistols, machetes, axes, rocks, and clubs. Before it could declare Monimbó "secure" on February 28, the regime had to use a force of six hundred heavily armed men backed by two tanks, three armored cars, five .50-caliber machine guns, two helicopter gunships, and two light planes.[6] In the process, the neighborhood was devastated and many dozens, perhaps hundreds, of civilians were either killed outright or arrested and never seen again.

Meanwhile, Somoza was defiantly reiterating his intention to stay in power until the expiration of his term of office in 1981. Swearing that he would never resign before that time, he sputtered angrily at one point, "They will have to kill me first. . . . I shall never quit power like Fulgencio Batista in Cuba or Pérez Jiménez in Venezuela. I'll leave only like Rafael Leonidas Trujillo of the Dominican Republic. . . . That is, dead."[7] In a calmer mood on another occasion he commented, "I'm a hard nut. . . . They elected me for a term and they've got to stand me."[8]

The Nicaraguan people, however, were not about to stand Somoza for another two years, much less wait until 1981 to participate in yet another rigged election—the "solution" that the United States, at that time, was promoting. Acts of passive resistance and violent opposition continued. July was a particularly active month. On July 5, The Twelve returned from exile, in defiance of the dictator's wishes, and were greeted as heroes by huge crowds at the airport and throughout the country. On July 19, "over 90% of the businesses in Managua and 70% of those in the country as a whole" answered the Broad Opposition Front's (FAO) call for a one-day, show-of-strength general strike.[9] And on July 21, Fernando Chamorro, an

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on July 21, Fernando Chamorro, an

automobile sales executive, carried out a daring, one-man rocket attack on *El Bunker*—Somoza's fortified, subterranean office and living quarters—where Somoza was holding a cabinet meeting.

The situation finally came to a head in August. Early that month, the Nicaraguan people heard to their astonishment that Jimmy Carter had sent Somoza a private, but subsequently leaked, letter late in July congratulating him for his promises to improve the human rights situation in Nicaragua. Exasperated by this news and determined to recapture the initiative, the FSLN decided to set in motion plans for its most spectacular guerrilla action to date, the seizure of the National Legislative Palace in the heart of old Managua. According to Edén Pastora, the "Commander Zero" who led the operation, the FSLN had been outraged by Carter's letter. "How could he praise Somoza while our people were being massacred by the dictatorship? It was clear it meant support for Somoza, and we were determined to show Carter that Nicaraguans are ready to fight Somoza, the cancer of our country. We decided, therefore, to launch the people's struggle."[10]

Operation Pigpen, which began on August 22, was as successful as it was daring. Dressed as the elite Guard of Somoza's son, Anastasio III, twenty-five young FSLN guerrillas, most of whom had never set foot in the National Palace, drove up in front, announced that "the chief" was coming, brushed past regular security personnel, and took command of the whole building in a matter of minutes. Before most of them even realized what was happening, more than 1,500 legislators, bureaucrats, and others conducting business in the palace were hostages of the FSLN. It was another humiliating defeat for Somoza. After fewer than forty-eight hours of bargaining, the FSLN commandos extracted a list of stinging concessions from the dictator, including $500,000 in ransom, space in the press and airtime on radio for an anti-Somoza communiqué, government capitulation to the demands of striking health workers, and guarantee of safe passage out of the country for fifty-nine political prisoners and the guerrillas. The governments of Panama and Venezuela vied with each other for the honor of providing the FSLN commandos with air transportation and asylum. And thousands of Nicaraguans cheered the new national heroes on the way to the airport as they departed.

The success of the FSLN palace operation triggered massive acts of defiance by Nicaraguan society as a whole. On August 25, the Broad Opposition Front (composed, at that time, of most of Nicaragua's political parties and organizations) demanded Somoza's resignation and declared another

nationwide strike, which paralyzed the country for almost a month. Simultaneously, Monimbó-style civil uprisings occurred in cities throughout the country, including Masaya, Matagalpa, Managua, Chinandega, León, Jinotepe, Diriamba, and Estelí. Once again, young people armed only with an assortment of pistols, hunting rifles, shotguns, homemade bombs, and the moral support of their elders erected paving-block barricades and battled elite units of Somoza's National Guard. Several towns—including León, the traditional stronghold of Somoza's Liberal party—held out for a week or more against terrible odds.

The outcome, however, was inevitable. Somoza and his hated National Guard knew that they were in a struggle for their very lives. The Guard, therefore, fought with unusual ferocity and vengeance, leveling large sections of several cities and taking the lives of between 3,000 and 5,000 people. The dictator's own son and heir apparent, Harvard-educated Anastasio Somoza Portocarrero, led the ground operations. After first "softening up" insurgent cities and neighborhoods with aerial strafing and bombardment, government troops moved in to "mop up." As most of the active insurgents usually had withdrawn by the time the troops took the cities, the mop-up operations frequently involved the mass summary execution of noncombatants—in particular those males who had the misfortune of being of fighting age.[11]

The events of August and September 1978 caused Nicaraguans on both sides to do some hard thinking. For his part, Somoza apparently began to realize that his dictatorial system might be doomed. In the next ten months, he and his associates worked feverishly to liquidate assets and transfer money abroad. At the same time, however, Somoza displayed an outward determination to hold on and to crush the "Communist . . . jerks." He announced plans to double the size of the Guard and bragged openly that, in spite of a U.S. arms freeze, he was having little trouble getting the arms and ammunition he wanted on the open market (mainly from Israel and Argentina).

Somoza was also quite clever in manipulating the United States in his efforts during this period to buy time. The September uprisings had caused the Carter administration, at least temporarily, to feel that Somoza might not be able to survive until 1981. This feeling was accompanied by a growing sense of alarm that Nicaragua might turn into "another Cuba."[12] The dictator played very effectively upon these cold war fears. His lobbyists in Washington argued passionately that Somoza was a loyal ally of the United States, about to be overthrown by Cuban-backed Communists. And from

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October to January, Somoza himself toyed with a U.S.-led mediation team from the Organization of American States (OAS) while it attempted to negotiate a transition agreement between Somoza and the small handful of traditional politicians who were still willing to make deals with the dictator. Dangling the idea of a national plebiscite before the OAS team and his traditional "opponents," Somoza did not kill the mediation process until January 1979, when he apparently was sufficiently confident of his own military strength that he no longer needed such charades.

Ironically, even though the Carter administration reacted with anger to Somoza's treachery by reducing its diplomatic presence in Managua and by finally withdrawing its small team of military attachés, the Americans, too, apparently felt that Somoza had weathered the storm. In May 1979, the administration once again aided the dictator by reversing an earlier position and allowing a $66 million International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan for Nicaragua to be approved without U.S. opposition.

Meanwhile, the Nicaraguan people had also learned some valuable lessons from the events of August and September 1978. It was clear that neither general strikes nor poorly armed mass uprisings would drive Somoza from office. The dictator and his Guard had demonstrated their willingness to slaughter and destroy in order to preserve their position. The next uprising, therefore, would have to be led by a larger, well-trained, well-armed guerrilla force. Accordingly, for the next eight months, the Sandinista National Liberation Front worked to prepare itself for a massive final offensive. The recruitment and training of young men and women—primarily students from urban areas—went on at a frenetic pace as the regular FSLN army expanded from several hundred to several thousand. Members of the opposition—particularly The Twelve—traveled throughout the world explaining the Sandinista cause and soliciting donations. Money received from various governments in Latin America, the Social Democratic parties of Western Europe, and solidarity groups in the United States and elsewhere was used to purchase modern, light, Western-made weapons on the international arms market. In March 1979, the FSLN, which formerly had been divided into three factions, finally coalesced under one nine-man directorate and issued a joint declaration of objectives. The stage was set for the final offensive.

After a false start in Estelí in April, the real final offensive was declared early in June 1979. Paving-block barricades were erected in poor neighborhoods throughout the country, and National Guard outposts were overcome

one by one as the dictator's control of the country shrank. In mid-June a broad-based government-in-exile was announced by the FSLN. Alarmed by the near certainty of a popular victory, the United States tried various schemes to block such an outcome, including a request to the OAS that a peacekeeping military force be sent to Managua. When this proposal for armed intervention was unanimously rejected, the Carter administration finally began to deal directly with the provisional government. Using various threats and promises, it tried unsuccessfully to force the FSLN to agree to preserve the National Guard—albeit in an altered form—and to include "moderates," such as members of the Guard and Somoza's party, in the government. When the FSLN refused, Washington finally accepted the inevitable and arranged for the departure of Somoza to Miami on July 17. A day later, the provisional government took the oath of office in a ceremony held in León, and on July 19, the FSLN entered Managua and accepted the surrender of most of what was left of the National Guard. Ecstatic crowds tore the statues of Anastasio Senior and Luís Somoza from their pedestals and dragged the broken pieces triumphantly through the streets. On July 20, the provisional government entered the capital and appeared in the main plaza to receive the acclaim of a jubilant and grateful people. The Sandinista insurrection had won unconditionally.

THE CONFLUENCE OF GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS

The overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship had been a product, in large part, of the confluence of two grassroots movements, both having their origins in the 1960s. One of these was Marxist, the other Catholic. The older of the two, the FSLN, was founded in July 1961 by Carlos Fonseca, Silvio Mayorga, and Tomás Borge, former members of the local pro-Soviet Nicaraguan Socialist party (PSN). For these young Nicaraguans, this old communist party was too Stalinist in organization and too subservient to the Soviet policy of "peaceful coexistence," which in Latin America often meant the docile acceptance of pro-U.S. dictatorships. The founders of the FSLN were determined to create an authentically Nicaraguan revolutionary movement, based on the tactics and sociopolitical objectives of Augusto César Sandino.

For a long time the young rebels were not very successful. At first they attempted to replicate Sandino's tactic of creating a rural guerrilla *foco* (nu-

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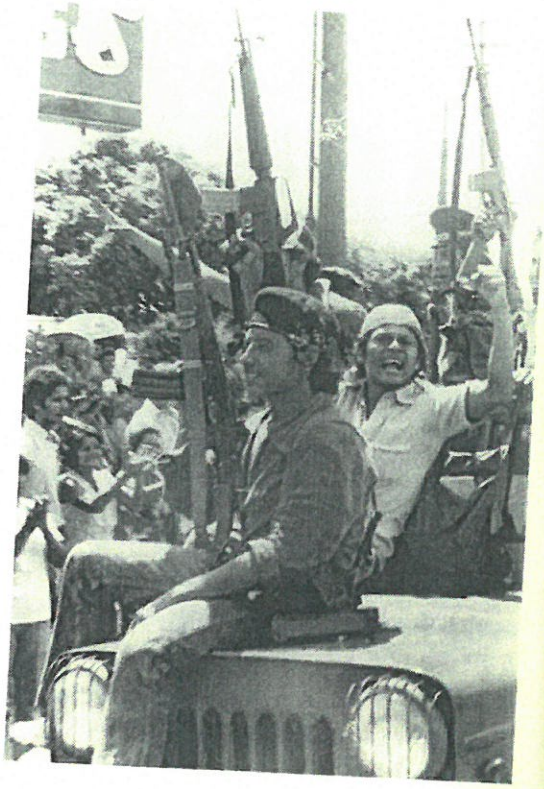
Fighting at the barricades. Ironically, the *adoquín* paving blocks used to construct the barricades were made in the dictator's own factory. (Photo courtesy of *Barricada*)

cleus) from which to harass the government. In 1967, this tactic led to the disaster of Pancasán, an area in the north in which most of the FSLN's best cadres were surrounded in their *foco* and killed by the National Guard. From then until 1974, the surviving Sandinistas reverted to a strategy of "accumulation of force in silence," temporarily abandoning guerrilla activities and working instead to organize peasants and the urban poor. In 1974, they returned to guerrilla activities, carrying out the successful Managua kidnap-ransom operation mentioned earlier.

The next year, harassed by an enraged Anastasio Somoza, the FSLN split into three "tendencies" in a dispute over strategies. The Prolonged Popular War (GPP) faction was most inclined to follow the SLN's original rural *foco* strategy. The Proletarian Tendency (TP) stressed the need to work with and mobilize the urban worker. Neither the GPP nor the TP felt that the time was ripe for an all-out insurrection. In contrast, the *Tercerista* (Third Force) advocated immediate urban and rural insurrection and a tactical alliance with all anti-Somoza forces, including the bourgeoisie. In the long run, Operation Pigpen and the September 1978 uprisings legitimized the strategy of the *Terceristas*. By March 1979, the three factions had formally reunited in preparation for the final offensive.



The Triumph—July 19, 1979.
(Photo courtesy of *Barricada*)

Meanwhile, a very important Catholic effort at mass mobilization was also being waged in the 1970s. Its roots lay in the second Latin American Bishops' Conference held at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. There the bishops had produced a document condemning the structural inequities of most Latin American social, economic, and political systems and calling for the clergy to make a "preferential option for the poor." Persons of the cloth were urged to organize Christian Base Communities (CEBs), in which Christ's liberating message would be discussed and the poor, who would be told that they, too, were made in the image of God, would be assisted in becoming socially and politically aware and encouraged to demand social justice. To assist the clergy in spreading the "social gospel" and in creating the CEBs, community leaders would be trained as lay Delegates of the Word.

Soon these directives were being implemented throughout Latin America—even in Nicaragua, where much of the clergy, until the late 1960s, had earned

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a reputation for being quite conservative. The activities of the lay delegates and the CEBs led to the creation and formation of other grassroots organizations which mobilized labor, peasants, students, and women. By the mid-1970s, the Somoza regime, which had come to feel threatened by these "subversive" activities, began to strike back, attacking CEBs and, in some cases, murdering lay delegates. This violence radicalized many young Catholics and led some of them to join, or cooperate with, the FSLN.

By 1978, the progressive Catholics and the FSLN were essentially working in tandem in expanding the grassroots organizations and preparing for the final insurrection. The Triumph of July 1979, then, was the product of a joint effort. Accordingly, the revolutionary system that would replace the Somoza dictatorship would be influenced as much by its Catholic humanist roots as by the peculiarly nationalist brand of Marxism of the original founders of the FSLN.

THE SANDINISTAS IN POWER

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 and explaining the history and current condition of Latin America. Consequently, they were automatically viewed with suspicion 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 disinformation depicting the government of Nicaragua as a grim, totalitarian Communist regime and an instrument of Soviet expansionism in the Americas.[13] 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.[14] Far from being a coterie of wild-eyed ideologues, the Sandinistas behaved in a pragmatic and, indeed, moderate fashion throughout the nearly eleven years they were in power. 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 rank Nicaragua at least in the top third of Latin American states.[15]

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 Sandinista—that is, revolutionary and popularly oriented. What is more, the mass organizations created in the struggle to overthrow the dictator gave the FSLN a grassroots 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 certainly would have generated a mass exodus of population. 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 ought not to surprise us that the Sandinistas, in fact, attempted to govern in a pragmatic, nonideological fashion.

Sandinista rule was marked by a high degree of consistency and continuity throughout—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-

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person Sandinista Directorate (DN). Decisions made by DN were based on consensus or near consensus. Reportedly, important decisions were never made on a 5-to-4 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 period, 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 grassroots 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 the years of Sandinista rule into four 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 the spring of 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 almost three years that elapsed from the spring of 1982 through the inauguration of elected president Daniel Ortega in January 1985, the revolutionary system rose to the challenge of withstanding an unprecedentedly massive surrogate invasion, direct CIA sabotage, and economic strangulation while at the same time institutionalizing itself and even augmenting its already wide base of grassroots support. However, in the fourth period, the final five years of the Sandinista government, the death, destruction, and economic collapse brought on primarily by the Contra War and other U.S.-orchestrated programs of destabilization eventually caused such desperation among the Nicaraguan people that a majority voted in 1990 for a U.S.-sponsored opposition coalition capable, it was hoped, of ending the paramilitary and economic torment of Nicaragua.

The first year 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 conservative Washington. During this period, the FSLN consolidated the revolution politically by promoting the growth of grassroots organizations, reorganizing the Sandinista armed forces, and

reequipping them with standardized military matériel. 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 (15,000–18,000 soldiers), and the civilian militia—little more than an association of patriotic marching units—barely constituted even 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 line with the decision to preserve a large private sector, the revolutionaries also created an interim government in which all groups and classes in society, including the privileged minority, could have a voice. The plural executive (Governing Junta of National Reconstruction), created shortly before the victory, included wealthy conservatives as well as Sandinistas. The interim legislative body (Council of State) gave corporative 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 lowered the national illiteracy rate from 51 percent to 13 percent 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, while 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 more than equivalent to 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 it was to take a highly critical position, playing to the fears of the privileged classes.

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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 second period, one of growing concern and apprehension, began in the fall of 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.[16] 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.[17] 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, too, 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.

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. By 1980, many in the privileged classes 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 shoot-out with state security forces while allegedly meeting with gunrunners 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 Catholic 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 by 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."[18]

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 chastised 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.[19] Meanwhile, there was a general belt-tightening as the importation of nonessential goods was restricted and salaries were held down.

All of the 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.

Finally, 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 over 10,000 Miskito Indians from isolated communities along the Río Coco. Although careful investigations into this matter indicate that the evacuation itself was carried out in a hu-

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Río Coco. Although careful investigations
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mane fashion, some isolated incidents occurred during subsequent security activities on the Miskito Coast in which individual commanders or soldiers disobeyed orders to respect the lives of prisoners and were apparently responsible for the execution or permanent "disappearance" of up to 150 individuals.[20] 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 coauthor Walker was a part that the human rights situation there was better than in El Salvador or Guatemala—ironically, two countries that Washington was then trying to portray as having made great strides in this respect.

The third period, from early 1982 through the beginning of 1985, 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 have numbered over 1.28 million). 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. Furthermore, ever larger numbers 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 with Nicaragua was drastically curtailed. In October 1982, Standard Fruit Company suddenly pulled its banana-buying operation out of Nicaragua in spite of the fact that, just the year before, it had reached a very concessionary agreement with the Nicaraguan government. In May 1983, the Nicaraguan quota for exporting sugar to the United States was cut by 90 percent. And Washington made an effort, albeit an only partially successful one, to get other countries to stop trading with Nicaragua.

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 under 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 Soviet Union for most of their petroleum needs. The scarcity of foreign exchange also meant severe shortages of imported goods and 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, it is clear that 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 period, support for the government actually appears to have grown—as measured by levels of membership in pro-Sandinista grassroots organizations.[21] In the aftermath of the Triumph (1979–1980), membership reached a peak of about 250,000 to 300,000 persons. Thereafter, it declined for a

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couple of 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, grassroots membership had begun to climb again, and by 1984, it had doubled or tripled over the previous high-water mark. By then, around half of all Nicaraguans age sixteen or older were members in voluntary support organizations.[22] Clearly 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.

The same period also witnessed a significant buildup in the military. Nicaragua stepped up its purchase of military hardware such as helicopters, propeller-driven aircraft, artillery, antiaircraft 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, increased to over 40,000; in addition, late in 1983 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. This increased preparedness (combined with the fact that in Nicaragua itself, the *contras* had little political support) paid off. The *contras* proved incapable of achieving even their most minimal objective of seizing and holding a Nicaraguan population center that could be declared the seat of a new government.

At first, the political response of the Sandinistas to the external threat was predictably defensive. In the spring of 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 their 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, at least continued to function. (In U.S. ally 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. 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, and 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 was set as the exact date, and in March, an electoral law modeled after "key components of the French, Italian, Austrian, and Swedish electoral systems" was enacted.[23] The Reagan administration denounced the Nicaraguan election in advance as a "Soviet-style farce" and then, with the U.S. media, portrayed businessman Arturo Cruz (at that time a highly paid CIA "asset") as the only viable opposition candidate. Cruz (whom in fact the United States had not intended to run) then played the role of a potential but reluctant candidate who ultimately, with great fanfare, decided not to enter the race on the grounds that the conditions for a free election did not exist.[24] Just before the election, the United States pressured another candidate to withdraw at the last moment. Nevertheless, the election did take place 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

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Association (LASA), and so on.[25] Although voting was not obligatory, 75 percent of those registered (93.7 percent of the voting-age population had registered) cast ballots. Although three parties 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 National (Constituent) Assembly to the FSLN.

The fourth and longest major subperiod of Sandinista rule was the time of decline from 1985 to 1990. This is not to say that there were no successes during that period but rather that the most important characteristic of those years was an essentially externally generated economic collapse and consequent internal political destabilization.

The January 1985 inauguration of Daniel Ortega, Nicaragua's first democratically elected president, should have been a cause for celebration. It was not; there were too many signs of trouble in the making. First, the previous November, the Reagan administration had skillfully obscured the nature of the election. In the United States, news of the election had been immediately drowned in intensive media coverage of deftly timed Reagan administration disinformation "leaks" that Soviet-built MiG jets were en route by ship to Nicaragua. Though groundless, these allegations raised to a fever pitch U.S. paranoia over the "Nicaraguan menace." Most of the thin election coverage that did take place in major U.S. media ignored the judgment of the disinterested international observer teams, choosing instead to echo Washington's distorted depiction. The lone major exception was the *Christian Science Monitor*, which timidly noted that the international observers had judged the Nicaraguan election as better than that conducted earlier that year in the U.S. client state of El Salvador.[26] But even that newspaper, perhaps not comfortable with possibly being seen as "out on a limb," would soon forget its initial evaluation.

The behavior of the Reagan administration early in 1985 made it clear that Washington had no intention of coexisting with Sandinista Nicaragua. Bilateral talks being conducted between U.S. and Nicaraguan diplomats during the run-up to the U.S. election of 1984 were unilaterally broken off by the United States at the beginning of the new year. In February, Reagan admitted that it was the objective of his administration to dismantle the Sandinista power structure unless the Sandinistas decided to cry "uncle."[27] This admission was followed in May by a complete embargo of U.S.-Nicaraguan trade.

For the next half decade, the Sandinistas tried to make the best of a bad, often impossible, situation. Though there were many setbacks, there were also some notable successes. First, during 1985 and 1986, the newly elected National Assembly worked to produce a constitution. In January 1987, after considerable legislative debate and domestic and international consultation, an original and simply worded democratic constitution was promulgated.[28] At the same time, after considerable negotiation and compromise, an innovative arrangement for the autonomy of Atlantic coast peoples was agreed to, and for all practical purposes, peace in that part of the country was achieved. In addition, parties and election laws were written in 1988 and amended in 1989 in order to carry out the constitutional mandate of a national election in 1990. Another major achievement was the containment of the *contras*. After 1982, the *contra* presence in Nicaragua had escalated rapidly to a high of around 15,000 troops by the mid-1980s. According to the U.S. Pentagon, approximately ten regular soldiers are normally required to contain one guerrilla fighter. Though Nicaragua (with a regular army that peaked at just over 80,000 troops) was never able to achieve anywhere near that ratio, its leaders adopted tactics that made up for the deficiency. Reportedly taking much of their strategy directly from U.S. Army counterinsurgency manuals and practices,[29] they created Irregular Warfare Battalions (BLIs) and Light Hunter Battalions (BCLs), which could take the war to the enemy under very difficult conditions. The leaders also accelerated agrarian reform, at least in part to solidify support in rural areas. They continued to pass out large numbers of AK-47 and AK-M assault rifles to civilians in threatened regions. Finally, the government extended the policy, begun in 1983, of granting amnesty to anyone willing to desert the *contras*. As a result, by the spring of 1988, their disintegrating and demoralized enemy had begun to sue for peace. From then on, though the United States would continue to maintain the *contras* as an irritant and potential threat to the Sandinistas and a stimulus for Nicaragua to continue high levels of military expenditures it could not afford, the U.S. surrogates would never again constitute a serious military problem.[30]

A final achievement of the 1985–1990 period was the maintenance of a relatively laudable record in the area of human rights.[31] Though there were scattered exceptions, respect for the "integrity of person"—the citizen's right not to be tortured, raped, murdered, or otherwise physically abused by agents of the government—was generally maintained throughout the period. [32] Social and economic rights were promoted as well as any

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government could do under the circumstances. And civil and political rights—which under international law may be restricted in times of external threat and national emergency—were only moderately and occasionally infringed upon. Indeed, Nicaragua's record in this latter category compared favorably with that of the United States and England in time of war and was much better than that of the contemporary U.S. client regimes of Guatemala and El Salvador.

However, these successes were ultimately overshadowed by the economically and politically destabilizing impact of continued U.S. economic and surrogate military aggression. Causing direct and indirect damage of over $9 billion to an export-oriented economy that in the best of years exported only a little more than $700 million, the U.S. campaign against Nicaragua achieved dramatic results.[33] The economy, which had grown in the first four years of the revolution and had leveled off in 1984 and 1985, began to plummet thereafter. According to a UN report, the annual inflation rate had reached 33,602 percent by 1988,[34] while real per capita income was sharply reduced. That year, and even more so in 1989, the government was forced to implement harsh austerity measures that, though they reduced inflation in 1989 to 1,690 percent,[35] threw thousands of government employees out of work. Significantly, all of these events were taking place just before the 1990 election.

During the same period, various exigencies created by the war, combined with economic hard times, also impacted negatively on the grassroots movement that had been the base of the Sandinista Revolution. Instead of being used primarily as devices to promote the sectoral interests they were supposed to be representing, the grassroots organizations were asked by the FSLN and the state to perform tasks important to the preservation of the revolution as a whole. Because some of these tasks were onerous—for instance, requests that neighborhood committees assist in the recruiting of draftees and that union leaders urge patience in the face of falling standards of living—or at the very least drained resources from the pursuit to meet more immediately felt needs, they tended to delegitimize the mass organizations. What is more, the increasingly desperate economic situation made it even more difficult for ordinary citizens to devote time to anything but the fulfillment of personal and family needs. All of this caused membership in grassroots organizations to decline gradually in 1985 and 1986 and then to plummet in 1987 and 1988.

The war itself also brought great suffering and therefore took a heavy political toll. According to internal government statistics that coauthor

Walker obtained from the outgoing government in January 1990, the death toll for the entire Contra War (1980–1989) was 30,865.[36] This included 21,900 *contras* and 8,965 individuals categorized by the government as "our people"—approximately 4,860 government troops and 4,105 others, mainly civilians. Calculating roughly that the population of Nicaragua, which grew from 2.5 million to 3.8 million in the period 1979–1989, averaged about 3.3 million during the war years, the over 30,000 dead represented 0.9 percent of the population. An equivalent loss for the United States would have been 2.25 million or over thirty-eight times the U.S. death toll in the entire Vietnam War. The war also produced 20,064 wounded, many of them so permanently disabled that they would be wards of the state for the rest of their lives.

Thus, by the 1990 elections, the Nicaraguan electorate was thoroughly tired of war. Continued hostile U.S. rhetoric toward the Sandinistas and sharply escalated *contra* activity in Nicaragua in the four months leading up to the 1990 elections convinced many Nicaraguans that the war, and hence the suffering, would not be terminated unless the Sandinistas lost on February 25.[37]

Washington's awareness of its success in destabilizing Nicaragua in the second half of the 1980s would seem to explain why the U.S. attitude toward elections in Nicaragua changed from 1984 to 1989–1990. In 1984, prior to the major impact of the destabilization, it was clear that the Sandinistas would win a free election against any conceivable opposition. In fact, a U.S. Embassy representative conceded to the Latin American Studies Association observer team that he thought they would take 70 percent of the vote in such an election. (As it turned out, he was off by less than 7 percentage points.) He added, "Who else has ever brought so much to the Nicaraguan people in so short a period of time?"[38] And as an unnamed senior Reagan administration official commented to a *New York Times* reporter just prior to the election, if someone like Arturo Cruz were to run and lose, "the Sandinistas could *justifiably* claim that the elections were legitimate, making it much harder for the United States to oppose the Nicaraguan Government" (emphasis added).[39] Thus the U.S. strategy in 1984 was to promote the opposition's abstention so that it would be possible to delegitimize the inevitable outcome.

Five years later, however, after Nicaragua had dropped to the unenviable status of being the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, and with the Nicaraguan people now desperately tired of war and deprivation, a U.S. strat-

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egy of promoting a unified opposition electoral coalition made good sense. Thus, while repeatedly and disingenuously criticizing Nicaragua's election laws as "stacked" in the Sandinistas' favor, stressing every minor irregularity that took place, and expressing grave doubts that a free election was possible (apparent rhetorical insurance in the event of a Sandinista victory), Washington used millions of covert dollars and promised overt funding[40] to weld a united opposition (National Opposition Union, UNO) out of fourteen disparate microparties and to promote the electoral success of its candidates. Leaving nothing to chance, the United States, said one State Department official at the time, decided to "micromanage the opposition."[41] And while accelerating the Contra War and repeatedly expressing hostility toward the Sandinistas, administration spokespersons from President George H. W. Bush on down made numerous statements not only endorsing UNO's presidential candidate, Doña Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, but indicating that the economic blockade and U.S. support for the *contras* would end if she won.

Actually, U.S. bureaucratic inertia prevented much of the nearly $8 million in overt U.S. funding from getting to Nicaragua before the election. The money that did get there began to arrive around the turn of the year, far too late to have much impact on the outcome. In addition, whereas the FSLN ran a glitzy modern campaign with tracking polls, targeted appeals, and huge rallies, UNO appeared to be handicapped by an inarticulate presidential candidate, open internal bickering, limited campaign outreach, and smaller rallies. As it turned out, however, the entire campaign period was probably essentially irrelevant. The voters of Nicaragua had a stark choice: Vote for the FSLN, which, though it promised to defend national sovereignty and promote social justice, was apparently powerless to end the war and the economic blockade; or vote for UNO, which, though its candidates and leaders had a very questionable record on the issues of sovereignty and social justice, appeared almost certain to be able to end the military and economic aggression.

The UNO victory was clear cut. Chamorro won about 55 percent of the valid presidential votes compared to Daniel Ortega's 41 percent. Of the ninety-two seats in the National Assembly, UNO captured fifty-one, the FSLN won thirty-nine, and two independent parties, the Social Christian party (PSC) and the United Revolutionary Movement (MUR), took one apiece.

Burnt by the experience of having had the Reagan administration and the U.S. press dismiss the 1984 election as a "farce," the Sandinistas had

made sure that the 1990 election would be even more heavily observed. As it turned out, their second election was "one of the most intensely observed in history."[42] The United Nations, which had never before observed an election in the Western Hemisphere, and a Carter Center/Organization of American States team (to name just two of the observer entities) both employed a scientific technique for the stratified sampling of local vote counts that enabled them to project the outcome to within 1 percent of the final count less than three hours after the polls closed. By 9:30 p.m., Ortega and Chamorro were given these projections.

Though it was clear to many impartial observers that the Nicaraguan people had voted, as the Sandinistas would repeatedly argue, with a "gun held to their heads,"[43] Daniel Ortega delivered a moving and dignified concession speech early the following morning. Later that day, he went to Chamorro's house, embraced and congratulated her, and promised to support her in her new role. Significantly, there were almost no celebrations by UNO voters and activists. Though Nicaraguans normally mark anything worth celebrating with the chatter of firecrackers and the boom of rockets, Managua was strangely silent in the aftermath of the UNO "triumph." After some bargaining over the nature of the transition, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro was inaugurated on schedule on April 25, 1990.

NOTES

1. Rigoberto López Pérez as quoted in Mayo Antonio Sánchez, *Nicaragua Año Cero* (Mexico City: Editorial Diana, 1979), p. 96.

2. For an FSLN account of this action and a transcript of the communiqué, see Comando Juan José Quezada, *Frente Sandinista: Diciembre Victorioso* (Mexico City: Editorial Diogenes, S.A., 1976).

3. U.S. Congress, House Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on International Organizations, *Human Rights in Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador: Implications for U.S. Policy*, hearings, June 8–9, 1976 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976).

4. Findings summarized in *Amnesty International Report, 1977* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1977), pp. 150–153.

5. *Apuntes para el Estudio de la Realidad Nacional*, no. 1 (June 1978), p. 9.

6. Ibid., p. 22.

7. "Somoza Rules Out Early Departure," *Central America Report*, vol. 5, no. 12 (March 20, 1978), p. 95.

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8. "The Twelve: Nicaragua's Unlikely Band of Somoza Foes," *Washington Post,* July 23, 1978.

9. "Nicaragua Strike," *Central America Report*, vol. 5, no. 29 (July 24, 1978), p. 231.

10. "Rocking Nicaragua: The Rebels' Own Story," *Washington Post,* September 3, 1978, p. C-1.

11. Organization of American States, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Nicaragua* (Washington, D.C.: General Secretariat of the OAS, 1978).

12. For more detailed analysis of U.S. policy making in this period, see William LeoGrande, "The Revolution in Nicaragua: Another Cuba?" *Foreign Affairs,* vol. 58, no. 1 (Fall 1979), pp. 28–50; and Richard R. Fagen, "Dateline Nicaragua: The End of an Affair," *Foreign Policy*, no. 36 (Fall 1979), pp. 178–191.

13. 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 *The Central American Crisis*, ed. Kenneth M. Coleman and George C. Herring (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1985), pp. 181–186.

14. Coauthor Walker had the privilege of working with several dozen such scholars while editing *Nicaragua in Revolution* (New York: Praeger, 1982); *Nicaragua: The First Five Years* (New York: Praeger, 1985); *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1987); and *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua: A Comprehensive Overview* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991).

15. Throughout its period of rule, the revolutionary government invited human rights monitoring organizations such as the Organization of American States, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Amnesty International, and Americas Watch to examine its human rights performance. Readers interested in Nicaragua's human rights performance should examine the numerous reports that they issued; also see Michael Linfield, "Human Rights," in Walker, ed., *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua.*

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

17. "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.

18. Jack Child, "National Security," in James D. Rudolph, ed., *Nicaragua: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), p. 202.

19. See note 18 in Chapter 8.

20. Organization of American States, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights of a Segment of the Nicaraguan Population of Miskito Origin* (Washington, D.C.: OAS, 1984).

21. Our estimates of grassroots organization memberships are rough. They are based on conversations that coauthor Walker held during ten visits to Nicaragua with individuals working in mass mobilization, and on Luís H. Serra, "The Sandinista Mass Organizations," in *Nicaragua in Revolution,* Walker, ed., pp. 95–114, and Luís H. Serra, "The Grass-Roots Organizations," in *Nicaragua: The First Five Years,* Walker, ed., pp. 65–89.

22. Interestingly, this estimate is essentially corroborated by an in-house U.S. Embassy estimate for late 1984, which places grassroots membership at 700,000–800,000. This information was revealed by an official in the U.S. Embassy to a group of which coauthor Walker was a part on June 25, 1985.

23. 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, Texas: LASA, 1984), p. 29.

24. Cruz, who later went on to serve the CIA briefly as one of the "civilian heads" of the *contras,* eventually came to regret his covert work as a foreign agent. At a conference on Nicaragua at Sonoma State University on April 22, 1989, coauthor Walker confronted fellow speaker Cruz with the description of Cruz's 1984 activities as given earlier in this chapter. Remarkably, instead of denying the charges, Cruz delivered an impassioned mea culpa, in which he described his work for the CIA as one of the two major "sins" he had committed against the Nicaraguan people (the other being his earlier association with the revolutionary government).

25. 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.

26. Dennis Volman, "Nicaragua Vote Seen as Better Than Salvador's," *Christian Science Monitor,* November 5, 1984, pp. 13, 14.

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and Thorvald Stoltenberg, "Statement [on
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Seen as Better Than Salvador's," *Christian*
. 13, 14.

27. "After Reagan's 'Uncle' Policy, Managua Announces 'Flexibility,'" *Latin American Weekly Report,* March 1, 1985, p. 1.

28. See Kenneth Mijeski, ed., *The Nicaraguan Constitution of 1987: English Translation and Commentary* (Athens, Ohio: Monographs in International Studies, Latin American Series, no. 17, 1991).

29. Col. Alden M. Cunningham, "The Sandinista Military: Current Capacities, Future Roles and Missions," a paper prepared for the conference "Nicaragua: Prospects for a Democratic Outcome," sponsored by the Orkand Corporation (under contract with the CIA), October 12, 1988, Washington, D.C., p. 6.

30. For a more complete discussion of the role of the armed forces, see Thomas W. Walker, "The Armed Forces," in Walker, ed., *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua.*

31. For a reasoned and well-documented examination of this matter by a Harvard-trained lawyer who did an internship in Nicaragua at the time, see Michael Linfield, "Human Rights," in Walker, ed., *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua.*

32. Throughout most of the war, human rights organizations certified that violations of the right of integrity of person that were occasionally committed by Nicaraguan security forces in the field appeared to have taken place randomly and against the instructions of the central government. Only for a short period in the late 1980s did one reputable human rights organization feel it had detected "a *pattern* of killings of *contra* supporters and *contra* collaborators" (emphasis added). In stark contrast to the endemic and patterned killing of many tens of thousands of people in the U.S. client states of Guatemala and El Salvador, this pattern, though reprehensible, reportedly involved two severe beatings, fourteen disappearances, and seventy-four murders. See Americas Watch, "The Killings in Northern Nicaragua" (New York: Americas Watch, October 1989).

33. Economic costs are from the Nicaraguan case against the United States at the International Court of Justice. The total claim was for $17.8 billion. The lower figure used in the text was obtained after deducting "damages to development and sovereignty, compensation for the dead and wounded, and 'moral damages.'" For a breakdown of these economic costs, see Kent Norsworthy and Tom Barry, *Nicaragua: A Country Guide* (Albuquerque, N.M.: Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center, 1990), p. 59.

34. [United Nations] Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, "Balance Preliminar de la Economía de América Latina y el Caribe, 1990," *Notas Sobre la Economía y el Desarrollo,* no. 500/501 (December 1990), p. 27.

35. Ibid.

36. These and the statistics in the rest of the paragraph are from eight pages of charts provided to coauthor Walker by the Nicaraguan Ministry of the Presidency in January 1990.

37. Coauthor Walker was in a particularly good position to attest to this upsurge in *contra* activity; as a member of the Latin American Studies Association Commission to Observe the 1990 Nicaraguan Election, Walker was specifically assigned to observe and investigate the campaign and election in the war zones of northern Nicaragua in late 1989 and early 1990.

38. As quoted in Michael E. Conroy, "The Political Economy of the Nicaraguan Elections," a paper prepared for presentation at the "Coloquio sobre las Crísis Económicas del Siglo XX," Universidad Complutense de Madrid, April 15, 1990, p. 1. A member of the LASA observer team, Conroy was present at the interview of that official.

39. Phillip Taubman, "U.S. Role in Nicaragua Vote Disputed," *New York Times,* October 21, 1984, p. 12.

40. Latin American Studies Association Commission to Observe the 1990 Nicaraguan Election, *Electoral Democracy Under International Pressure* (Pittsburgh: LASA, March 15, 1990), pp. 24–26.

41. An unidentified State Department official as quoted in "Chamorro Takes a Chance," *Time*, May 7, 1990.

42. LASA Commission, *Electoral Democracy,* p. 31.

43. See, for instance, "Editorial: The Ungovernable Nicaragua," *Barricada Internacional,* December 1, 1990, p. 3.