

FACT AND FANTASY IN NICARAGUA

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(South Carolina and Corpus Christi '76)

OVER THE PAST COUPLE OF YEARS the British papers have carried numerous accounts of the accomplishments of American tax dollars in Nicaragua. Since some of these reports may have escaped the attention of those with access only to the American press, I shall reproduce a couple of representative extracts here. Consider, for example, the following description of an attack on a state-run agricultural cooperative, related to British reporters by one of the survivors: "Rosa had her breasts cut off. Then they cut into her chest and took out her heart. The men had their arms broken, their testicles cut off, and their eyes poked out. They were killed by slitting their throats, and pulling the tongue out through the slit." Or, again, consider these extracts, published in *The Guardian*, from the diary of a Scot who had recently returned from an extended stay in rural Nicaragua: "April 4: I spoke with Ephraim today (a nurse in the hospital in Esteli). He had a terrible day . . . He had examined some of the corpses of youngsters brought in from San Juan de Limay. An 18-year-old student had been castrated and his genitals stuffed in his throat. His eyes had been burned with battery acid, most of his teeth removed by a bayonet, and his tongue cut out. They left him that way to die. . . . February 2: I chatted with Laura Sanchez, a daughter of one of the Cooperative workers who explained how her uncle, aunt and four cousins were massacred. Each had their eyes pulled out, ears cut off, and intestines smeared against the walls of their farm."

Those responsible for these deeds—the contras—have been variously described by President Reagan as "heroes," "our brothers," "freedom fighters struggling for liberty and democracy," and "the moral equal of our Founding Fathers." Given this profound admiration for the moral character of the contras and their achievements, the President has every reason to be proud—for the contras are, as is now well known, his Administration's own continuing creation. It was the US that initially forged the main contra group into a fighting force; the US that provided their weapons, training, uniforms, and

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salaries; the US that organized and planned their major campaigns, collected their intelligence, and drafted their communiqués. And, despite restrictions recently imposed by Congress, the contras, and in particular the FDN, have continued to depend on American largesse and direction and have continued to serve as Reagan's private army. On one occasion the President even offered the Sandinistas a ceasefire, something that would not have been within his power were he not the *de facto* commander-in-chief.

Yet, like the father of a beloved but illegitimate child, the President has been reluctant to acknowledge his progeny. In April 1983, in the course of an avalanche of mendacity delivered before a joint session of Congress, he asserted that "Nicaragua's dictatorial junta . . . like to pretend they are being attacked by forces based in Honduras. The fact is, it is Nicaragua's government that threatens Honduras, not the reverse." Since, unlike the President, most members of Congress appear to read the newspapers, there could scarcely have been a person present who was not conscious of being lied to. But there was little protest, either from the Congress or the media, and the President retreated toward the truth only gradually. Once he had recognized the contras' existence, he explained that their purpose was simply to interdict the arms that Nicaragua was supposedly supplying to the insurgents in El Salvador. Later their job description shifted, and they were said to be preventing Nicaragua from "exporting revolution." Apparently, however, Reagan's revolutionary consciousness soon began to expand, and the contras' mission then became to rescue the Nicaraguan revolution by pressing the Sandinistas to honor the promises of the revolution they had betrayed.

Still later, after new legislation apparently repealed the Boland Amendment, which required the Administration not to seek the overthrow of the Sandinistas, Reagan was asked whether he sought their overthrow. "Not," he replied, "if the present government would turn around and say 'uncle'." In other words, if they do *not* submit to his demands, then he *will* overthrow them. Among the Administration's demands are that the contras, who in the official mythology are supposed to be moderate revolutionaries that have been excluded from power, must be welcomed "back into the revolution"; that Nicaragua must "sever" its ties with Cuba and the Soviet Union; that its armed forces must be cut "down to size"; and that the Sandinistas must "re-

store democratic rule" (a reference, presumably, to the halcyon period when democracy reigned under the Somozas). In short, if the US is not to overthrow them, the Sandinistas must hand over Nicaragua's sovereignty and quietly retire from government. Either way, the Administration's blueprint for Nicaragua's future has little role for the government that the Nicaraguan people have chosen.

Unleashing the freedom fighters on Nicaragua's rural peasantry is not the only form of coercion the US has employed in its effort to force the Sandinistas to say "uncle." It has also mined Nicaragua's harbors, planned and participated in the destruction of its major oil facilities, held continuous large-scale military exercises near its borders for purposes of intimidation, disrupted the national elections by creating sonic booms over polling stations, threatened the country with direct attack if it purchases MiG aircraft, and engaged in various acts of economic warfare, including blocking development loans from the international lending agencies and imposing an economic embargo.

To enact a trade embargo on grounds of national security the government is required by law both to certify that "the policies and actions" of the target state "constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States," and to "declare a national emergency to deal with the threat." In order to satisfy the law—a law that was intended to prevent the use of sanctions in just this sort of case—the national emergency was duly declared. (Later the President actually accused Nicaragua of being "engaged in acts of war against the government and people of the United States.") Putting aside the grotesque black humor in the idea that a country as tiny and impoverished as Nicaragua could itself create an emergency threat to American national security, we can see that there is nevertheless some truth in the idea that Nicaragua threatens American foreign policy. It poses the same kind of threat that revolutionary Grenada and the opposition in El Salvador have posed: insubordination within an American sphere of influence.

The Sandinistas' insolent assertion of Nicaragua's independence from American control is threatening in two respects. First, when a country is emboldened to wrest itself free from American domination and to experiment with unapproved forms of economic and political organization, it sets a dangerous precedent that other countries may be tempted to follow. Thus, whether intentionally or not, the Sandi-

nistas have presented a challenge to the entire system of global control that furnishes the US its grossly disproportionate share of the world's wealth and resources. Second, Nicaragua's defiance threatens American "credibility": it suggests to the US's adversaries and to its dependents that the US is incapable of controlling its own domains. And this, it is thought, invites the adversaries to try to exploit the US's presumed weakness and causes the dependents to doubt the US's reliability.

The combination of military and economic pressures is designed to make conditions intolerable for the people of Nicaragua. The state of siege is calculated to force the Sandinistas to infringe or curtail various rights and liberties, thereby alienating and antagonizing the populace. The assault on the economy is also intended to arouse domestic discontent, the ultimate aim being to provoke a general uprising against the government. A concomitant aim is to stop the contagion from spreading by impressing upon potential insurgents throughout the US's spheres of influence that it does not pay to defy the rules that have been laid down for lesser members of the free world. Finally, by punishing the Nicaraguan people and engineering the overthrow of their government, the Administration aims to demonstrate to the Soviets and others that the US can manage its own back yard.

Thus, for the crime of asserting its sovereignty and independence, Nicaragua has paid a heavy price—though this is usually kept well-hidden from those who, through their voting preferences and tax dollars, are ultimately responsible for what is being done. For example, the cover story in a recent issue of *U.S. News & World Report* is entitled "Will U.S. Squeeze Lead to War?" The US is merely conducting a "squeeze": there is no war. There will be a war in Nicaragua only if Americans start to share in the dying. Yet the squeeze has already taken the lives of an estimated 8,000 Nicaraguan citizens, nearly half of whom have been children. To put this figure into perspective, note that this is from a population of roughly 3.2 million (up from 2.5 million in 1978, largely as a result of the dramatic decline in the infant mortality rate brought about by the Sandinistas' health care programs). This means that, on a proportional basis, Nicaragua has already lost approximately eleven times as many *civilians* as the US lost soldiers during the whole of the Vietnam war.