

U.S. Policy Towards Nicaragua

U.S. policy towards Nicaragua was one of the most divisive issues of the Reagan presidency. The administration argued that under the Sandinistas, Nicaragua was a "totalitarian dungeon" rapidly becoming "another Cuba" and that the prudent course was to support the armed struggle of "freedom fighters," better known as the contras. The zeal with which the administration pursued this policy ultimately led to the Iran-Contra scandal — the secret and illegal use of funds from the sale of arms to Iran to support the contras. Democrats in Congress agreed with many of the administration's underlying assumptions about Nicaragua, but sought a policy of accommodation and containment. The changes in Nicaragua inspired still another, more diverse and grassroots constituency which sought to build support for the Sandinista revolution and to critique the assumptions of both the administration and Democrats alike.

The terrain of U.S. debate on Nicaragua is shifting rapidly. It would be an impossible task for us to offer a lesson that was up-to-date. We've chosen instead to provide an historical examination of differing points of view on the changes occurring in Nicaragua during the first few years after the 1979 revolution. This will allow students to continue their study of the origins of U.S. hostility towards the Nicaraguan government — and to evaluate the arguments of the dissenters.

Note: The essay attacking the Nicaraguan government and supporting the contras is excerpted from **Central America: What are the Alternatives?** by Elliott Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs under Ronald Reagan and published by the United States Department of State Bureau of Public Affairs, April 1987. The essay critical of U.S. policy was excerpted from **Nicaragua: Give Change a Chance**, written by Medea Benjamin, Joseph Collins, Kevin Danaher and Frances Moore Lappé and published by the Institute for Food and Development Policy, San Francisco, CA, 1986.

Goals/Objectives

1. Students will learn some of the major arguments raised in the United States about the early years of the Sandinista revolution.
2. Students will evaluate these arguments against what they have learned about Nicaraguan society.

Materials

- Handout #9: **U.S. Policy on Nicaragua — For and Against**

Time Required

- Two class periods

Procedure

1. Read aloud or give as homework Handout #9: **U.S. Policy on Nicaragua — For and Against**. We find that it generally works best to go over a difficult reading with students, rather than simply assigning it.
2. Discussion and/or writing questions

include:

- According to the State Department, what is wrong in Nicaragua?
- Which of the State Department's claims, if true, could justify attempting to overthrow the Nicaraguan government?

- What are some of the important differences between Food First and the State Department when interpreting recent Nicaraguan history?
 - How would you decide whom to believe?
 - The State Department argues that the U.S. government is committed to “develop democratic governments in Central America.” Does the history of U.S. involvement in Nicaragua before the Sandinista revolution tend to support or discredit the State Department’s assertion? Explain.
 - How does Food First measure progress in Nicaragua? Is this a different way of measuring progress than that used by the State Department?
 - Both the State Department and Food First agree that Nicaragua has built up its army. What interpretations do the readings offer for the build up? Which of these do you agree with and why?
 - Based on the readings, would you say Nicaragua poses a military threat to the United States?
 - Food First asserts “it is impossible to be both for the hungry and against change.” What does that mean? Do you agree?
 - How do you account for why different people, presumably working with access to the same information, could come to such totally opposite conclusions?
3. Ask students to choose one of the readings to critique. Give them a number of options for how they might complete this assignment. For example, they could be editorial writers composing point/counter-point responses. This

would allow them to be passionate and biting in their criticisms. As an alternative they might choose to write parodies of one of the readings. They could write speeches to be delivered at a rally, compose leaflets refuting the major points of either of the readings or draw on the dialogue poem model introduced in Lesson #6. The goal is simply to give students as free a hand as possible in evaluating and responding to the arguments raised in either of the readings.

4. After students have finished their critiques, give them the opportunity to share these with one another. Encourage student response.



U.S. Policy on Nicaragua — For and Against

For: U.S. Department of State: Nicaragua's Crimes

Today the Sandinistas are hard at work cementing their dictatorship. The Sandinista police are silencing voices of opposition throughout the country. So-called Sandinista Defense Committees operate in every neighborhood, watching the movements of citizens and enforcing politically correct behavior. These block committees can punish dissent by turning people in to the police or by taking away the ration cards people need to obtain the staples of daily life.

The Sandinistas draft Nicaraguan youth into the largest army in Central America. But it is not the Nicaraguan national army, it is the Sandinista party army. There is no such thing as conscientious objection. There is no such thing as free expression, either: **La Prensa** is closed. The Catholic Church radio station is closed. Were it not for radio and television from outside the country, Nicaraguans would get their only news from the Sandinista press, Sandinista radio, and Sandinista television. Farmers and businesses cannot set prices, move capital, or buy equipment without the state's permission...

Nicaragua, in short, is beginning to look less and less like a part of Latin America and more and more like the Soviet Union which Carlos Fonseca [a founding member of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation — ed. note] so admired three decades ago. And as in Eastern Europe, communist repression has given rise to a powerful reaction. Denied self-de-

termination, 20,000 Nicaraguans have taken up arms to fight for the freedom they thought they had won in 1979 when they got rid of the old dictatorship.

Why Central America Matters to the United States

Why should their fight matter to the United States? Why should we care what happens in Central America?

Let us start with doing what is right. The thousands of Nicaraguans who resist the Sandinistas, whether in the civic opposition or in armed rebellion, are defending the sacred rights of the individual that we Americans have fought and died for ever since we won our own independence. They are fighting for our values, for democracy and independence. We have every moral right to help people free themselves from repressive rule.

But there is a second case to be made; it concerns our security. The Nicaraguan resistance is fighting for Nicaragua's freedom and independence, but their success will serve our security interest as well. We owe it to ourselves and to future generations of Americans, to help them succeed.

The challenge to American security in Nicaragua is not yet a direct one. Rather, it is indirect and building only gradually. but it is, nonetheless, a serious challenge with many dimensions.

The first part of the threat is Sandinista subversion of our friends and allies in this hemisphere. The Sandinistas have said openly that their revolution reaches beyond Nicaragua's borders. Just as Cuba became a base for terror and subversion, the Sandinistas have helped other violent radicals throughout Central America and even in South America and the Caribbean. The headquarters of the Salvadoran communist guerrillas remains in Managua. Sandinista aid to South American guerrillas continues. Communist subversion of Latin America's new democracies is a fact.

The second part of the threat is that the Sandinistas will permit their territory to become a base for the projection of Soviet military power. Again, Cuba is an example. Castro's military relations with the Soviets were slow to develop, but they have developed steadily. And they have developed in spite of the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreements that ended the missile crisis. Today Cuba is an important base for the Soviet military. Soviet aircraft patrol our Atlantic coast from Cuban bases. Soviet submarines call regularly at Cuban ports. A huge Soviet espionage facility in Cuba, the largest in the world outside the U.S.S.R., intercepts U.S. military and civilian communications...

Will Nicaragua follow this Cuban pattern? The Soviets are certainly investing in Nicaragua's future. They supply all of Nicaragua's oil, and they shipped more military supplies to Nicaragua during 1986 than in any previous year — 23,000 tons, worth \$500 million. The Sandinistas have built an airbase with a runway longer than necessary for any plane in their air force inventory but which can serve any aircraft in the Soviet inventory. From this base, the Soviets could patrol our west coast — a new capability Cuba does not give them.

From a geostrategic perspective, the

bottom line is simple: the Sandinistas offer the Soviets an opportunity to project Soviet power on the American mainland and in the Caribbean basin. The Soviets know that if they can bring new military bases or political instability to this area, they can divert our attention and our defense resources from other parts of the globe. This would directly reduce our capacity to defend NATO or other Western interests, and it would represent a major Soviet strategic success.

To defend our interests against this new challenge, we are moving to support the development of democratic governments in Central America and throughout the hemisphere. Democracies do not force their citizens to revolt against them. Democracies do not attack or subvert their neighbors.

A secure future for Central America — a future of freedom, peace, and development — depends on bringing democracy to Nicaragua. As long as the Sandinista dictatorship lasts, it will continue to produce repression and conflict at home and subversion abroad. And that's what Nicaragua's civil war is all about: democratic political change. The change could take many forms. It could take the form of overthrow. It could take the form of internal collapse. It could take the form of power-sharing by negotiated formula. It could take the form of restored political rights and freedoms accompanied by an end to the Sandinista monopoly over the security forces. It could combine elements of all the above. But one thing is certain: it must be the product of Nicaraguans agreeing among themselves to create the democracy they glimpsed in 1979. Democracy need not be brought by war; a negotiated settlement could work if the Sandinistas would open the political system to the many different groups of Nicaraguans they have driven into opposition.

But until the Sandinistas keep those promises, there will be no peace because the Nicaraguan people will keep on fighting. Their cause is just. And as long as they fight for that cause, the policy of the United States must be to support them. Freedom may not come in a few months; it may not come this year, but it will come. One day the Nicaraguan democratic resistance will be so strong that the Sandinistas will face a choice: to live up to their democratic promises or yield to a movement that will end their dictatorship and put more representative leaders in charge.

Today thousands of brave Nicaraguan men and women are fighting to reach that moment. Some are in the mountains with arms; others are caring for the wounded; many remain in the cities, working in every way they can to keep the flame of civic resistance alive. They have one thing in common — they are risking all they have for their country, for their children's future. As Americans we should be proud to have friends such as these. When peace and democracy come to Nicaragua, we will be proud that we made the right decisions at the right time to help friends in their hour of greatest need.

Against - Food First: Nicaragua: Give Change a Chance

Under the Somoza dictatorship, over half of Nicaragua's children were undernourished. Even in the best economic year (1977) over 90% of the deaths of children under one year were related to malnutrition.

The new government's programs have cut infant mortality by over one-third. The Sandinistas' emphasis on primary health care — mass immunizations, improved sanitation, free health care centers in poor areas — prompted the World Health Organization to designate Nicaragua a model country. "Before, almost every day a little coffin would come by in a funeral procession," reports Sister Pat Edmiston, a Maryknoll nurse working in a poor barrio. "Now, you don't see that."

Under the Somoza dictatorship, over half of all Nicaraguans could neither read nor write. In many rural areas 100% of the women were illiterate. But in 1980, a universally praised literacy campaign cut the illiteracy rate to 13%. Over 1400 new schools have been built, mainly in rural areas. School enrollment has more than doubled, and 200,000 adults now participate in evening classes. Everywhere in the countryside one encounters previously illiterate peasants proudly keeping farm ledgers.

The theme of Nicaragua's agrarian reform is "idle land to working hands." By 1985, titles to more than one-fourth of the nation's farmland had been granted, free of charge, to over 70,000 land-poor families. Total land now owned by peasants, including nearly four million acres given away under the agrarian reform, amounts to more than fifteen times that held by peasants under the Somoza dynasty.

The goal of the reform — now within sight — is to provide land for everyone who wants to farm. In a major social advance, women are receiving titles to their own land.

But land is useless without credit to buy seeds, tools and fertilizer. So the government is also providing peasant producers with ample credit and technical assistance.

As one peasant woman told us: "It's very different now. Before, a lot of people went hungry. People were so in debt they had to mortgage their crops. Now people get credit from the government. Now people can eat three times a day."

U.S. War is Creating an Emergency

These significant advances in health, education and land reform are jeopardized by the U.S.-directed war being waged by counterrevolutionaries ("contras") based in Honduras and Costa Rica. Because of contra attacks, 50% of the national budget must be diverted to defense.

There has been a sharp decline in corn and bean production, located primarily in areas under contra attack. The Sandinistas are determined to prevent war-related shortages from enriching those who hoard goods and speculate on people's basic needs. In August 1984, the government began rationing eight essential products to ensure fair distribution. Rationing, welcomed by many poor Nicaraguans victimized by speculators, is resented by many merchants who believe it restricts their profits.

Thus rationing entails stiffer laws and stricter police enforcement which the

Reagan administration seized upon as another way of discrediting the Sandinistas.

Instead of calling attention to how the people of Nicaragua are securing their basic needs for land, food and jobs, the U.S. government focuses single-mindedly on Nicaragua's alleged violations of civil liberties.

Let's look at the facts.

Press Freedom. Press freedom is notably absent in most of Central America. In U.S.-allied El Salvador and Guatemala, right-wing forces have either shut down the media or forced them into self-censorship through bombings and assassinations. In Nicaragua, press censorship was initiated in 1982 as part of a state of emergency shortly after President Reagan authorized covert operations to destabilize Nicaragua, and two vital bridges were dynamited by contras.

We think the Nicaraguan government has at times been heavy-handed in its use of censorship, lacking confidence in public good sense. But the opposition press and radio stations have not been silenced. Censorship mainly affects *La Prensa*, the right-wing daily backed by anti-government elements of the wealthy classes. *La Prensa* continues to publish regular attacks on the government.

Political Freedom. In the November 1984 national elections the Sandinista party (FSLN) ran against six other parties — ranging from far-left to conservative — and won 63% of the vote. Numerous international organizations, including Food First and the Latin American Studies Association, verified that the elections were free and fair.

On October 5, 1985, under pressure

from U.S. destabilization, the Nicaraguan government declared a state of emergency limiting civil liberties and making it easier for the army to arrest suspected counter-revolutionaries. The National Assembly immediately restored some of the cancelled rights, especially judicial safeguards such as the right to a trial by jury. Even with the remaining restrictions, there are no mass arrests, no curfew, and political parties are still functioning.

A Policy of Aggression

Despite numerous polls showing the majority of U.S. citizens oppose the policy, Congress and the administration have given more than \$100 million to the contras based in Honduras and Costa Rica. Private right-wing groups have given untold millions more.

Since 1981, contra forces, led by former members of Somoza's hated National Guard, have carried out terrorist raids, targeting whoever symbolizes the new Nicaragua: a rural nurse, an adult education teacher, a student volunteering to pick coffee, a peasant family which received land through the agrarian reform.

Financed and directed by the CIA and the Pentagon, the contras have killed more than 12,000 Nicaraguans, and driven 250,000 from their homes, out of a population of only 3 million. Equivalent losses in the United States would equal more than three times the number of Americans killed in World War II.

The contra war has resulted in economic losses, four times the country's annual export earnings. By burning peasant farms, granaries, tractors and trucks, the contras are sabotaging Nicaragua's food supply.

The Reagan administration is also

engaged in economic warfare against Nicaragua. Following several years of blocking international aid, in 1985 the Reagan administration declared an economic embargo against Nicaragua, excluding Nicaraguan airliners from U.S. airspace, banning the importation of Nicaraguan goods, and restricting U.S. trade and investment in Nicaragua. The U.S. economic warfare comes at a time when Nicaragua, like most Third World countries, is suffering from low world market prices for its major exports.

A Threat to the Region?

President Reagan claims Nicaragua is building up its army for "waging war on its neighbors" and is seeking to "export revolution," especially to El Salvador.

The Nicaraguans are building up their army. This is understandable, given the extensive attacks by the contras and the legitimate fear of a full-scale U.S. invasion. The Nicaraguans would prefer to channel the money into development, but under the circumstances they would be foolish not to strengthen their armed forces.

A study by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute shows that Nicaragua's military hardware is defensive in nature, whereas the Honduran army is equipped mainly with offensive weapons.

Certainly most Nicaraguans would like to see a victory by popular forces in El Salvador. But as former CIA analyst David MacMichael reported in June 1984: "The whole picture that the Administration has presented of Salvadoran insurgent operations being planned, directed and supplied from Nicaragua is simply not true. The Administration and the CIA have systematically mis-represented Nicaraguan involvement... to justify efforts to overthrow the Nicaraguan government."

The Reagan administration claims its military and economic assault on Nicaragua is necessary to prevent foreign military bases from being established in Central America. Yet numerous foreign press correspondents have verified that there are no Cuban or Soviet bases in Nicaragua. There is no evidence to contradict Nicaragua's claim that the vast majority of the Cubans in the country are health workers and teachers. Nicaraguans feel that the victory over Somoza brought independence for the first time. Why would they now hand control of their country over to foreigners?

Nicaragua does not pose a military threat to the United States. As President Kennedy's National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy recently stated: "No one is going to make war on us from Central America. There is something genuinely zany in thinking about the area in those terms."

Throughout Central America and the Third World, the poor are demonstrating that they will not suffer in silence, watching their children die from hunger while the rich live in luxury and block the political and economic changes necessary to end hunger. Peasants and workers will continue to rise up against enforced poverty. For us, therefore, it is impossible to be both for the hungry and against change.