A Latin American Revolution: The Sandinistas, the Cold War, and Political Change in the Region, 1977-1990

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Abstract

Inspired by Fidel Castro’s proclamation of a socialist Cuba in 1961, armed groups throughout Latin America pursued violent struggle as a means to redistribute wealth and transform their societies. Unlike most of their contemporaries, however, Nicaragua’s Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) actually succeeded in taking power (1979-1990). Though unique and short-lived, their victory was no aberration. In fact, when seen from the Latin American perspective, the Nicaraguan Revolution was – like the Cuban and Mexican revolutions before it – a true watershed that reconfigured the region’s political landscape.

Departing from the existing literature’s narrow focus on U.S. intervention, this project draws on archival and oral history sources from Managua, Havana, Mexico City, Panama City, and San José. Nicaragua’s revolutionary process was, from the moment regional actors conspired to topple the U.S.-backed Somoza regime, deeply intertwined with wider Latin American politics. Because of this internationalized quality, events in Nicaragua set off revolutionary changes elsewhere in Latin America, even as the FSLN failed to achieve social transformation at home. The first seizure of state power by the armed Left since Cuba, and the inability of U.S. intervention to reverse it, forced regional governments to build peace in Central America by creating democratic transitions where all actors – including the previously marginalized Left – could participate legitimately. This process entailed a re-ordering of hemispheric international
relations because Latin American countries, having identified U.S. intervention as a threat to regional peace and autonomy, excluded Washington from these South-South discussions in unprecedented fashion. Thus, the Sandinistas both reflected and propelled a wider revolution that took place in Latin America in the late-Cold War; though they lost power, their project inadvertently helped build the region’s Third Wave of democratization and set the stage for a revised (though still hegemonic) role for the U.S. after 1990. In making this argument, the dissertation suggests that the adoption of liberal democracy in the so-called Third World was a historically specific response to the challenges posed by the superpower interventions and ideologically fueled revolutions of the Cold War.
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Finally, nobody has been more crucial to this project than my extended family. Like most Nicaraguan families, mine was torn apart by the ideological polarization of the revolutionary period. That history of division and eventual reconciliation informed both my research as well as my underlying intellectual commitment to study Nicaragua’s past in order to help the country reckon with the inequalities, injustices, and legacies of violence which shape its present. Above all, thanks to my loving and politically committed parents, to whom this dissertation is dedicated.
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Introduction
In February 1980, Mexican President José López Portillo travelled to Managua – Nicaragua’s capital – for a state visit. The city, which is surrounded by active volcanoes and lies on several fault lines, had not yet recovered from a devastating 1972 earthquake. Now it was shaking from seismic activity of a different sort. Several months earlier, on July 19, 1979, Nicaraguans helped give rise to the last major socialist revolution of the 20th century. Following the 40-year dictatorship of the U.S.-backed Somoza family, a youthful band of Marxist guerrillas had taken power in this mostly agrarian Central American country, oceans away from the industrialized European polities that Marx and Engels had in mind when they drafted *The Communist Manifesto*.

Addressing a packed crowd of sympathizers who waved the black and red flag of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), the Mexican president enshrined this revolution as a turning point in the region’s sociopolitical development. He spoke of the “Labyrinth” of Latin American history – a sort of maze of inequalities and injustices from which the region’s countries fruitlessly sought escape. According to López Portillo, Latin Americans had previously come across two critical junctures in that labyrinth. First, there had been his country’s Mexican Revolution of the early 20th century. The Mexicans, he lamented, had overthrown their dictatorship and advanced the goal of political liberty, but at the expense of meaningful economic and social change. Half a century later, another epic turning point – Fidel Castro’s Cuban Revolution – similarly turned out to be another “false exit” from the Latin American Labyrinth, because the Cubans advanced the cause of economic justice and equality only by sacrificing fundamental political liberties in the process.

Hence, López Portillo turned to his Nicaraguan hosts and told them that the eyes of the world were upon them. The Sandinistas, he argued, represented the hope that previous revolutionary errors could be righted, that Latin America could find a way out of its labyrinth,
and that the goals of liberty, justice, and equality could be conjoined. “You are Nicaragua today,” he told them, “but América tomorrow.”¹

In the end, the Nicaraguan Revolution also fell short. While in power, the FSLN improved Nicaraguans’ access to healthcare and education while mobilizing a degree of popular participation in politics that Central America had rarely witnessed before. They also succeeded in standing up to the government of the United States, which failed in its covert, overt, and proxy efforts to topple the revolutionary government in Managua. Nevertheless, and by their own admission, the Sandinistas did not achieve the economic redistribution and poverty reduction that was so central to their vision of social transformation.² Therefore, when the FSLN handed over power in 1990 after a devastating civil war, Nicaragua’s basic social hierarchies were largely unchanged from the previous era. As the late Guatemalan sociologist Edelberto Torres Rivas put it, the Sandinista Revolution was “a revolution without revolutionary changes.”³

This dissertation claims that, in order to understand and nuance Torres Rivas’ assessment, the story of the Nicaraguan Revolution must be told in transnational context. As the Mexican president’s speech suggests, the aftershocks of this revolution were felt well beyond Nicaragua’s borders. Indeed, like the Mexican and Cuban Revolutions before it, the Nicaraguan one failed to achieve its stated goals; but also like those major revolutions, it unleashed a chain reaction which ultimately changed Latin America’s political status quo.⁴ The motivating irony and premise of

² Today, Nicaragua is the poorest country in Spanish-speaking America, and one of the most unequal. Nonetheless, the country’s social indicators, as measured by the Human Development Index, outperform the country’s economic indicators by a significant margin. For analysis of the twists and turns of poverty reduction and social welfare during and after the Sandinista period, see Rose Spalding, “Poverty Politics,” and Eduardo Baumseiser, “Politics of Land Reform,” in The Sandinistas and Nicaragua Since 1979, eds. David Close, Salvador Martí i Puig, and Shelley A. McConnell, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011).
³ This phrase provides the title of Torres’ Rivas wide-ranging comparative analysis of revolutionary movements in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua: Revoluciones sin Cambios Revolucionarios: ensayos sobre la crisis en Centroamérica, (Guatemala: F & G Editores, 2011).
⁴ Political scientist Thomas Wright synthesizes research on the international impact of the Cuban case in Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution and Beyond, (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2018). International histories of the Mexican Revolution are less common, but two good recent examples include Renata Keller, Mexico’s Cold War: Cuba, the United States and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution (London: Cambridge University Press,
this project is that the Sandinistas were far more successful at revolutionizing the international scene than they were at achieving social transformation at home.

Today, most Nicaraguans (more than half were born after 1990, when the Sandinistas left power following an electoral defeat) may find it hard to believe that their small, poverty ridden country could be the subject of a global obsession. In the 1980s, however, this is precisely what happened. For one, the Sandinistas electrified the global Left and briefly gave Soviet analysts reason to think that the USSR was winning the battle of hearts and minds in the Third World.\(^5\) This revolution generated a rare level of enthusiasm because the Sandinista National Liberation Front, despite overt allusions to the Algerian and Vietnamese fronts de libération nationale, stood apart from the Third World socialist pack in important ways. Nicaragua’s armed Left came to power on the back of an ideologically plural, multi-class alliance which included segments of the country’s business elite and Catholic Church. Once in power, the Sandinistas promised not to repeat the Cuban model of “Real Socialism.” Instead, they swore to govern according to three moderate principles: political pluralism, a mixed-economy, and non-alignment in international affairs. This “third road” revolutionary model was music to the ears of global leftists who had become disillusioned by the totalitarianism of the Cuban and Russian Revolutions and repulsed by the tremendous violence which swept Southeast Asia in the wake of the Vietnamese Revolution. By infusing Marxist principles with liberal-democratic sensibilities, the Sandinistas renewed hope in socialism with a human face. That romantic image was burnished by a

generation of internationally recognized writers and artists – Ernesto Cardenal, Sergio Ramírez, Claribel Alegría, to name a few – who flourished in the effervescence of national insurrection.

In a tidal wave of solidarity, tens of thousands of European and U.S. citizens travelled to Nicaragua in the 1980s to witness – and sometimes assist in – the making of revolution. The North American city of Burlington, Vermont, led by its young mayor Bernie Sanders, petitioned to become sister cities with Managua. The Clash, the seminal UK punk-rock band, chose Sandinista! as the title of their third LP. The Nicaraguan Revolution meant different things to the many foreigners who consumed it. At their grandest, the Sandinistas challenged Western assumptions about the relationship between capitalism and democracy by attempting to marry the latter to socialist, state-led transformation. The Argentine writer Julio Cortázar observed that this post-Leninist revolutionary agenda was “no more than an ideal” to European socialists. The Nicaraguans, he gushed, “have actually put it into action.”

Global sympathizers found further cause for excitement in the furiously aggressive reaction that the Revolution provoked from U.S. conservatives. With the ghost of Vietnam looming large, Washington’s Cold Warriors feared that if they allowed this “second Cuba” to put down roots, the USSR would have another foothold in America’s “own backyard.” Thus,

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8 In 1992, Noam Chomsky wrote that “The hatred that was elicited by the Sandinistas trying to direct resources to the poor (and even succeeding at it) was truly wondrous to behold. Just about all US policymakers shared it, and it reached a virtual frenzy.” In his view, the Reagan administration did not oppose the FSLN because of Nicaragua’s strategic importance. Rather, he argued that it was the novel substance of Sandinista reforms that inspired U.S. intervention. He posed the question, “Why did the US go to such lengths in Nicaragua?” His response: “The success of Sandinista reforms terrified US planners…” What Uncle Sam Really Wants, (Berkeley: Odonian Press, 1992), 43.

9 President Ronald Reagan made this argument most concisely in a televised 1986 speech. “For our own security, the United States must deny the Soviet Union a beachhead in North America...Using Nicaragua as a base, the Soviets and Cubans can become the dominant power in the corridor between North and South America. Established there, they will be in a position to threaten the Panama Canal, intercept our vital Caribbean sea lanes and, ultimately move against Mexico. Should that happen, desperate Latin peoples by the millions would begin fleeing north into the cities of the southern United States, or to wherever some hope of freedom remained.” He concluded the speech by asking: “Will we give the Nicaraguan democratic resistance the means to recapture their betrayed revolution, or
President Ronald Reagan chose to fund anti-Sandinista insurgents in Nicaragua known as the Contra, as in contrarrevolucionarios – or counterrevolutionaries. This intervention ignited a political firestorm in the United States. Indeed, as the Reagan administration resorted to illegal means to destabilize the FSLN government and as details of the Iran-Contra nexus began to emerge, for a moment it even seemed as if that motley crew of irreverent Central American guerrillas might bring about the impeachment of the President of the United States. As historian Piero Gleijeses recently noted, although Reagan was far from the first president to authorize a CIA-led paramilitary intervention in the Global South, this was the first time in U.S. history that “there was a debate – a vigorous debate – about a paramilitary intervention while it unfolded (not after it had failed, as had been the case for the Bay of Pigs in 1961 and Angola in 1975).”

Because the U.S. public was so aware of its government’s intervention in Nicaragua, the Sandinista Revolution raised thorny questions about what role the superpower should play in the developing world, when it should use force to advance its interests, and which branch of government had the authority to settle those matters.

Understandably, most U.S.-based scholarship on the Nicaraguan Revolution has been a continuation of those debates. Using declassified U.S. sources, it explores the motivations and consequences of Washington’s intervention in Central America. This is a fruitful line of inquiry. For example, historian Greg Grandin has persuasively argued that 1980s Central

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America policy provided an ideological blueprint – and in some cases, even a direct link in terms of personnel and practices – for the United States’ 21st-century interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.\(^\text{12}\) Moreover, U.S. policies – which went beyond the Contra operation to include economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and direct sabotage by CIA agents – constrained the Sandinistas’ policymaking and helped fuel a devastating civil war in Nicaragua. Political scientist William Leogrande, who wrote the authoritative history of U.S. foreign policy in Central America in the 1980s, is therefore right to say that the fate of the region’s inhabitants “depended fundamentally on decisions made in Washington.”\(^\text{13}\)

Nonetheless, as with other so-called hotspots in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, superpower intervention in Central America was only one part of a complex, Cold War tapestry. Consider that the Reagan administration, which considered the Sandinista government a “cancer” to be excised from the Western Hemisphere, did not achieve the regime change it sought in Nicaragua.\(^\text{14}\) Though all Central American politics in this period were conditioned by the economic and political realities of North American intervention, the FSLN did not “say uncle” as Reagan had wished, nor did it accept the unconditional surrender that U.S. hawks had demanded. Instead, the Sandinistas only left power after being voted out of office by the Nicaraguan people. Their legitimization as a democratic actor was unimaginable to Reagan’s Cold Warriors, who argued that Marxist-Leninists were ideologically unequipped to produce anything but totalitarian regimes. Moreover, as numerous analyses of U.S. foreign policy in this era have highlighted, North American diplomats often felt frustrated by their inability to direct events on the ground in Central America. Additionally, a focus on U.S. intervention colored scholarly analyses of the


\(^{13}\) William M. Leogrande, *Our Own Backyard*, x.

\(^{14}\) In the 1986 speech cited above, Reagan – referring to Nicaragua’s Sandinista government – pondered if there “could be any greater tragedy than for us to sit back and permit this cancer to spread.”
revolutionary process in Nicaragua. On the one hand, Reagan’s sympathizers sought to prove that the Sandinistas were incompetent, totalitarian thugs; on the other hand, U.S. critics of Reagan’s expansionist foreign policy were eager to disprove the administration’s interventionist pretext by casting Nicaragua’s revolutionaries as docile nationalists whose internal mistakes were mostly the result of external aggression. Finally, an exclusive focus on Washington ignores the fact that Nicaragua – like the rest of Latin America’s countries – does not exist in a vacuum with the United States; aside from the Soviet Union and Cuba, state and non-state actors from around the world – from Peru to Palestine – played pivotal roles in shaping the Sandinista Revolution.

In sum, the problem is not that a U.S.-focused perspective – whether sympathetic or critical – denies legitimate Central American agency. Indeed, it bears repeating that such a perspective is important because American citizens should study the history of their country’s foreign policy in the Global South in order to hold policymakers accountable and inform contemporary debates. The real problem is that U.S. documents cannot tell us why there was a revolution in Nicaragua, what its leaders hoped to accomplish, or how the revolutionary process meshed with pre-existing dynamics in Nicaraguan and Latin American history. Perhaps most importantly, because the U.S.-centered perspective is grounded in the implicit belief that global institutions and norms are diffused outwards from the West and North to the East and South – the countries of which, the argument implies, have no option but to passively accept or resist these changes – a narrow fixation on Washington obscures the revolutionizing effect that the Sandinista Revolution had on Latin American politics and state-to-state relations at the end of the Cold War.

Therefore, while still relying on the latest declassified U.S. government documents, the bulk of this history’s source base seeks to understand the Nicaraguan Revolution on Nicaraguan terms. This re-centering posed several obstacles. For one, the country lacks a truly centralized national archive. Orderly transfers of power have been uncommon in Nicaraguan history; frequent regime turnover has left private libraries to do the work of maintaining the public record. Documentary evidence from the revolutionary period is particularly difficult to come by because Sandinista officials often destroyed or exported internal records for fear of their capture in the event of a direct U.S. invasion. In order to gain the inside perspective on the FSLN leadership, I had to leverage my own Nicaraguan background and contacts in order to find non-traditional sources of documentation, such as the personal archives of senior Sandinista officials who had crates full of untouched internal documents collecting dust in their homes. Most notably, the personal papers of Sergio Ramírez (Vice President, 1985-1990, and member of the first Revolutionary Junta), archived at Princeton University’s Firestone Library complemented Sandinista documents housed at Universidad Centroamericana’s Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica (IHNCA). Alejandro Bendaña also provided a significant trove of documents from the Sandinistas’ Ministry of Foreign Relations, where he served as Vice Minister and Secretary General. Cuba’s Ministry of Foreign Relations Archive was another important repository of internal FSLN documents. Finally, I consulted countless published memoirs and documentary collections produced by revolutionaries, counterrevolutionaries, and everyone in between.

Much of the fieldwork for this project was done elsewhere in Latin America. Any history of this socialist revolution must grapple with the question of why it took place in perhaps the least industrialized country in the Spanish-speaking Americas. In fact, as the early chapters of this project argue, a broad coalition of Latin American countries and political movements saw
the Somoza dynasty as a threat and conspired to replace it with the Sandinista Front, which in the course of insurrection became the most legitimate political actor in Nicaragua. This was the first and only time since the Cuban Revolution that the armed Left took power in the region. As a result, the Nicaraguan Revolution unsurprisingly became central to Latin American politics in the 1980s. Historians widely accept that Castro’s revolution, as Thomas Wright has written, was a watershed because it became “paramount in setting the general terms of political debate in Latin America.”¹⁶ The Sandinistas had a similar effect. Washington’s hawkish response to the Revolution revived the specter of intervention and domination precisely at the moment when the region’s countries, especially in South America, were transitioning away from U.S.-backed anti-communist military dictatorships. The renegotiation of regional sovereignty vis-à-vis the United States, which found a litmus test in the Central American crisis, was the major international relations question of the day – one which dovetailed with an accompanying shift toward liberal electoral regimes. Moreover, in the same way that the Cuban Revolution both heightened demands for social change and aggravated conservative reactions, the Sandinista success inspired an uptick in guerrilla and counterinsurgency activity throughout the continent. The effect was especially pronounced in Central America, where the politics of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala took place in the shadow of events in Sandinista Nicaragua. In turn, Latin American politics shaped the revolutionary process in Nicaragua in numerous ways. Perhaps most importantly, Mexican and South American leaders constrained the Revolution’s socialism by demanding liberal democratic institutions, while also enabling the revolutionary government’s survival by opposing U.S. efforts to undermine it. Finally, there is one additional reason to place the Sandinista Revolution in regional perspective: as Grandin has written, Central America’s revolutionary upheavals were the last chapter of a “century of revolution” initiated in

¹⁶ Wright, Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution and Beyond, xvii.
Latin America with the rise of the Mexican Revolution. In order to map out the Latin Americanization of the Revolution, as well Nicaragua’s effects on hemispheric affairs, I mined national and diplomatic archives in Mexico, Cuba, Panama, and Costa Rica.

Because of this history’s recentness, oral history interviews became an essential component of the source base. This method provided unprecedented access to the inner workings of the Sandinista Front’s upper-echelon: I conducted interviews with members of the FSLN’s 9-man National Directorate (the collective leadership of the Revolution), high-ranking officers from the Sandinista Popular Army, top diplomats, and numerous figures from the party intelligentsia. The interviews, cited throughout this history, complement archival sources but are also independently valuable because they give a sense of how the Sandinistas’ aspirations and revolutionary imaginary changed over time alongside an evolving domestic and international context. Because of the internationalization described above, I also conducted interviews with guerrilla leaders, heads of state, and diplomats from around the Caribbean Basin. MP3 audio files and rough transcripts of these interviews are available upon request.

What follows is not a comprehensive history of the Nicaraguan Revolution. First and foremost, I would refer readers to the many memoirs of Sandinista and anti-Sandinista Nicaraguans who made this history. Foreign journalists such as Stephen Kinzer wrote excellent blow-by-blow accounts of the period. Additionally, though most of it was written during the Revolution or its immediate aftermath, there is an enormous literature of specialized academic monographs on different aspects of the Sandinista period such as its gender dynamics, the novel

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18 Many of these are cited throughout the text. Other memoirs worth reading include Omar Cabezas, *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde*, (Managua: ANAMA ediciones, 2007) and Gabriela Selser, *Banderas y harapos: relatos de la revolución en Nicaragua*, (Managua: ANAMA, 2017), as well as the testimonies compiled by former Sandinista guerrilla leader Mónica Balcodano at memoriasdelaluchasandinista.org.
impact of popular religion on the Revolution, the salience of racial and ethnic cleavages, and the structural causes of the Somoza regime’s collapse. Political biographies of leaders like Carlos Fonseca and Daniel Ortega are also a valuable resource. While they have not yet devoted much attention to the revolutionary period specifically, Central American and Nicaraguan analysts have incorporated the Sandinista Revolution into their historical interpretations of Nicaraguan state formation and the distinct characteristics of the country’s caudillo – or strongman – political culture. Finally, readers should note that this study centers on Nicaragua’s revolutionary government; an entirely different dissertation could focus on the domestic actors who opposed it. As of this writing, the country is experiencing such political turmoil that Nicaraguans are showing a renewed popular interest in the origins and legacy of the revolutionary period. However, a single narrative history of the Sandinista Revolution which weaves together all the social, political, economic, and cultural threads remains to be written.

Nonetheless, this dissertation aims to provide an essential history of the Sandinista Revolution. For better or worse, the fundamental elements and characteristics of the Nicaraguan revolutionary process were determined by actors, ideas, and historical forces far outside the

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country. Specifically, from the moment regional actors conspired to topple the Somoza regime, Nicaraguan affairs became deeply intertwined with greater Latin American politics. Because of this internationalized quality, events in Nicaragua set off revolutionary changes elsewhere in Latin America, even as the FSLN failed to achieve social transformation at home. The triumph of the armed Left in Nicaragua, and the failure of U.S. intervention to reverse it, first mired Central America in conflict but eventually forced its leaders to build peace by creating democratic transitions where all actors – including the previously marginalized Left – could participate legitimately. This process entailed a re-ordering of hemispheric international relations because Latin American countries, having identified U.S. intervention as a threat to regional peace and autonomy, excluded Washington from these South-South discussions in unprecedented fashion. Thus, the Sandinistas both reflected and propelled a wider revolution that took place in Latin America in the late-Cold War; though they ultimately lost power, their project inadvertently helped build the region’s Third Wave of democracy and set the stage for a revised (though still hegemonic) role for the United States after 1990.

REVOLUTIONS IN TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT

This revisiting of the Nicaraguan Revolution engages with three arenas of historical and political research. The first concerns the study of revolutions. Many of this dissertation’s arguments about the rise and fall of the FSLN are informed by generations of scholarly debates regarding the classification and causes of revolutions. In particular, readers may notice that insights drawn from Theda Skocpol’s state-centered approach pervade the early chapters; rather than understanding the fall of the Somoza regime as the simple result of direct action by regime
opponents, I (without underestimating the importance of rebel practices and ideology) explore this history in the context of structural transformations in Nicaragua’s state and class structures. Interestingly, because it took place the same year that Skocpol published *States and Social Revolutions*, the Sandinista Revolution visibly impacted her and her students’ approach to the field. The Nicaraguan case, along with the contemporaneous Iranian Revolution, forced scholars to ask if lessons learned from the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions could be reasonably transposed onto the contemporary Third World context.

While conventional analyses of revolutions are often nationally framed, this project forms part of a research agenda which understands these political phenomena in transnational and global context. In fact, Skocpol wrote of the importance of “world systemic openings” in determining the collapse of *ancièn régimes* prior to a revolution. In Nicaragua, where myriad groups had unsuccessfully tried to topple the Somozas in the past, the FSLN vaulted through such an opening in the international system. While Cold War realists like National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski pushed to buttress the Somoza regime – a long-time *gendarme* of U.S. anti-communism in the Caribbean Basin – their strategic concerns butted heads with President Jimmy Carter’s emphasis on human rights as part of his administration’s foreign policy agenda. As with the Iranian government of the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Washington waffled in its support for the old regime, leading the ousted Anastasio Somoza Debayle to decry a “sordid betrayal”. In his view, the “nation was truly delivered into the hands of the Marxist enemy by President Jimmy Carter.” Changes in U.S. foreign policy, however, did not produce a social revolution by themselves. While Somoza was losing the support of his key benefactor, the FSLN was winning key battles abroad. Indeed, the outgoing dictator himself noted that “in this

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25 Skocpol addressed these questions in a follow-up edited volume: *Social Revolutions in the Modern World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
treachery, [Carter’s] most active accomplices were Venezuela, Panama, Costa Rica, and Cuba.”

In fact, these Latin American countries were no mere accomplices: they were the intellectual and material authors of Somoza’s replacement by a Sandinista-led revolutionary coalition – an outcome Carter’s advisors clearly sought to avert. These countries, along with Mexico, found unique reasons for dislodging Somoza and worked to unify the FSLN and develop its military capacity. Once the popular insurrection was well underway in 1979, they were instrumental in swinging regional public opinion against the Somoza family. Consequently, the FSLN-led provisional government was recognized by most Latin American governments well before Sandinista columns were anywhere near Managua. As Somoza Debayle notes in his memoir, this diplomatic defeat made his ouster a fait accompli. To be sure, his regime met all the structuralists’ conditions for regime vulnerability: a sultanistic ruling style, an unsustainable economic model, a highly personalized National Guard, among other things. But these conditions, as well as the FSLN’s military exploits inside Nicaragua, were less important than diplomatic happenings outside of the country caused by a changing political environment as well as the Sandinistas’ shrewd coalition-building. The proximate causes of the revolution, in other words, were internationally determined.

Once in power, the Revolution only became more internationalized. Outsiders immediately invested heavily in the form of ideas, resources, and personnel in order to reinforce or reverse the Sandinista Revolution. Theorist of revolutions Jack Goldstone, acknowledging that Skocpol broke ground in identifying the external economic and military determinants of old regime stability, points out that “this only begins to suggest how international influences can trigger and shape revolutions.” There is not only the question of direct foreign intervention to deter, cause, reverse, or support a revolution. Goldstone, citing waves of anti-monarchical

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26 Anastasio Somoza Debayle and Jack Cox, Nicaragua Betrayed, (Boston: Western Islands), 397.
revolutions in the late 18th century, liberal revolutions in the mid-19th century, and communist revolutions in the 20th century, notes that “ideological influences can spread across boundaries, with both the example and the content of revolutionary movements in one nation influencing others.”

The Sandinistas’ revolutionary agenda, for example, was influenced not only by Cuban and East German socialism but also by the more conservative ideas of the Latin American governments that helped bring them to power. In turn, the rebel victory in Nicaragua in 1979 – which made Cuba in 1959 seem less exceptional – both influenced the rise of a powerful revolutionary movement in neighboring El Salvador but also pre-determined its failure because Somoza’s collapse energized right-wing forces into action. Like the early 20th century struggle of their namesake, Augusto César Sandino, the Sandinista project was internationalized throughout its rise and fall.

Cold War historians, who see social and political change as framed by the imperial conflicts and bipolar ideological struggle of that specific era, are particularly attuned to the transnational dimensions of modern revolutions in the Global South. For instance, Matthew Connelly dubbed the Algerian war for independence a “diplomatic revolution,” for two reasons. First, the Algerian FLN’s victory was made possible by diplomatic efforts which won key support for its rebel cause while also isolating colonial France. Second, the process of the Algerian Revolution led to a “re-ordering of international relations,” because it was “the first time a subject people lacking the means to control any of the territory they claimed declared their independence and won the recognition that finally made independence possible.”


Nicaraguan case fits this framework nicely. Not only was the 1979 victory internationally determined; the rise and eventual fall of the Sandinista Revolution can be clearly tied to wider, democratizing changes in Latin American politics which saw the region collectively move away from U.S.-backed military dictatorships. Another relevant example of this Cold War research agenda is Lien-Hang Nguyen’s treatment of the Vietnamese Revolution. In *Hanoi’s War*, she uses local documents and interviews to tell the global – but locally-rooted – side of a story so often reduced to Washington’s perspective and debates about the United States’ relative victory or defeat in a conflict which historians increasingly argue was not theirs to win or lose. Similar problems plague academic and popular scholarship on Nicaragua and the Contra war; the local and multi-national source base relied upon here offers a corrective. Finally, Tanya Harmer has brought this innovative agenda to the realm of Latin American history, using Brazilian and Cuban sources to complicate U.S.-centered histories of the rise and fall of Chile’s Allende government in the 1970s. Like her book *Allende’s Chile and the Inter-American Cold War*, this project sees a multi-sided international context as a key explanatory variable that sheds light on the twists and turns of the revolutionary process.

**LATIN AMERICA’S COLD WAR**

Many of the international histories cited above form part of a “Global Cold War” research agenda that seeks to de-center late 20th century history away from the superpower conflict and towards the Third World, where most of the period’s violence took place. Over the

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past decade, Latin Americanists have successfully brought the region “in from the cold,” to borrow the title of an influential volume edited by Gilbert Joseph and Daniela Spenser, by studying the unique ways in which geopolitics and ideological polarization overlapped with local and inter-American concerns to either advance or retard social change in the region. Thanks to this new perspective, historians no longer reduce Latin America’s Cold War experience to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Instead, they have begun asking how waves of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary violence in Latin America were an integral part of its Cold War experience but also predate and outlive it – some have even proposed that we broaden the typical periodization by which we define that period in history.

Some familiar obstacles remain. Though there has been a laudable push to move the period’s history “beyond the eagle’s shadow,” sometimes Latin Americanists’ attempts at de-centering are still circumscribed by old questions about the role of U.S. interference in stunting the region’s development. One example is Hal Brand’s recent international history of Latin America between 1945 and 1990, suggestively titled *Latin America’s Cold War*. Drawing on archival sources from across the region and synthesizing several national histories, Brands correctly argues that Latin American political violence in this period was not exclusively determined by the superpowers. In other words, as historians Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough put it, there were – as in Asia and Africa – “indigenous” origins of the Cold War in Latin America. But for Brands, the purpose of decentering is often to rebut claims that U.S. foreign

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35 *Beyond the Eagle’s Shadow: New Histories of Latin America’s Cold War*, eds. Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Mark Atwood Lawrence, and Julio Moreno, (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2013).
policy was malicious or uniquely responsible for miring the continent in dictatorships and violence. As a result of this bias, the book revisits Latin American countries’ bilateral relations with the United States but mostly obviates inter-American dynamics, implicitly reproducing the fallacy – spread by both champions and critics of U.S. Cold War policy – that Latin American foreign policies only exist to resist or socialize into Washington-led orders. Thus, studies such as these take a step toward the multilateralization of Latin America’s international history but respond more directly to questions of the traditional field of U.S. foreign relations history.

This project, by contrast, is unabashedly focused on the Latin American origins and consequences of the Sandinista Revolution. Questions of the United States’ responsibility for driving violence play a secondary role. Nevertheless, decentering is not done for its own sake. The United States, being the regional hegemon, cannot be wished away by scholars just as Latin Americans cannot ignore its preponderance in hemispheric affairs. However, the present history shows that Latin American leaders have never viewed U.S. power as the only game in town. Moreover, the specific benefit of regionalizing the history of the Sandinista Revolution, which took place in the twilight years of the superpower conflict and ideological struggle, is that this framing exposes the Revolution’s effect on the region’s post-Cold War. Bethell and Roxborough have persuasively explained the early impact of the Cold War on Latin America: entrenched elites, threatened by the democratic openings which came with World War II-era popular fronts, used anti-communism as a pretext to consolidate their power and perpetuate their rule with U.S. complicity.38 But what consequences remained when the Cold War ended four decades later? In some ways, and in some parts of the region, the collapse of anti-communist military dictatorships implied a return to the democratic spring started during the Second World War. But in other

38 Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough, “The Impact of the Cold War on Latin America.”
ways, the Latin America which emerged in the 1990s was brand new, and the Sandinista Revolution was in the middle – and sometimes in the driver’s seat – of the changes. More countries than ever before adopted liberal electoral regimes. The armed Left, mostly defeated on the battlefield, was normalized in mainstream politics in an unprecedented fashion. Both of those changes, this dissertation argues, were mediated by a modest revision of U.S. unilaterality in the hemisphere: more often than not, democratization was reinforced by multilateral instruments which emerged as a sort of collective security action against North American interventions which intensified during the Cold War and threatened to exacerbate and spread the instability of the 1980s Central American crisis.

DEMOGRATIZATION: THE VIEW FROM THE SOUTH

When the FSLN-led insurrection started to truly gather steam in 1977, Venezuela and Costa Rica were the only countries classifiable as democracies in Latin America. Two of the region’s oldest and most stable – those of Chile and Uruguay – had recently been reversed by military coups in 1973. In Central America, which had never experienced a significant period of electoral democracy, “prospects for democracy could hardly have been bleaker,” one political scientist pointed out.39 In fact, the sub-regional trend in politics bent towards greater repression and increased military domination of unelected civilian regimes. Of all the countries on the isthmus, Nicaragua had a particularly poor record – for most of the 20th century, it was either mired in civil war, occupied by U.S. marines, or governed by a 40-year, personalist family dictatorship. The Sandinistas did not wage guerrilla warfare in order to restore a liberal

republicanism which, for all intents and purposes, had never existed. Rather, they hoped to transform Nicaraguan society by reducing the dependence on the U.S. and economic inequality that they blamed for the country’s problems. Sergio Ramírez, a longtime FSLN conspirator who served on the 1979 Junta of National Reconstruction and later as Vice President, wrote in his memoir that the mission met with a paradoxical failure:

The revolution did not bring justice for the oppressed as had been hoped; nor did it manage to create wealth and development. Instead, its greatest benefit was democracy, sealed in 1990 with the acknowledgment of electoral defeat. As a paradox of history, this is its most obvious legacy, although it was not its most passionate objective.  

In fact, when the Sandinistas handed over power to Violeta Barrios de Chamorro in 1990, Nicaragua became one of fifteen countries to have successfully made the democratic transition during the intervening years. Those twin lifespans are no coincidence: the seizure of state power by the armed Left in Nicaragua was both part of Latin America’s Third Wave as well as the progenitor of international debates and conflicts which amplified its reach.  

This perspective differs from conventional scholarly visions of late 20th century democratization, which were informed by notions of Western diffusionism. Enthusiastic observers like Francis Fukuyama argued that the success of North America and Western European capitalist democracy, along with the collapse of the Soviet communism, induced Third World countries into creating liberal democracies of their own. Though they would disagree with Fukuyama’s triumphalist assertions, many of liberalism’s skeptics also indulged in North-to-South narratives of democratization. In Promoting Polyarchy, sociologist William Robinson

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41 Scholars use the term Third Wave to describe a third major resurgence in electoral regimes in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. The first and second waves occurred in the early-19th century and briefly after the Second World War, respectively. Between 1974 and 1990, the number of democracies worldwide roughly doubled with Latin America accounting for a significant portion of that wave. See Samuel P. Huntington, “Democracy’s Third Wave,” Journal of Democracy, 2(2), 1991: 12-34.
made the case that the spread of democratic regimes in Latin America was the result of U.S. efforts to advance older economic interests – specifically, the expansion of markets – under a novel guise.\textsuperscript{43} British political scientist Peter Wilkin adopted a similar perspective: the Third Wave, in his view, was “part of a continued imperialist strategy by the core capitalist states and their dominant social forces in the modern world system.”\textsuperscript{44}

The problem with such perspectives, as Brazilian political scientist Oliver Stuenkel recently wrote, is that they assume non-Western actors to be “relatively passive rule-takers” instead of “legitimate or constructive rule-makers and institution-builders.”\textsuperscript{45} Amitav Acharya makes the related point that “while the West designed the post-war order, the non-Western countries were not passive. They contested and redefined Western ideas and norms and contributed new ones of their own making.”\textsuperscript{46} Building on these new scholarly perspectives, the story of the Central American crisis shows that in some parts of the Global South, the adoption of “Western” institutions such as representative democracy actually emerged in response and, to an extent, in spite of the United States. In Central America, as anti-communist dictators repressed calls for social change, socialist rebels emerged in response, leading to further repression, further revolution, in a violent spiral. Intervention from the U.S. added fuel to the fire but failed to reverse leftist revolutions. This bloody stalemate eventually gave way, as a compromise between elites, to democratization. The U.S. government promoted democracy insofar as that strategy served anti-communist aims; in Nicaragua, it vocally opposed any electoral-based settlement which would turn the FSLN into a democratically legitimate actor.

When pressed recently on the consequences of U.S. support for El Salvador’s military-dominated government in the 1980s, Elliot Abrams – Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs under Reagan – caustically replied that the country “has been a democracy” ever since.\textsuperscript{47} But he and his administration actively opposed the 1987 Esquipulas Peace Accords – a deal inspired by the multilateral Contadora Process – which served as the basis for that country’s democratic transition. In fact, Central American leaders signed that agreement with the explicit aim of ending U.S. intervention, which had exacerbated the region’s civil wars without achieving its goal of reversing leftist revolutions. Democracy was not an ideological aspiration for most regional elites. Nor can its adoption plausibly be seen as the direct result of North American foreign policy. Rather, local elites realized after a decade of intractable conflict that in order to create stability within their countries, and in order to undermine the pretext for foreign intervention, they needed to finally create inclusive political systems where all actors could participate.

Curiously, this narrative of Central American democratization – which downplays the importance of U.S. policy and actors – actually resembles the way in which democratic ideas originally took hold in Western Europe and the United States. Historian James Kloppenberg has argued that democratic ethics of reciprocity emerged in response to the catastrophic religious wars of the Protestant Reformation.\textsuperscript{48} Perhaps it is no coincidence that, as historian Odd Arne Westad recently noted, the 16th- and 17th-century rivalry between Catholic Spain and Protestant

\textsuperscript{47} The fiery exchange between Abrams, who had just been appointed special envoy to Venezuela by the administration of President Donald Trump, and Congresswoman Ilhan Omar took place on the floor of the House of Representatives on February 13, 2019. “The fight between Ilhan Omar and Elliott Abrams, Trump’s Venezuela envoy, explained,” \textit{Vox}, February 15, 2019.

England was the international system which most closely mirrors the bipolar, highly ideologized framework of the Cold War.49

This history of the Sandinista Revolution dovetails with the latest political science scholarship on Latin America’s Third Wave. Frances Hagopian and Scott Mainwaring, synthesizing several studies on different aspects of that transition, found that structural factors such as class composition, level of industrialization, and economic performance were almost meaningless in explaining the timing and strength of Latin American transitions to democracy in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, it would be preposterous to posit that Central America, which became a Cold War disaster zone of the highest order, adopted liberal democracy as a result of economic growth or modernization. Rather, they argue that political factors – for instance, attitudes toward democracy and a favorable international context – were far more decisive.50

Specifically, Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez Liñan point out that “decreasing polarization and stronger commitment of political elites to democracy” was crucial. Once democracies emerged, network effects created incentives for other countries to democratize.51 Central America’s revolutionary upheavals, where the Esquipulas Accords operated as a mechanism of transmission for those network and demonstration effects, provide a visceral illustration of how these norms emerged. What this project contributes is historical specificity: the ideological polarization and foreign interventions which created the need for democratization were unique to the Cold War in the Global South. Democratization, in other words, was a relatively contingent response to the ideologically fueled and highly internationalized armed conflicts inspired by the global struggle between capitalism and communism.

In retrospect, this was a rather fragile and narrow basis for liberal democracy. Indeed, democratization was not designed to solve the underlying problems of poverty, inequality, and weak rule of law. A few decades later, as Mainwaring points out, “the most common outcomes of third-wave transitions have been breakdown and stagnation.”

The Nicaraguan Revolution had briefly raised the promise of a more durable democratic transition. In 1979, all Nicaraguan political actors – from the radical Left to liberals to conservative businessmen – agreed about the need to reopen political spaces closed by the Somoza dictatorship. There was more, however, to this multi-class and pan-ideological coalition. They also believed that their revolution needed to address the social misery and wealth inequality which underpinned strongman politics and allowed for the Somoza family to consolidate power in the first place. Therefore, the 1979 program of national unity and reconstruction – backed by important sectors of the national bourgeoisie – envisioned land redistribution, nationalization of key industries, and other forms of state leadership in the economy. Nonetheless, the Sandinista Front hegemonized the revolutionary government, marginalized moderate political allies through their Leninist practices, and took the economy in a more explicitly socialist direction. Looking back, Sandinista leaders later believed that – independent of external factors – their departure from the consensual 1979 platform created contradictions which led to the Revolution’s undoing. But more importantly, the defeat of the 1979 consensus on economic inclusion foreshadowed the failure of a 1990 transition which focused exclusively on political inclusion. To some extent, though the Left was not annihilated, one legacy of the Cold War’s end in Latin America was the defeat of redistributive agendas that might have accompanied political liberalization.

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53 For a history of the rise and fall of “social” understandings of democracy in Latin America which entailed working-class participation in politics and economic redistribution, see Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004), as well as the previously cited works by Bethell and Roxborough.
OUTLINE

I argue that the Sandinista Revolution was part of a greater “Latin American” Revolution, for two main reasons. First, the emergence of a revolutionary government in Nicaragua (and not elsewhere in the region) was the result of a transnational effort. An ideologically diverse range of leaders, from Soviet-aligned Fidel Castro to the center-right president of Costa Rica, collaborated to overthrow the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship. As Chapter One demonstrates, Latin American countries – pursuing their own specific real interests and foreign policy doctrines, but with the shared objective of eliminating Somoza and challenging unilateral U.S. policy in the hemisphere – armed the Sandinista Front, brokered unity among its disparate factions, and waged a diplomatic war to legitimize the FSLN and block foreign attempts to save Somoza’s regime. More importantly, these leaders used their support to “buy stock” in the FSLN, in the words of Panamanian leader Omar Torrijos, shaping the creation of a unique revolutionary agenda which married socialist characteristics with liberal-democratic sensibilities. Thus, Nicaragua’s revolutionary process was from the outset fused with greater regional politics.

Second, the Nicaraguan Revolution ultimately catalyzed a re-ordering of international relations and mainstream politics in Latin America. In particular, the seizure of state power by the armed Left – for the first and only time since Cuba – proved enormously consequential. Chapter Two shows how the Sandinistas consolidated power, moved to implement a more radical socialist agenda, and began supporting guerrilla movements in countries like El Salvador. In doing so, they re-posed questions that had haunted Latin America since the early 20th century:

54 A month before Somoza’s resignation, as the Carter administration frantically sought to find an alternative to the Sandinistas, Torrijos told the U.S. ambassador in Panama that it was a shame that Carter “hadn’t bothered to buy a share of Sandinista stock”; “Memorandum from Robert Pastor of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski), Washington, June 5, 1979, Foreign Relations of the United States: Volume XXIX, 563.
what was the nature of social upheaval in the region, and how legitimate were the political organizations born from such ferment? The U.S. government, joined by several like-minded anti-communist Latin American regimes, saw the FSLN as a Soviet-implanted threat and moved to destabilize its government. Combined with the polarizing effect of the Sandinistas’ revolutionary policies and authoritarian practices, this intervention fueled a devastating civil war in Nicaragua.

Chapter Three explains how, as more countries in the region transitioned to democracy and began rejecting the United States’ East-West characterization of politics in Latin America, a parallel conflict emerged on the international scene. Just as the Reagan administration told American citizens that it would begin “rolling back” the Communist empire in Nicaragua, newly-democratizing countries in South America – organized through the Contadora Peace Process – increasingly saw Central America as the site where they would push back against U.S. unilateralism and the threat it posed to their real interests and dreams of regional autonomy.

Contadora failed to forge peace in Central America, but its unprecedented exclusion of the United States from an inter-American mediation (which also set the stage for post-Cold War multilateralism and South-South engagement in the Americas) paved the way for a successful effort led by Central Americans themselves. Despite U.S. opposition, the 1987 Esquipulas Peace Accords called for an end to foreign-fueled wars in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua in exchange for free elections in each of those countries. Therefore, in a concrete example of how Latin America’s Third Wave of democracy actually spread across the region, Nicaragua democratized because its neighbors did so, and vice-versa. The Sandinistas, in taking power, had set off the chain of events which led to these discussions. And in holding on to power despite U.S. intervention, they had won a seat at the table as a legitimate political actor, as Chapter Four argues. The FSLN’s success in making it this far, and the military stalemate their survival entailed, proved that U.S. intervention had only exacerbated ideological polarization on the
isthmus. In response, the leaders of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras found it necessary to normalize and negotiate with the Sandinista Front – and as a consequence, with leftist opponents inside their own countries – in order to build political regimes which would defuse their civil wars and collectively end foreign interventions on the isthmus.

In agreeing to these terms, however, the Sandinistas wound up voted out of power. The elections which came about as a result of these agreements – the first free contest in Nicaragua’s history – revealed popular discontent with U.S. intervention but also with the Sandinistas’ high-modernist attempt at transforming society. But in handing over power in 1990, Chapter Five argues, the Sandinistas consolidated major changes in the region that came about as a result of their revolution. Not only did their transfer of power seal a transformation whereby Central Americans traded bullets for ballots and Latin Americans more widely adopted a supranational value – though perhaps not yet the perfect practice – of liberal democracy, they also earned political legitimacy for the region’s previously ostracized radical Left, which despite the fall of communism transitioned seamlessly into mainstream politics in the region after 1990.

For all of these reasons, this was a *Latin American* revolution. Not only because the rise and fall of the Sandinistas was a truly regional affair that cannot be understood outside of its transnational context, but because that arc also propelled a wider revolution that took place in Latin America in the late Cold War; in an unlikely fashion, these illiberal Marxist-Leninists indirectly set off the chain reaction which ultimately led to the adoption of liberal democracy in this corner of the world. The Epilogue, which brings the narrative to the present day, recounts recent Nicaraguan politics in order to trace that legacy’s evolution over time. Many of the Revolution’s political conquests came undone when the Sandinista Front – shorn of its original socialist ideology and renounced by much of its original leadership – returned to power in 2006. In 1990, both critics and supporters had hoped that the Sandinistas’ peaceful transfer of power
would establish the rule of law and create the basis for a truly modern, non-partisan State. Instead, Nicaragua has once again fallen into the habit, identified by Costa Rican historian Victor Hugo Acuña, of aborting previous processes of state formation. The utter failure of Nicaragua’s democratic transition exposes the fragile historical basis of liberal electoral regimes in Latin America, and – like the Sandinista Revolution in the late-Cold War – may be a bellwether of changing winds in Latin America more generally.

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Chapter One

A Latin American Insurrection:

Transnational Conspiracy and the Rise of the Sandinistas, 1977-79
It was in many ways the “second coming” of revolution in Latin America. But in taking power in July 1979, Nicaragua’s Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) did not simply succeed where dozens of other groups inspired by the Cuban Revolution had failed.56 Theirs was a different type of leftist revolution: to the global Left, the ideological pluralism and multi-class composition of the Nicaraguan Revolution offered hope for a model which would not degenerate into the totalitarian violence of other contemporaneous revolutions. After taking power, the FSLN and its allies swore to radically transform Nicaragua, all the while pursuing the moderate “three pillars” of political pluralism, a mixed-economy, and non-alignment in international affairs. The Sandinistas’ alliance-building and promises of moderation mitigated, moreover, the fears of U.S. policymakers which had been tempted to intervene militarily in Central America in order to pre-empt the emergence of a hostile government in Managua. For this last reason, when Omar Torrijos learned two years earlier of an embryonic Sandinista plan to build a broad patriotic front organized around moderate revolutionary policies, the Panamanian strongman leapt out of his bed with excitement. “That’s right, let’s not get radicalized,” he told FSLN conspirator Sergio Ramírez, as he lit his usual cigar, “with the Yankees, be careful: you have to play with the leash, but not the monkey.”57

Latin American leaders like Torrijos, who agreed to help finance the cash-strapped Nicaraguan rebels in 1977, do not feature prominently in most histories of the fall of the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship. Numerous studies have focused on the tactics, ideology, and grassroots organizing of FSLN leaders in order to explain their unlikely revolutionary success.58

Agential accounts have been married effectively to structural analyses which explore both the long-simmering social discontent of the Nicaraguan population as well as the various crises of a corrupt, personalistic, and ultimately inefficient somocista state. Diplomatic historians have also had a say: decades of U.S. foreign policy – which pursued stability in Central America by installing a military dictatorship in Nicaragua and backing two dynastic successions – made the emergence of a radical revolutionary challenge in this country virtually “inevitable,” argued Walter LaFeber.60

Nevertheless, while the rise of the Revolution was easy to foresee, its triumph in Nicaragua was anything but. When Ramírez asked Torrijos for help in 1977, the Terceristas he represented were just one faction of a divided, broke, and isolated revolutionary front. At that point, the fall of the Somoza regime seemed a ludicrous proposition. But the Panamanian leader, joined by several other Latin American leaders, decided to throw their weight behind the Sandinistas anyway, eyeing an opportunity. Therein lies an indispensable, missing part of the puzzle of the FSLN victory: the roots of their revolutionary challenge were certainly national, but their success was decidedly transnational – the result of an overlooked conspiracy by a cabal of Latin American leaders to overthrow Somoza and block a unilateral U.S. intervention in Central America, shaping and installing a Sandinista-led government in the process.

In the 1930s, where this chapter begins, National Guard Commander Anastasio Somoza García laid the foundations for a powerful and durable authoritarian regime. By pacifying the countryside, implementing economic policies favorable to the agro-export economic elite, and making deft use of power-sharing agreements with his political opponents, the U.S.-backed

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dictator consolidated his control domestically. Those foundations were so solid that his regime withstood myriad political and armed challenges, including his own assassination in 1956. Having become a dynastic dictatorship, his sons Luís and Anastasio “Tachito” Jr. deepened their father’s model in the 1960s and 70s by achieving notable economic growth and further co-opting a pseudo-opposition movement which ultimately did more to prolong the dictatorship than to challenge it. In that context, those national figures who called for the regime’s immediate ouster operated in the political wilderness. By the mid-1970s, Carlos Fonseca’s armed Left failed to build any military momentum, and the legal struggle waged by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro failed to mobilize massive popular support against the Somozas. Even in 1978, when the Somoza regime entered its gravest crisis yet and its replacement became plausible, neither the Sandinista Front nor its moderate allies expected the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship to be swiftly replaced by a socialist-oriented government dominated by the FSLN. Like CIA analysts, most Nicaraguans believed that Somoza would serve out the rest of his “constitutional” term through 1981.

In fact, at a time when Somoza’s overthrow appeared highly unlikely, a fellowship of Latin American leaders – most notably the aforementioned Torrijos, Venezuela’s Carlos Andres Pérez, Costa Rica’s Rodrigo Carazo Odio, Cuba’s Fidel Castro, and Mexico’s José López Portillo – conspired to topple the dictator and propel the Sandinistas to power. Those international allies provided the FSLN with virtually all of its military capacity. Moreover, their concerted diplomatic efforts to isolate Somoza and block a potential U.S. military intervention – which together represented an unprecedented challenge to unilateral North American power in the hemisphere – further enabled the rebels’ victory. More importantly, diplomatic archives and oral history interviews in those countries show how their leaders “bought stock” in the FSLN, to borrow the words of Omar Torrijos, as a means of shaping the Sandinistas’ revolution. Specifically, the Revolution’s international partners played a decisive role in the unification of
the FSLN’s three “tendencies,” encouraged their adoption of the winning *Tercerista* strategy of alliance-building with non-Marxist parties and moderate bourgeoisie, and heavily influenced the formation of a broad-based revolutionary junta committed to a unique leftist agenda based on the three pillars of political pluralism, a mixed economy, and non-alignment.

Though most of these leaders personally detested Somoza, affect alone does not explain this transnational effort. Sympathy for the young and charismatic Nicaraguan guerrillas certainly played a role; many of these Latin American leaders saw the bearded *muchachos*, and therefore their revolutionary project, through a paternal lens. Like all statesmen, however, they pursued real interests and unique ideologies – for example, Soviet-aligned Castro and center-Right Carazo share little in common on these fronts. At the same time, in accelerating Somoza’s downfall, they were motivated by a shared fear of U.S. meddling. The Somoza dictatorship was the latter’s ultimate manifestation in the continent. Concretely, these Latin American countries felt threatened by the violent instability provoked by Somoza’s desperate attempts to stay in power; worse still, they worried that the U.S. government might choose to intervene in Nicaragua, exacerbating said instability and once again retarding the region’s political development. Therefore, Somoza needed to be removed promptly, and the FSLN – which enjoyed supreme popular legitimacy – was perfect for the task. Moreover, if the FSLN could be encouraged to forge deeper links with a broad range of political allies (and therefore allay Washington’s fears of a second Cuba in Central America), then they could achieve Somoza’s swift removal whilst avoiding a “backfire” in the form of a U.S. intervention. In this way, this Latin American fellowship came to see the triumph of the armed Left in Nicaragua as a collective security strategy which would shield the region from U.S. interventionism in the Caribbean Basin.
Thus, as this chapter narrates and argues, the Nicaraguan Revolution was born of a tacit agreement forged with and between the FSLN’s foreign state benefactors: transform Nicaraguan society into a more just one, but do so in such a way – respecting the three pillars of political pluralism, a mixed-economy, and non-alignment – that does not provoke an aggressive reaction by the United States. It was a “diplomatic revolution,” in the sense that Somoza’s fate was sealed the moment that Latin American countries started treating the Sandinista-led Junta as Nicaragua’s legitimate government. But it was also much more: as Torrijos’ quote shows, when viewed from perspective of Latin American documents, this was an organized, regional revolt against the U.S. – one which included ostensibly friendly leaders like Torrijos and Pérez who conspired against Americans officials and deliberately deceived them about the scale and intent of their involvement in Nicaragua. The Revolution that took place in July 1979 therefore bore the strong influence and stamp of approval of a remarkable plurality of Latin American governments who came to see this utopian project as their own. It is in this transnational context that the origins – and troubled aftermath – of the Sandinista victory must be understood.


On the eve of the Sandinista Revolution, a U.S. senator at a congressional hearing wondered how Nicaragua had become such a mess under the Somoza family, and asked how they had taken power in the first place. “I think we helped them get in,” was a top State Department official’s curt reply.61

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61 Administration Briefing on the Current Situation in Nicaragua [Testimony of Viron P. Vaky and Sally Shelton] United States Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, September 13, 1978, Nicaragua Collection, Digital National Security Archive (DNSA), ProQuest ID (1679052018).
Since Independence, Nicaragua’s frequent civil wars were often shaped or caused by the direct military intervention of the United States, which at various points saw instability or unfriendly governments in the country as a threat to its interests on the strategically important Central American isthmus. But when U.S. marines occupied the country in 1926 to shore up a collaborative government, General Augusto César Sandino – the sole military leader to refuse surrender – took to Nicaragua’s northern mountains and led a guerrilla insurrection to force the departure of the foreign invaders and restore constitutional order. In 1933, having failed to defeat Sandino’s forces, the Hoover administration withdrew from Nicaragua and – as in Cuba and the Dominican Republic – supervised free elections and trained a professional, non-partisan National Guard which would supposedly guarantee the country’s stability and democratization. Within two years, however, the freshly anointed chief of that new institution – Anastasio Somoza García – had murdered Sandino in cold blood and usurped the democratically-elected president. Much like Cuba’s Batista and the Dominican Republic’s Rafael Trujillo – and with greater success – Somoza forged the desired stability by establishing a dynastic dictatorship which would last 45 years.

Though invested by a foreign power, Somoza García built domestic pillars of support. Seen as a crude, middle-class upstart by much of the country’s traditional ruling aristocracy, he used economic success – achieved through monetary reform, expansion of state institutions, and trade policies favorable to the agro-export sector – to co-opt elite families in his own Liberal Party as well as those of the rival Conservative Party. Somoza García mastered the use of power-sharing agreements to give his regime a veneer of political pluralism, an approach enabled by his ideological flexibility and knack for mirroring international trends: in the 1930s he was idealized as a Mussolini-type figure by fascist intellectuals, during the 1940s he enjoyed the

backing of the Nicaraguan Socialist Party and granted legal status to workers’ unions, before pivoting to virulent anti-communism after the onset of the Cold War. Nonetheless, despite the growing acquiescence of the elite, and although the general population enjoyed a novel respite from armed conflict, Somoza was despised by a younger generation of students and middle-class professionals. On September 21, 1956, a 27-year old poet named Rigoberto López Pérez infiltrated a party in León and shot the dictator in the chest. Bodyguards killed the assassin on the spot; Somoza, tellingly, died at a U.S. military hospital in the Panama Canal Zone a few days later.

He was immediately succeeded by his oldest son Luis Somoza Debayle, who unleashed an indiscriminate wave of retaliatory repression against regime opponents. Among the dozens of young people rounded up and tortured by the regime was Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, the 32-year old editor of opposition daily La Prensa. The Chamorro family of Granada was amongst the most important of the country’s 19th- and early 20th-century oligarchy, and it dominated the Conservative Party since its earliest wars with León’s Liberal families. But Pedro Joaquín – whose ideological orientation can best be described as that of a Social Christian in the progressive, postwar Chilean style – clashed with his family and the leadership of the Conservatives, who in 1950 signed a pact with the ruling Liberal Party, earning the right to participate in sham elections in exchange for accepting Somoza’s autocracy. Already an intransigent opposition journalist, his experience in imprisonment – and the enthusiasm generated by the Cuban Revolution – pushed him to lead an ill-conceived and unsuccessful armed uprising in May 1959. Its failure, along with the communist-authoritarian turn of the Castro government in Cuba, persuaded him to abandon the armed struggle and return to journalism and legal opposition to the dictatorship.63

63 For a political biography, see Edmundo Jarquín Calderón, Pedro Joaquín: ¡Juega!, (Managua: ANAMA, 1998).
Another young man arrested in the post-assassination roundup was Tomás Borge. He and his friend Carlos Fonseca Amador were part of a generation of middle-class student activists who plotted a series of similarly doomed insurrectionary operations in the late 1950s. Unlike Chamorro, however, they were hardline communists: Fonseca travelled to the Eastern Bloc in 1958 and wrote a gushing description of life and society in the USSR, complete with a spirited defense of the recent Soviet invasion of Hungary.64 Thrilled by the success of the Cuban Revolution, Borge and Fonseca sought to fuse the legacy of Sandino’s nationalist, anticolonialist guerrilla struggle (which itself had inspired Castro’s rebellion) with a political agenda to remake Nicaraguan society as a socialist one.65 Thus, the Sandinista National Liberation Front was born in the early 1960s. In its early years, the FSLN carried out targeted assassinations of National Guard commanders notorious for torturing dissidents, but its main goal was to schematically emulate the Guevarist foco style of rural guerrilla warfare, to the extreme that they drew up a 25-month timetable for their mountain-based struggle, based on the exact amount of time it took Castro’s men to overthrow Batista from the Sierra Maestra.66

They found little success. French theorist Régis Debray – something of a global authority on guerrilla tactics in socialist movements – later remarked that up until the Sandinistas’ unexpected triumph in 1979, their “history would have constituted one of the longest litanies of failure that a revolutionary organization could possibly offer.”67 On the one hand, the Sandinistas capitalized on the growing influence of socialism and Liberation Theology to quietly dominate the student movement and develop ties to radical priests who both fomented popular opposition...
to the regime and served as a gateway to Marxist politics for young Catholics from the elite. The FSLN also gained expertise from friendly communist parties – particularly Costa Rica’s Vanguardia Popular – and armed Marxist groups in places as distant as Palestine. Their incorporation of cultural figures like Ernesto Cardenal, Gioconda Belli, and Sergio Ramírez facilitated contacts with Latin American intellectuals who would eventually connect the Nicaraguans with important political and military allies. On the other hand, Sandinista guerrillas failed to deliver any significant blows to Somoza’s armed forces, and by Borge’s own admission, “totally lacked an internal base of support” in the mountainous countryside they sought to liberate.68 During the 1960s and 70s, the KGB dismissed the Sandinistas’ revolutionary prospects, and Cuba saw more promise in the long-running struggle of Guatemala’s various Marxist guerrilla organizations; revealingly, despite living in Havana for several years, historic leader Carlos Fonseca was never deemed worthy of an interview with Fidel Castro.69

Moreover, by the mid-1970s, when Anastasio Somoza Debayle (the original dictator’s youngest son) held power, the FSLN was plagued by infighting, with some of its leaders advocating a departure from the movement’s defensive, mountain-oriented orthodoxy. When Carlos Fonseca fell in combat in 1976 (a day after the death of Eduardo Contreras, another high-ranking figure), those disagreements matured into three full-blown tendencias, or factions. Those – like Borge, Henry “Modesto” Ruiz, and Bayardo Arce Castaño – who still saw the mountains as the locus of struggle and argued for the slow accumulation of forces over a long time horizon, became known as the GPP - Guerra Popular Prolongada (Prolonged Popular War). The Insurrectional Tendency (commonly known as Terceristas) saw mass mobilization as the key mechanism and urban centers and border regions as the principal theater for Somoza’s

overthrow. Its leaders (most notably the brothers Camilo, Daniel, and Humberto Ortega) promoted an offensive approach in order to spark a civilian insurrection and identified Somoza – rather than capitalism or North American imperialism – as the immediate enemy. They thus called for a broad alliance with all anti-Somoza elements of Nicaraguan society, including the bourgeoisie. A third, smaller faction known as the Proletarian Tendency, led by doctrinaire Marxists from the upper- and middle-classes like Jaime Wheelock Román and Luís Carrión, called for the organization of urban workers into a political force which would ultimately seize state power and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Meanwhile, one of Chamorro’s closest collaborators in UDEL (his pan-opposition alliance of legal parties, which included the Moscow-line communist party) notes that during the first half of the 1970s, “Somoza was stronger than ever, and the civic-democratic opposition seemed increasingly useless.”70 Rather than prolonging the dynasty merely through brute repression, “Tachito” Somoza Debayle had deepened his father’s corporatist model, refreshing power-sharing agreements with the pseudo-opposition Conservative Party and expanding the state’s social control through a panoply of popular organizations and worker’s groups. Somoza’s modernization of the economy produced 4.8% GDP growth between 1967 and 1977 – one of the fastest rates in the hemisphere – a fact which political sociologists have rightly cited in arguing that economic factors cannot plausibly explain the collapse of the regime just a few years later.71 Moreover, while Nicaraguan historians have emphasized how that growth was of an “unequal, dependent” variety full of “inherent contradictions” which led to its implosion, the country’s population was neither poorer nor more stratified than it had been in the past, nor was the

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socioeconomic picture vastly different to that of other poor Latin American countries.\(^\text{72}\) This is obviously not to say that extreme inequality and social misery – and the Revolution’s promises to address them – did not play a key role in motivating Somoza’s overthrow. Rather, the socioeconomic variable is simply not sufficient on its own to explain why a revolution occurred in Nicaragua instead of some other Latin American country, and in 1979 rather than at some other point in the country’s history. As Trotsky reminds readers in his \textit{History of the Russian Revolution}, “the mere existence of privations is not enough to cause an insurrection; if it were, the masses would be always in revolt.”\(^\text{73}\)

Not only did the regime’s structural underpinnings seem solid just a few years before its collapse; in the mid-1970s the Revolution’s would-be vanguard was extremely weak and isolated. For Chamorro, a biographer and collaborator says that the period was “like preaching in the desert; he was seen as annoying, uncomfortable, and intransigent even by his closest friends.”\(^\text{74}\) The FSLN, by its own admission, was viewed by middle- and upper-class Nicaraguans as a “terrorist force” of “embittered delinquents” who were “condemned to failure.”\(^\text{75}\) Aside from a successful hostage-taking in 1974 which led to the liberation of several Sandinista political prisoners, they struggled to make a splash on the national political scene. Composed of some 250 militants in 1977, the fractious FSLN was far smaller than its Marxist guerrilla counterparts elsewhere in Central America, and certainly no match for the highly-trained and well-supplied National Guard.\(^\text{76}\)

\(^{72}\) Jaime Wheelock Roman, \textit{Imperialismo y dictadura: crisis de una formación social}, (Mexico DF: Siglo Veintiuno, 1980). Written while he led the Proletarian Tendency during the 1970s, Wheelock made a thorough Marxist analysis of the economic underpinnings of the Somoza dictatorship, as well as its destiny to crumble under the weight of its own capitalist contradictions.


\(^{74}\) Jarquin, 213.

\(^{75}\) Sergio Ramirez Mercado, interview with the author, Managua, February 2, 2017. MP3s and rough transcripts of all interviews available upon request.

\(^{76}\) CIA, “Nicaragua: The Sandinista Guerrillas and Their International Links,” Classification Excised, September 6, 1978, Nicaragua Collection, DNSA, ProQuest ID (167905247).
It was in this grim context in early 1977 that the *Terceristas* – whose leadership was in the Costa Rican and Honduran capitals, rather than the Nicaraguan mountains – started planning to make their “insurrectional thesis” a reality. That year’s so-called October Offensive had two objectives. First, Sandinista fighters would strike a military blow to the National Guard, shattering Somoza’s image of invincibility, and sabotaging his ongoing negotiations with the U.S. government, which under the aegis of the Carter administration’s human rights-focused foreign policy – and with the support of the pseudo-opposition parties – sought to polish the regime’s democratic record without questioning its legitimacy. Second, military success would undermine the peaceful, civic struggle led by Chamorro’s UDEL. The Ortega brothers, along with Tercerista leaders Víctor Tirado, Germán Pomares, and Edén Pastora, met in San José and drew up a three-pronged strategy – with Northern, Pacific, and Southern fronts – to conquer several National Guard garrisons and thereby arm local populations for a general uprising. Most importantly, the Southern Front would conquer a large piece of territory along the Costa Rican border in order to establish a Provisional Government.77

In May of that year, the writer Sergio Ramírez convened a group of eleven other well-known Nicaraguan citizens – some intellectuals and academics like him and Father Fernando Cardenal, others were wealthy capitalists or technocrats – to a secret meeting at a hotel in San José. There, Ramírez and Humberto Ortega outlined their insurrectionary plans, which the former describes in retrospect as “pretty crazy, and totally blown out of proportion.” They also asked each of the men to pledge $100,000 for the October Offensive.78 At a second meeting in Cuernavaca, Mexico in July, they decided that these men would constitute the Revolutionary Junta which would run and represent the Provisional Government.79 The odds of success were

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78 Sergio Ramírez, interview with the author.
less than slim, and when one of them asked what would happen in the event of defeat, it was clear that there was no “Plan B”. Despite this bleak reality, these mostly older bourgeois men had rational reasons to risk it all on a group of ragtag Marxist-Leninists. Some of them, like liberation theologian Fernando Cardenal, were already committed to some form of socialist renewal. But crucially, the revolutionary agenda they adopted in Cuernavaca was hardly radical: it emphasized what would become the “three pillars” of the Sandinista Revolution: a mixed economy, non-alignment in international affairs, and a democratic regime with full political liberties. Just as important, as Ramírez remembers, these men assumed a fundamentally moral commitment based on their hatred of Somoza: two of them – wealthy businessmen Joaquín Cuadra Chamorro and Emilio Baltodano – already had children among the FSLN’s ranks.

Provisional governments mean little without foreign recognition. Thus, Ramírez – who they decided should be part of the provisional government and avoid identifying publicly as an FSLN militant – travelled to Bogotá that August to deliver a letter from the Terceristas to Gabriel García Márquez, informing the writer of their plans and asking him to persuade Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez to recognize the Junta once it set foot in Nicaragua. After shredding the Tercerista missive in order to avoid leaving a paper trail, “el Gabo” booked a flight to Caracas and promised to inform Ramírez of his mission’s outcome. Indeed, just a few days later, Ramírez received a call from the Colombian literary giant, with a coded message signaling Pérez’s approval of the Sandinista plans and willingness to support them financially: “the editor,” he said, referring to the Venezuelan leader, “is willing to buy the manuscript. And he’s also willing to pay some handsome royalties.” From September 1977, FSLN allies like poet-

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80 Sergio Ramírez recalls Joaquín Cuadra Chamorro asking this question in Adiós Muchachos, 96-7.
81 Ortega, Epopeya de la Insurrección, 320. The 5-point program called for: 1) a democratic regime with civil liberties; 2) abolition of the National Guard; 3) expropriation of the Somoza family estate; 4) agrarian reform and a mixed economy; 5) non-alignment in international affairs and the end to dependency on the U.S.
82 Ramírez, Adiós Muchachos, 96-7, “The parents were dragged in by their children.”
minister Ernesto Cardenal and Joaquin Cuadra Chamorro flew to Caracas to secretly meet with Pérez’s camp and bring back suitcases filled with monthly payments of $1 million in cash.  

Why would Pérez, an anti-communist social-democrat, throw his weight behind the FSLN? As later events would demonstrate, his government was committed to Somoza’s ouster, and the Terceristas could argue that inside the opposition movement there were other factions – the GPP and Proletarians – who were opposed to alliance-building, and thus could position themselves as a more moderate, “social-democratic” option by contrast. The completely non-military provisional government helped; Pérez was pleasantly surprised to find that he was already acquainted with the president of the Revolutionary Junta – business magnate Felipe Mántica – because he was the nephew of a close Nicaraguan friend who had lived in Venezuelan exile for decades.

With the money from their bourgeois and Venezuelan benefactors, the Terceristas bought hunting rifles and other small arms from legal gun shops and black market vendors in San José for the October Offensive. The coordinated attacks, which took place on October 13th, were mostly a disaster. Daniel Ortega and Victor Tirado’s Northern Front succeeded in establishing a foothold in the Northern mountains; but uprisings in Pacific towns never truly materialized, and the National Guard easily repelled Sandinista fighters on the key Southern Front, forcing them to retreat back across the border to Costa Rica. The failure, which seemed to validate the GPP’s dismissal of the offensive as “adventurism,” demoralized Humberto Ortega so badly that on the following day he decided to scrap the insurrectional plans altogether and told the Provisional Government to feel no further obligation to the FSLN. To his surprise, however, they urged him to press forward, and Carlos Andrés Pérez reaffirmed his own support to Ernesto Cardenal.

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83 Ramírez, previously cited interview with the author. Ramírez also describes the Gabo connection briefly in Adiós Muchachos, 121-24, as does Ernesto Cardenal in his own memoir, La Revolución Perdida.
84 Ernesto Cardenal, who introduced the Junta to Pérez, recalls the statesman’s response in La Revolución Perdida, 31.
Further encouragement came from Costa Rican ex-President Pepe Figueres, who rose to power in 1949 by overthrowing a Somoza García-backed authoritarian government. Once installed, “Don Pepe” financed Chamorro’s 1959 uprising, supplied some material and moral support for Castro’s revolution, and orchestrated several attempts to overthrow Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. In a concrete linkage to that earlier “Caribbean Cold War,” Figueres literally unearthed hundreds of weapons and crates of ammunition which he had buried on his farm – aptly called La Lucha Sin Fin – at the end of the Costa Rican Civil War, and provided them to the Terceristas after their failed offensive.85

Ditching the provisional government idea for the time being, on October 14th Ramírez and company published a communiqué revealing themselves as El Grupo de los Doce, and announced their intention to return to Nicaragua and promote a broad anti-Somoza front in support of the FSLN’s armed struggle. The appearance among them of wealthy aristocrats and respected intellectuals shocked the elite and changed the game for the Sandinistas: no longer in mountainous isolation, they suddenly had a political visage. The public revelation of this bourgeois support group, nevertheless, deepened the rift between Terceristas and orthodox Sandinistas. In December, a group of GPP sympathizers crashed a UDEL conference in Matagalpa chanting, “¡UDEL, Los Doce, y Somoza son la misma cosa!” (UDEL, los Doce, and Somoza are all the same!). Upon hearing those chants from the FSLN’s far left, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro realized that UDEL and the Terceristas were more united in their immediate opposition to Somoza than one might think given the obvious differences between the Sandinistas – who sought class liberation – and the civil opposition, which pursued democratic

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freedoms. Moreover, the backing of the Doce – which included close friends and family of Chamorro – made the armed path seem more viable and less likely to produce a radical government. Later in December 1977, Chamorro sent Ramírez a friendly note which he cheekily signed, “the probable number 13.” Shortly thereafter, in early January of the new year, Chamorro’s surrogates made arrangements for him to secretly meet with Daniel Ortega and Ramírez in Mexico in February.86

That meeting never happened. On January 10th, two assassins shot Chamorro through his open driving window, in broad daylight on a well-trafficked Managua thoroughfare. Later investigations determined that the intellectual author of the crime was not Somoza Debayle, but rather business associates of his son Anastasio Somoza Portocarrero, known derisively by Nicaraguans as simply “El Chigüín” (The Kid). The dictator insisted on his innocence, citing the fact that he had quickly arrested the hitmen. After all, had he wanted Chamorro dead, he could have made that happen at any point in the past. He understood, moreover, that killing a popular journalist and activist – one, notably, from the country’s traditional elite – would be an unforced error that might spell disaster for his regime.87

86 Ramirez recalls these anecdotes as well as plans for the rapprochement in a chapter of Adiós Muchachos titled “el probable número trece,” 163-4. Edmundo Jarquín, who in December 1977 met with Tercerista representatives on behalf of Chamorro to set up the February 1978 meeting, also recalls the Matagalpa incident and describes those talks in Pedro Joaquín: ¡Juega!, 277-9.
87 In transcripts of taped discussions with U.S. Ambassador Lawrence Pezzullo that he reproduced in his memoir, Somoza Debayle argues on the eve of his resignation that the whole crisis would have been averted were it not for the Chamorro assassination. Anastasio Somoza Debayle and Jack Cox, Nicaragua Betrayed, (Boston: Western Islands), 250.
Ernesto Cardenal later called Chamorro’s assassination the “detonator” that triggered the Revolution.\textsuperscript{88} Specifically, it marked the creation of what Lenin would have called the “revolutionary situation” in Nicaragua.\textsuperscript{89}

First of all, as Lucrecia Lozano noted in her early history of the FSLN, “the assassination of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro determined the break of the anti-Somoza bourgeoisie with the dictatorship.”\textsuperscript{90} During the 1970s, the vastly corrupt Somoza estate, using its control over government to unfair advantage, grew so large that it began encroaching on the economic activity of Nicaragua’s most important capital groups. As one political scientist explains, this illicit expansion “violated time-honored elite arrangements which encouraged a close relationship between government and business,” a fact symbolized by the regime’s response to a devastating 1972 earthquake: the Somoza family brazenly monopolized and pilfered the foreign relief and reconstruction aid. In spite of these tensions, however, the Conservative Party continued legitimizing the dictatorial system throughout the decade. And though the regime had tortured and murdered countless dissidents, it was not until the elite activist’s assassination that COSEP (the Federation of Chambers of Commerce, the maximum expression of elite business interests in Nicaragua) openly called for Somoza’s resignation. They backed their demand by

\textsuperscript{88} Cardenal, \textit{La Revolución Perdida}, 65.
\textsuperscript{89} V.I. Lenin, “The Collapse of the Second International,” in \textit{Collected Works}, Volume 21: August 1914-December 1915, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964). “What, generally speaking, are the symptoms of a revolutionary situation?... 1) when it is impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule without any change; when there is a crisis, in one form or another, among the “upper classes”, a crisis in the policy of the ruling class, leading to a fissure through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed classes burst forth. For a revolution to take place, it is usually insufficient for the “lower classes not to want” to live in the old way; it is also necessary that “the upper classes should be unable” to live in the old way; 2) when the suffering and want of the oppressed classes have grown more acute than usual; 3) when, as a consequence of the above cause, there is considerable increase in the activity of the masses, who uncomplainingly allow themselves to be robbed in “peace time”, but, in turbulent times, are drawn both by all the circumstances of the crisis \textit{and by the “upper classes” themselves} into independent historical action.” 213-4.
\textsuperscript{90} Lucrecia Lozano, \textit{De Sandino al triunfo de la revolución}, (Mexico DF: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1985), 14.
gut-punching the economy with a two-week commercial and industrial lockout launched on January 23. The “death of Pedro Joaquín,” as the Terceristas saw it, “convinced everybody of the need for unity, and the armed struggle started being accepted as the only way to put an end to somocismo.”

Second, in murdering a popular journalist, the dictatorship engendered the first wide-scale, popular rebellion in its four-decade history. In Managua, thousands of mourners accompanied the slain journalist’s coffin to its burial place, while others sacked and burned Somoza family businesses. In both the capital and other cities, young men and women attacked National Guard posts with whatever small arms and improvised weapons they could muster. The most notable of these impromptu rebellions took place in the historically indigenous Monimbó neighborhood of Masaya in the last week of February, where violent rioting spread after National Guardsmen prevented the community from renaming a town square after Chamorro. When normal infantry proved incapable of quelling the unrest after a few days, Somoza ordered a combined tank and helicopter assault. Tercerista leader Camilo Ortega, like many other FSLN fighters who joined the spontaneous popular revolts of early 1978, died alongside dozens of civilians in the attack. A few months later, a CIA report would point out that the Chamorro assassination had spurred FSLN recruitment. Meanwhile, Somoza held phony municipal elections in February to demonstrate his popularity.

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91 Sergio Ramírez, interview with the author.
93 CIA, “Nicaragua: The Sandinista Guerrillas and Their International Links,” Classification Excised, September 6, 1978, Nicaragua Collection, DNSA, ProQuest ID (167905247). With respect to the effervescence of anti-Somoza activity in early 1979, Humberto Ortega later wrote: “In this way, the people did not allow the unbowable anti-Somocista oppositionist Pedro Joaquín to die; he became – along with Carlos Fonseca Amador – the other fundamental pillar in the struggle for liberation and democracy under the enveloping mantle Augusto C. Sandino.” Epopeya de la Insurrección, 336.
94 Much like the ill-fated Shah Pahlavi of Iran, he never stopped believing – even after his overthrow and exile – that he was truly loved by the people. In earnestness, Somoza cites in his memoir the fact that the Liberal Party won in
Finally, Chamorro’s death had fatal implications for the dictatorship on the international scene. Somoza had long held a claim to be, as Panamanian President Aristides Royo described him to a U.S. diplomat, “the most hated man in Latin America.”\(^95\) In 1976, Doce member Fernando Cardenal had testified before the U.S. Congress regarding Somoza’s human right’s abuses; after Chamorro’s assassination, U.S. foreign policy critics like journalist Jack Anderson published so many damning columns on Somoza that the dictator devoted an entire chapter to blasting him in his post-overthrow memoir, *Nicaragua Betrayed*.\(^96\) In one of that book’s recurring themes, Somoza blames the Carter administration’s human rights-oriented foreign policy for undermining his government. Indeed, as former Carter administration officials have explained, this policy made it harder for Somoza to attain the weaponry needed to quash the insurrection, and it compelled him to lift a state of siege in October 1977 (a reprieve which ironically ended with Chamorro’s murder). But in early 1978, the Carter administration – still informed by the myopic Cold War logic which led it to maintain cordial relationships with anti-communist military dictatorships in Latin America – was nowhere near considering the ouster of a staunch anti-communist ally, even if a viable, non-radical alternative were to present itself.

While a growing focus on human rights in U.S. foreign policy left its practitioners with “fewer tools to prevent” a radical revolution, that shift only goes so far in explaining that outcome; after all, human rights officers at the State Department did not arm the Nicaraguan populace and compel them to replace their dictator with a socialist government.\(^97\) Instead, as Bob Pastor (a

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\(^95\) “Memorandum From Robert Pastor of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski),” Washington, June 5, 1979, in *Foreign Relations of the United States* (henceforth, *FRUS*), Volume XXIX: Panama, 566.


Latin America staffer on Carter’s National Security Council) remembers, “others, marching to
different drummers, moved to center stage with the objective of overthrowing Somoza
militarily.”98

One of those others was Carlos Andrés Pérez, who was enraged by the slaying of
Chamorro, a longtime friend. Chamorro had attended the Venezuelan’s inauguration in 1974 and
begged his assistance in overthrowing Somoza, but Pérez maintained that Nicaraguans first
needed to create conditions for regime change before he could add his support (an intent
confirmed by his assistance for the Terceristas’ 1977 October Offensive). In an interview given
after the 1979 Revolution, Pérez said that his friend’s assassination “made me compromise my
previous position.”99 He started taking a more direct role, which included blocking the sale of his
country’s plentiful oil to Nicaragua. On January 31 – three weeks after the assassination – Pérez
sent Carter a letter urging him to pressure Somoza to resign, and refused to meet with the U.S.
ambassador to Venezuela until he received a response on Nicaragua. According to Pastor, the
letter served its purpose, as National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and other high-
ranking officials saw the Nicaraguan crisis as a “political issue” for the first time. Carter
responded on February 17, pledging to pressure Somoza on human rights issues but refusing to
mention the possibility of regime change.100 In the coming months, his Venezuelan counterpart
voiced agreement but practiced the opposite. The payments to the Doce had begun months
earlier, and according to one Venezuelan government official, Pérez may have ended up
spending as much as $100 million to oust Somoza.101 That support, as illustrated by the earlier

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98 Pastor, Not Condemned to Repetition, 99.
99 Interview with Bob Pastor quoted in Ibid., 50.
100 Ibid., 52.
101 Aristides Calvani, interview with Pastor cited in Ibid., 77.
Gabriel García Márquez connection, was highly secretive (and mostly illegal). Ramírez describes Pérez as a “gutsy conspirator” in his own right, who by mid-1978 had left the U.S. ambassador in Caracas with “not an inkling” of the Venezuelan government’s involvement with the FSLN.

Understanding why Pérez got involved is important. Venezuela, like the other countries which got involved – notably, Panama, Costa Rica, Cuba, and Mexico – had specific goals and interests at play. Accurately describing these countries’ unique motivations is crucial, not just for painting a truly multi-sided picture of international affairs in Latin American history, but for understanding how their governments tried to use their support as leverage to shape – rather than simply enable – the unfolding of Somoza’s downfall and replacement. As Sandinista commander Joaquín Cuadra Lacayo recalls with respect to Pérez’s support for the Revolution, “there’s no such thing as a free lunch.”

There were ideological, economic, and strategic dimensions to Pérez’s incipient intervention in Nicaragua. A founding member of Venezuela’s social-democratic Acción Democrática (AD) party, he was imprisoned several times under the military dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez, an ally of the Somozas. Upon its overthrow, the military government was replaced by the democratically-elected administration of Pérez’s mentor, Rómulo Betancourt. In his first address to Venezuela’s congress in 1959, Betancourt called for the non-recognition of

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102 The subsequent administration of Luis Herrera Campins chose not to investigate Pérez (who in any event never involved the Venezuelan armed forces directly in his operations) due to the popularity of the anti-Somoza cause.
103 “…when I met Carlos Andrés, I realized that he was a gutsy conspirator, willing to assume the risks born from a good plot…” Sergio Ramírez, Adiós Muchachos, 123. Pastor, citing an interview with Ambassador Pete Viron Vaky, writes, “Pérez began supporting Pastor in early 1978, although when Ambassador Vaky left Caracas in July [1978], he still “had no inkling that Pérez was involved in helping the Sandinistas”, Not Condemned to Repetition, 103. In fact, as previously explained, Pérez started sending money in mid-late 1977.
104 Historian Hal Brands’ recent treatment of the Cold War in Latin America, which purports to recast the period as a complex “series of overlapping conflicts” (rather than a simple standoff with U.S. imperialism) correctly notes that the Sandinista Revolution was a “truly regional affair” involving the key support of several countries other than Cuba. However, despite alluding to complexity and varied motives, Brands makes little attempt to ask why these governments would take such action, reducing their motivations to “cold opportunism,” “hatred for Somoza,” and – in the case of Mexico and Venezuela – a crude desire for greater regional clout, Latin America’s Cold War, 182-3.
105 Joaquín Cuadra Lacayo, interview with the author, Managua, August 15, 2016.
Latin American states which had come to power via non-democratic means, and similarly voiced support for multilateral intervention against such regimes – a challenge to U.S. National Security Doctrine as well as a rejection of Mexico’s Estrada Doctrine of non-intervention in other states’ internal affairs. The Betancourt Doctrine, as it came to be known, was a core aspect of Pérez’s first presidency (1974-1979), where high energy prices allowed oil-rich Venezuela to embark on an activist foreign policy which included the influential backing of Panama’s quest to reclaim its canal, and the creation alongside Mexico of the Latin American Economic System (SELA) – an early attempt at regional integration at the expense of the U.S.-dominated Organization of American States (OAS). Aside from high oil prices, the global context for Venezuela’s expansionism, which included covert and overt support for a leftist revolution in Nicaragua, was the cooling of superpower tensions known as détente – a context not lost on Sandinista tacticians either.¹⁰⁶

Pérez did not take advantage of this favorable diplomatic setting simply for the sake of protagonism, however. Like Betancourt, Pérez was a dedicated anti-communist who did not want to see another Cuba in the hemisphere. In a March 1978 meeting with President Carter in Caracas, he argued that the longer Somoza remained in power, “the danger is the increased strength of the Sandinistas. It is very similar to the fall of Batista.”¹⁰⁷ Unlike U.S. foreign officers, Pérez knew enough about Nicaragua’s political landscape to recognize it wiser to support moderate elements of the FSLN than to seek a non-leftist alternative to the Sandinistas that simply did not exist. Thus, as fighters on the ground like Victor Hugo Tinoco noted, “the

¹⁰⁶ F. Parkinson, “Latin American Foreign Policies in the Era of Détente,” *International Affairs*, 50(3), July 1974: 439-50. Humberto Ortega cites how in the April of 1978, Tercerista tacticians considered “a complex international situation, where the détente between East and West was deteriorating…In this context I pointed out the need to take advantage of Carter’s human rights policy and support for bourgeois social-democratic forces…that situation would not be present for much longer, because crises in Africa and the Arab world were tensing the international political situation. It is for this reason that we propose the overthrow of the dictatorship in briefest time frame possible,” *Epopeya de la Insurrección*, 342.
¹⁰⁷ Pastor, *Not Condemned to Reptition*, 64.
most important [Venezuelan] aid was directed to the factions that they considered most plural and most social-democratic.”

As Venezuela’s involvement deepened in 1978, Pérez increasingly used his support as leverage to push the FSLN towards the Terceristas’ ostensibly more moderate and – ultimately more effective – path to power, as well as to empower moderate elements within that faction itself.

One crucial element of that moderate strategy was the Terceristas’ deepening policy of alliances, something which the more radical Sandinistas vehemently opposed. In the spring of 1978, the late Chamorro’s UDEL coalition joined forces with the Movimiento Democrático Nicaragüense (MDN), a pro-business party founded by the young private sector leader Alfonso Robelo, under the banner of a Broad Opposition Front (FAO). Thanks to Doce efforts to “give the Broad Opposition Front a popular face,” that newly-created FAO subsequently allied with the Movimiento Pueblo Unido (MPU), a recent grouping of Sandinista-dominated popular organizations – neighborhood organizations, women’s groups, youth groups, and unions. By the summer of 1978, in other words, organized support for the FSLN’s armed struggle encompassed a remarkably wide breadth of actors including the private sector, Liberals, Conservatives, Communists, Socialists, civil society, and grassroots organizations. The elite FAO and the grassroots MPU’s Broad Patriotic Anti-Somocista Front, as it came to be known, was an early expression of the “multi-class coalition” that social scientists have identified as the key ingredient which distinguished the successful Nicaraguan Revolution from failed attempts elsewhere in the Global South.

Even Tercerista commanders like Hugo Torres Jiménez found

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109 Cuadra Lacayo argues with respect to the Venezuelan support, “Carlos Andrés, he wanted to influence the way in which triumph of the revolution and overthrow of the dictatorship took place, and therefore wanted to have enough godfathership so as to guide us: “do this, boys; don’t do that, boys.” Previously cited interview with the author. With regards to efforts to promote moderate figures within the Tercerista faction, Cuadra Lacayo cites the Venezuelans’ “embrace of Edén Pastora” and their subsequent efforts to impose Pastora as a member of the Tercerista National Directorate.
110 Mark Everingham, Revolution and the Multiclass Coalition in Nicaragua, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996). Other comparative accounts (John Foran and Jeff Goodwin, “Revolutionary Outcomes in Iran and
it difficult to “understand, let alone complacently accept a policy of alliances with the bourgeoisie…which we considered complicit in the perpetuation of the dictatorship.” For the GPP – which rejected Tercerista overtures in mid-1978 – such policies were anathema. But internal doubters like Torres quickly recanted as they began to see the fundamental, immediate contradiction in Nicaragua as not one of class, but of “the people against the dictatorship.”

Orthodox Sandinistas were also unimpressed by the Terceristas’ increasing military “adventurism” in the first half of 1978, such as their March 8th assassination of Somoza’s Army Chief of Staff. In a conversation with the U.S. ambassador the day after the hit, Somoza still identified the Conservative Party and rogue elements in his own Liberal Party as the main threats to his presidency. By late April, however, he began expressing concern that the crisis was no longer being directed by the political opposition, but by the FSLN. It is a testament to the highly contingent nature of the Sandinista Revolution that its principal victim did not begin to take the FSLN seriously as late as 15 months before its climax. Somoza’s myopia was not helped by the Carter administration’s policy of condemning the regime’s abuses while simultaneously refusing to question its legitimacy. In July, Somoza secretly met with Pérez for a four-hour meeting on a small island off the coast of Venezuela, where the Nicaraguan leader brandished a letter from Carter which he interpreted as expressing strong support for his remainder in power. By Somoza’s own account, Pérez – who was already financing the rebels, and hoped to convince...
his counterpart to resign voluntarily – responded coldly: “I don’t care what Carter says. Our position is firm. You have to go.”

Meanwhile, the multi-class coalition was scoring further victories. On July 8, the Doce returned to Managua with the goal of fomenting the unity of the broad anti-Somocista front, pushing the FAO further into the arms of the FSLN, and mobilizing the masses in support of a popular insurrection. Somoza’s propaganda apparatus attacked this FSLN support group for being out-of-touch millionaires and Costa Rica-based traitors, but their highly choreographed return to Managua – bearing the slogan “the dictatorship is a cadaver, we’re here to bury it” – was received by throngs of adoring sympathizers. Further adding to the atmosphere of rebellion was an August 5 statement by the conservative Catholic Church hierarchy calling for Somoza’s resignation.

The time was ripe for a major stunt. The Sandinistas had long called the Nicaraguan Congress, which was composed of Somoza’s Liberals and representatives from the various puppet parties, la Chanchera (the Pigsty). In the summer of 1978, they made plans to take the National Palace, where the legislature was housed, by force. Part of a broader strategy the Sandinistas called “armed propaganda,” the main goals of Operation Pigsty were to secure the release of dozens of FSLN prisoners and to trigger a massive insurrectionary response by the population. On August 22, Edén Pastora (Comandante Cero) led the Ribogerto Lopéz Brigade into the National Congress by disguising themselves as National Guard soldiers and simply strolling into the main chamber. In under the three minutes, the commandos quietly secured the building without anybody noticing they were imposters and held the entire legislature hostage.

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114 Nicaragua Betrayed, 140. The Carter letter, which congratulated Somoza on his “steps toward respecting human rights”, is reproduced in its entirety on pages 276-7.
115 Grupo de los Doce, “Minuta de Acuerdos” June 26, 1978, Sergio Ramirez Papers, Box 57, Folder 15, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ.
116 Ferrero Blanco, La Nicaragua de los Somoza, 222-47.
After defending the position from a series of counterattacks by elite National Guard troops, the operation ended in stunning success: following a mediation by Catholic Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, Somoza agreed to publish a Tercerista communiqué and release all FSLN prisoners (from all three factions) and allow them to fly to Panama and Venezuela on a plane sent by Carlos Andrés Pérez.\textsuperscript{117}

In a visceral illustration of the FSLN’s internal divisions and how those fissures were refracted by the involvement of Latin American leaders, the transportation of the freed prisoners did not go according to plan. As Ramírez explains,

\begin{quote}
…symbolizing the new alliances, the commandos and liberated prisoners were flying to Panama and Venezuela, not Cuba; but at the last minute, the Hercules plane sent by Carlos Andrés Pérez had to return to Caracas empty. Ideological apprehensions were still carrying weight, and Tomás Borge did not want to accept the support of a social democratic president. The Terceristas, in order to make up for the insult, sent Edén Pastora to deliver to Carlos Andrés – as a security deposit, of sorts – the flag taken from the floor of the National Congress, which would be returned to its place once we had a democratic parliament.\textsuperscript{118}
\end{quote}

Operation Pigsty achieved its stated goal of generating popular support for the armed struggle. As soon as it succeeded, the politician-led FAO and grassroots MPU called another general strike. Five days later, young men and women in the mountain city of Matagalpa – later joined by nearby GPP fighters – rose up against the local National Guard, controlling large parts of the city for several days. Despite these setbacks, Somoza was confident that the “FSLN had committed its worst mistake,” mistakenly believing that the Sandinistas, by taking the legislature hostage, had unmasked themselves as a bloodthirsty, terrorist force which would be repudiated by the populace.\textsuperscript{119} But in the words of Hugo Torres, by the time the Terceristas called on the

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\textsuperscript{117} Ortega, \textit{Epopeya de la Insurreción}, 346-51.
\textsuperscript{118} Ramírez, \textit{Adios Muchachos}, 207
\textsuperscript{119} “Amb Meeting with President on FSLN Attack,” Confidential, August 24, 1978, DNSA, ProQuest ID: 1679046811.
\end{flushright}
general population to rise up against the regime on September 7, the “insurrectional flame had been lit, and it couldn’t be put out.”

The problem now, according to Torres, “was not the lack of fighters but of weapons, munitions, supplies, and greater combat readiness in order to launch the next offensive.”

Following the success of Operation Pigsty, Tercerista leaders sought the needed goods from Carlos Andrés Pérez, who provided 150 Belgian FAL battle rifles taken from the arsenal of the Venezuelan presidency. Along with explosives and other equipment, the guns were flown to Costa Rica on a military plane sent by General Omar Torrijos. From this moment on, Panama’s strongman became a key player in a Latin American conspiracy to topple Somoza, which gathered pace as the U.S. failed in the latter months of 1978 to broker a peace agreement in Nicaragua.

The Panamanian caudillo was not as different from Somoza as his democratically-elected partner-in-conspiracy from Venezuelan and had his own reasons for pursuing regime change in Nicaragua. On the one hand, Torrijos – a School of the Americas Graduate and lifelong army officer – came to power in a coup and was therefore not opposed to military governments in principle. On the other hand, in a conversation with U.S. diplomats in 1977, Torrijos voiced “extreme displeasure for Somoza’s right-wing dictatorship, not because he disliked Somoza

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120 Torres, Rumbo Norte, 456.
121 Ibid.
122 Ortega, Epopeya de la Insurrección, 352. Due to the covert (and illegal) nature of the operation, neither Carlos Andres nor Torrijos could provide weapons from their countries’ armed forces.
(because he didn’t) but because he considered it such a feudal country.” In fact, Torrijos had a populist-leftist streak which distinguished him from his Nicaraguan counterpart. The Panamanian Revolution, as he and his allies termed it, implemented a wide-ranging agrarian reform, and its civilian government – though truly subordinate to the National Guard – featured leftists and communists in key posts. During the 1970s, its government adopted an increasingly assertive and Third Worldist foreign policy, leading to clashes with U.S.-aligned Nicaragua over such issues as Torrijos’ attempts to create an OPEC-style cartel of banana-exporting countries (which Somoza helped scuttle) and his re-opening of diplomatic relations with Cuba (which Somoza denounced). Most importantly, Somoza did not support the true motivation behind Panama’s diplomatic offensive in the non-aligned world: its desire to negotiate a handover of its U.S.-owned and -operated interoceanic canal.

Torrijos eventually came to see Nicaragua’s national liberation struggle as a key element in Panama’s own anti-colonial project to reclaim the canal; as the window of détente appeared to close, a hostile Somoza government – one allied with the most conservative sectors of the U.S. political system – might threaten diplomatic (and in the worst-case scenario, military) efforts to nationalize the waterway. As Marcel Salamín, one of the strongman’s closest advisors, explains:

As the confrontation with Somoza sharpened, [Torrijos] suggested that it was vital for Panama to open up democratic space for itself in Central America; because without democratic space, Panama could not truly complete the task of approving and implementing the [Torrijos-Carter] treaties...if the negotiations failed, he realized, the Central American-Nicaraguan problem would become a vital one in the strategy to

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123 “Memorandum of Conversation,” Washington, September 25-6, 1977, FRUS, Volume XXIX: Panama, 297. In fact, as Ramírez recalls, when rogue elements of Panama’s National Guard tried to oust Torrijos while he travelled to Mexico in 1969, Somoza – who later visited Panama – actually provided the plane which flew Torrijos back to Panama to restore order. Adiós Muchachos, 133.
124 According to Romulo Bethancourt Escobar (not to be confused with the aforementioned Venezuelan president), a close Torrijos advisor, Somoza once handed Torrijos a list of all the communist elements in his government, unsuccessfully encouraging him to purge them. See Cuban journalist Luis Baéz’s interview with Bethancourt from 1982: “Torrijos admiraba a Fidel,” Radio la Primerisima, May 2, 2014.
recover the Canal through armed means if the Treaties were rejected in the North American Congress.\textsuperscript{126}

Somoza’s fall therefore became a real strategic interest for Panama. Like Pérez, however, Torrijos carefully supported the Tercerista faction because he believed in their military strategy, but, more importantly, in order to ensure “the emergence of a pluralistic transitional government formed by a number of people who would guarantee that the Sandinistas would not have the totality of power, and that they would share that power with other important political forces.”\textsuperscript{127} Torrijos was no communist, but ideology did not determine his fear of a radical leftist government in Nicaragua. Rather, he worried that such an outcome would almost certainly provoke an aggressive response by the United States, potentially tanking the approval and implementation of the Torrijos-Carter treaties and complicating any Nasser-style plans for seizing the canal by force. For that reason, when Torrijos first met with the Doce in 1977 and listened to their plans for a moderate, non-aligned revolutionary government, he was thrilled: “that’s right, let’s not get radicalized,” he told them, “with the yankees, be careful. You have to play with the leash, but not the monkey.”\textsuperscript{128} Torrijos, who was fond of political allegory, compared Central America to a DC-10 airplane. Overthrowing Somoza would be like taking a screw out of the aircraft in mid-air.\textsuperscript{129} The trick to keeping the Central America plane flying was that the Sandinistas should “maintain the right speed.” In another transportation metaphor that

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\item \textsuperscript{126} Marcel Salamin, unpublished book manuscript, “El Dr. Marcel Salamin y su relación con el General Omar Torrijos,” 23. Shared with the author, January 2017. Sandinista leaders were well aware of the centrality of the canal in Panama’s decision to take on Somoza. As guerrilla leader and future FSLN diplomat Victor Hugo Tinoco recalls, “For Latin America the idea of a North American intervention in the region was terrible...for the Panamanians because, with a North American intervention in Central America – what future was there for a canal owned by the Panamanians,”; interview with the author, Managua, August 23, 2016. Ramírez notes that if “Torrijos wanted one thing more than anything else, it was to recover sovereignty over the canal,” and writes of his knowledge that “Torrijos...had a secret plan to immobilize the Panama Canal with dynamite charges if he was unable to recover it through treaties.” Adiós Muchachos, 95.
\item \textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{128} Ramírez, Adiós Muchachos, 134.
\item \textsuperscript{129} Salamin, unpublished book manuscript, 85-86. Torrijos also used the DC-10 metaphor in conversations with Carter and his top advisors: “Memorandum of Conversation,” Washington, July 3, 1979, in FRUS, Volume XV: Central America, 1977-80, 645.
\end{itemize}
Salamín recalls, Torrijos explained that “depending on the velocity… the whole Central American train could be derailed. If [the FSLN] became too radicalized, the train would be driven toward greater confrontation with the United States.”

Throughout 1978-79, Torrijos would successfully “yank the chain” by secretly supporting the FSLN while assuaging the fears of the “monkey” by assuring his friend Jimmy Carter of the Terceristas’ good intentions.

Freshly armed with foreign weapons, the Terceristas launched their so-called September Offensive of 1978, hoping to exert more direct control over the hitherto disorganized and spontaneous popular insurrections which began earlier that year. The plan was roughly similar to the previous year’s October Offensive: on September 9, when the latest FAO-led strike was coming to an end, FSLN fighters launched synchronized attacks on National Guard garrisons in Léon, Chinandega, Estelí, Masaya, and Managua while Eden Pastora’s Southern Front once again attempted to conquer a slice of territory for the installation of a provisional government.

Because of its centrality to the greater Tercerista strategy, the Southern Front received the heaviest weapons; fighting there took on a more conventional style, unlike the guerrilla warfare of the urban centers and rural periphery, with National Guardsmen and Sandinista fighters assuming fixed positions. Historian María Dolores Ferrero Blanco cites interviews with GPP

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130 Salamín, unpublished book manuscript, 86.
131 Like Pérez, Torrijos and his camp repeatedly lied to U.S. officials about their material support for the FSLN, and in congressional testimony in September 1978, Assistant Secretary of State Viron Vaky claimed there was “no hard evidence” of Venezuelan and Panamanian arms shipments. Vaky further explained that the FSLN “have had some moral support from Panama and Venezuela in the sense of their saying, ‘we want to keep this group from becoming Castroist and Communist and this is something we ought to encourage.’” Administration Briefing on the Current Situation in Nicaragua [Testimony of Viron P. Vaky and Sally Shelton] United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations. Confidential, Hearing. September 13, 1978, DNSA, ProQuest ID (1679052018).
132 Ortega, *Epopeya de la Insurrección*, 353-9. Another reason for the Southern Front’s preponderance was Pérez and Torrijos’ favorable view of Eden Pastora, who they viewed as the main “social-democrat” among the Terceristas. In the middle of the Offensive, the Terceristas “with the aim of improving its image among democratic forces in the region” named Eden Pastora chief of the nascent Sandinista Army which would ostensibly replace the National Guard upon Somoza’s overthrow (Ortega, 360-61). As Ramírez notes, despite the official title Pastora was never really in command, “because the person still managing military affairs was Humberto Ortega. And Edén Pastora doesn’t have the approval of many of the forces inside [the country] who are very radical.” According to Ramírez, Costa Rican President Rodrigo Carazo, Pérez, and Torrijos demanded on his naming, “because the Doce were the political insurance and Edén Pastora was the military insurance.” (Ramírez, interview with the author).
leaders to show how their faction continued to oppose the insurrectional thesis in September 1978, still preferring the long-run, mountain-based struggle. As Ferrero Blanco argues, however, by this time “the fact that the final denouement would take primarily in the urban struggle seemed irrefutable.”

Moreover, the government’s clumsy repression of the September Offensive further mobilized Nicaraguan youth against Somoza.

Predictably, Costa Rica – the Terceristas’ “strategic rearguard” since 1976 and the staging ground for the Offensive’s main thrust – was irreversibly dragged into the Nicaraguan crisis. Since Independence, the two countries have clashed over territorial disputes. Costa Rica annexed Nicaragua’s southernmost province in the mid-19th century and contests its northern neighbor’s control over the San Juan River, which straddles most of their shared border.

Moreover, Costa Ricans – who by the 1970s had built the most robust and stable democracy in Latin America – generally despised Somoza Debayle not just for his unenlightened despotism, but because his father intervened in their country’s 1949 civil war, sparking ex-President Pepe Figueres’ lifelong quest to undermine the Somozas and their Caribbean dictator allies. This history of bilateral animosity, and the increasing incidence of violent border confrontations during the 1970s, provides the key context for this country’s involvement in Somoza’s downfall. However, despite those tensions, Costa Ricans had little love for the FSLN, whose militants – operating clandestinely with the support of Vanguardia Popular, the Moscow-line communist party – were routinely persecuted by local security forces. Thus, when Rodrigo Carazo was elected President in the spring of 1978, he travelled to the Nicaraguan border to discuss de-

Indeed, in a later interview with Bob Pastor, Carazo states that his strategy was to “support Pastora 100 percent. We saw him as the only alternative,” (quoted in Pastor, Not Condemned to Repetition, 102).

133 Ferrero Blanco, La Nicaragua de los Somoza, 251.
134 Humberto Ortega describes Costa Rica as such in Epopeya de la Insurrección, 316.
escalation of tensions with Somoza’s foreign minister: “If you respect us,” Carazo promised, “we will respect you.”

That concordat only lasted a few months. On September 12, Nicaraguan planes chased FSLN militants into Costa Rican territory and bombed a group of innocent students in the process. Costa Rica was no longer neutral; while not yet committed to pursuing Somoza’s overthrow, the Carazo administration took the first steps in what Juan José Echeverría – his Minister of Public Security – calls its “undeclared war” on Nicaragua. Carazo – a Christian Democrat elected at the head of a coalition of center-right parties – clearly did not move out of ideological sympathy for the FSLN. Rather, he and his advisors had deemed Somoza a direct threat to Costa Rican citizens and territorial integrity. After protesting the attack at the OAS, Carazo called the Venezuelan ambassador; within three days, the two countries quietly signed a mutual defense treaty. Of course, because Costa Rica lacked a standing army, it was a one-way deal: Carlos Andrés Pérez placed a squad of bomber planes at the international airport in San José, immediately signaling to Somoza that his forces should not invade Costa Rican territory. While the government in San José had previously focused on “avoiding confrontations with the Nicaraguan National Guard, as well as blocking the use of our territory to attack Nicaragua,” as a result of the September 12 bombing Minister Echeverría met with Pastora and other militants and gave them permission to operate in Costa Rican territory, so long as they

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136 “By this point it was evident that it would be very difficult or almost impossible to maintain our position of not getting involved in the Nicaraguan civil war.” Juan José Echeverría, *La Guerra No Declarada*, (San José, EUNED: 2006), 21. The history of these decisions are also narrated in an internal presidential document written after the fact, “Conflicto Costa Rica-Nicaragua,” Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica (ANCR), Fondo Presidencia, 1480.

137 In the 1978 Costa Rican election, the FSLN had hoped for a victory for the candidate of the Liberationist Party – the center-left grouping founded by Pepe Figueres (Ramírez, interview with the author). But Carazo turned out to be much more averse to the Sandinistas than his Liberationist predecessor Daniel Oduber, who paid a friendly visit to Somoza Debyate at his beach house when the Nicaraguan dictator suffered a heart attack in the summer of 1977.

138 “Pacto del 15 de Septiembre,” reproduced in Echeverría, *La Guerra No Declarada*, 27. Echeverría explains that the agreement “never acquired the conditions of a treaty; it was a moral commitment. It was a commitment between friendly nations, but one that was always respected…the assistance that Venezuela gave us was of great usefulness throughout the difficult months between 1978 and 1979.”
stayed within pre-determined areas and so long as they promised to honor any cease-fires that came about in the upcoming negotiations between Somoza and the FAO-led opposition.¹³⁹

Those talks were convened and mediated by the U.S. government in response to the September Offensive.¹⁴⁰ Torrijos and Pérez, confident that Somoza would not negotiate in good faith, begged Carter to simply force the dictator’s resignation.¹⁴¹ But the Carter White House, especially Brzezinski and representatives from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were too worried that the Sandinistas might be worse than Somoza. While many career diplomats and Latin America experts shared Torrijos and Pérez’s belief that Somoza had to go as soon as possible, they wanted to first find a viable alternative and refused to consider any solution that involved the Sandinistas – even the ostensibly moderate ones receiving support from Panama and Venezuela.

Losing patience, on September 21 Pérez warned a U.S. diplomat that “this will end in Cuban hands…the United States has not been decisive enough.”¹⁴² The following day, in a desperate attempt to sway the U.S. President, Venezuelan and Panamanian officials told U.S. sources that their countries had plans to bomb Somoza’s Managua bunker using the planes stationed in Costa Rica. Keeping interceptors on alert throughout the day, Carter phoned Torrijos for a tense conversation, in which he urged his Panamanian counterpart to confirm that he would abandon

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¹³⁹ Echeverría explains that if the FSLN fighters inside Nicaragua were not allowed to supply themselves in Costa Rica, they would be “condemned, in fact, to extermination,” La Guerra No Declarada, 33. Whenever U.S. officials pressed them on the issue, Costa Rica – which denied acquiescing to FSLN operations on their territory – simply pleaded their inability, given a lack of a standing army, to patrol their border. This excuse was relayed by U.S. diplomats to Somoza on several occasions.

¹⁴⁰ Carazo had offered to mediate but walked away in the wake of the September 12 attack. The FAO and Doce wanted its sympathizers – Venezuela, Mexico, Panama, and Colombia – to mediate; Somoza proposed several military regimes – Guatemala, Argentina, and Chile – as mediators. By the time they began, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic were co-mediating the talks with the U.S. Colombia was previously on the mediation team but was expelled at Somoza’s behest after President Julio César Turbay condemned the Nicaraguan regime in a letter to the UN General Assembly. Shortly before the negotiations began, a Mexico-led proposal in the OAS failed to secure enough votes for a statement calling on Somoza to step down.


¹⁴² Quoted in Pastor, Not Condemned to Repetition, 71.
any military plans and support the mediation. Torrijos agreed, even as he maintained that the Somoza problem “is not one for the OAS; it is a problem for a psychiatrist.”143 In a meeting the next day with Brzezinski (who was still furious from the threat), one of Torrijos’ advisers reaffirmed Panama’s commitment to the mediation but made a minor attempt at inducing U.S. officials to include the Terceristas in their image of what a moderate Somoza replacement might look like, professing Torrijos’ belief “that the extremists are isolated in Cuba and that the Sandinistas who are fighting Nicaragua only intend to change Nicaragua into a kind of Costa Rica.”144 Brzezinski and the others were unmoved: when the U.S. government pressured Somoza into negotiating with the opposition, they did not bluntly demand his resignation as a precondition for talks.

The negotiations were therefore doomed by a fundamental contradiction: Somoza, who on the eve of the negotiations announced plans to double the size of the National Guard, insisted on finishing his “constitutional” term through 1981; meanwhile, the FAO demanded the ruling family’s immediate departure from the country. The latter’s negotiating team was led by Sergio Ramírez of the Doce (and secretly, the FSLN), Alfonso Robelo of the MDN, and Rafael Córdova Rivas (Chamorro’s replacement at the helm of UDEL). A handwritten document from October 1978 reveals the different potential scenarios that these opposition leaders team envisioned for the short-medium run.

The first scenario envisioned a “democratic-revolutionary” outcome, “not in the sense of a violent transition from a capitalist society to a socialist one,” but a transition to liberal democracy. To achieve this outcome, the opposition should continue making use of strikes, popular protest, and FSLN-led military efforts to forcefully install a pluralistic revolutionary

government which would implement a moderate agenda. This was the vision laid out by the Terceristas since their earliest talks with the Doce and foreign allies since 1977. A second, “constitutional” scenario imagined that Somoza might, under U.S. pressure, resign and allow the National Congress to elect an interim President who would call for free elections. In this hypothetical scenario, the FAO would mobilize popular opinion against the caretaker government and insist on its replacement by the joint FAO-FSLN government envisioned in the previous scenario. Finally, the FAO pondered a “military” outcome, where Somoza would be overthrown via a coup from within his own National Guard, which would subsequently install a repressive government. This scenario would force the FAO to back the FSLN in ramping up the armed struggle. However, if the coup government promised to democratize the country, the FAO would seek participation in a civil-military government so long as the FSLN was included as well.145

Most notably, none of the scenarios outline by the FAO even contemplated the possibility that Somoza would suffer a complete military defeat and be replaced by a Sandinista-dominated radical government. Even though the Revolution was less than a year away, nobody thought such a scenario realistic. After all, the National Guard – in fighting which produced thousands of casualties in under a month – had just repelled the September Offensive.146

Like Somoza, the FSLN only backed the mediation in order to buy time to prepare for future hostilities.147 In order to scuttle any negotiated settlements which might frustrate the

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145 “Posiciones del FAO frente a las alternativas de desenlace de la actual crisis politica,” Sergio Ramirez Papers, Box 58, Folder 5.
146 The September fighting devastated the country. In a scathing report from the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IACHR), on-site observers condemned the Somoza regime for “serious attempts against the right to life, in violation of the international humanitarian norms, in repressing, in an excessive and disproportionate manner, the insurrections that occurred last September in the main cities of the country.” The commission called on Somoza to restore civil liberties and blamed the regime for obstructing the work of the Red Cross, which estimated that anywhere between 1,500 and 3,000 people were killed in that month alone. IACHR, “Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Nicaragua,” November 17, 1983.
147 The FSLN ordered Ramirez to participate in the mediation, because like Somoza, “they were just looking to buy time and strengthen themselves.” Adios Muchachos, 220.
Terceristas’ insurrectional plans, Sergio Ramírez backed out of the talks on October 25 – just three weeks after they began – denouncing the talks as an imperialist maneuver to establish “somocismo without Somoza” in Nicaragua, alleging (correctly) that U.S. officials hoped to ensure that a transitional solution preserved the National Guard and other institutions intact.

While chief U.S. negotiator William Bowdler tried his best to keep the government and the FAO at the negotiating table, Los Doce took up asylum at the Mexican embassy and the FSLN threatened to resume fighting if no agreement for Somoza’s departure was reached. Believing that they had found the perfect middle ground between the FAO and the government, in late November the mediating countries started pushing the idea of a plebiscite. If Nicaraguans voted “Yes,” Somoza would leave the country and a newly elected constituent assembly would form a new government reflecting the predominance of the FAO; if they voted “No,” Somoza would see out his term in his office. While some FAO leaders expressed support for the idea in theory, the notion of a fair vote after 45 years of rigged elections appeared ludicrous to them, even though Somoza lifted the latest state of siege and restored civil liberties on December 7.

In any event, the opposition was under extreme pressure from the FSLN to resist a settlement. Taking advantage of the political truce, the Doce left the safety of their asylum to lead protests against the plebiscite. In a first major show of unity from its three competing factions, FSLN leaders came together to warn the U.S. – and any would-be collaborators in the FAO – against the plebiscite:

The FSLN-GPP, the FSLN-Tendencia Proletaria, and the General Staff of the Urban Resistance, FSLN-Insurreccional, have decided to unite our political and military forces in order to guarantee that the heroic struggle of our people not be stolen by the machinations of yankee imperialism and the treasonous sectors of the local bourgeoisie…we reject the imperialist mediation which is no more than a vulgar interventionist tactic by which yankee imperialism tries to mock the revolutionary aspirations of the Nicaraguan people by implanting a reactionary government subjected
to their control: a *somocismo* without Somoza. We give warning that we will oppose imperialist intervention, raising revolutionary rifles against it.\(^{148}\)

Pérez wrote a letter to Carter on December 22 urging him to realize that Somoza’s apparent support for the plebiscite was a farce.\(^{149}\) He was soon proved right: before the end of the year, Somoza began reneging on the proposal, arguing implausibly that his cabinet had voted against the plebiscite because it violated the country’s constitution and sovereignty. Having successfully pressured Somoza into talking to the opposition, the Carter administration was frustrated by its inability to force him to negotiate in good faith. With the failure of the talks imminent, Bowdler paid a visit to Somoza – this time accompanied by Dennis McAuliffe, chief of the U.S. Southern Command – and plainly told him that peace would be unachievable until he left the presidency and the country.\(^{150}\) By February, the negotiations were declared officially dead; Carter responded by temporarily suspending all military aid and recalling half of the U.S. diplomatic staff in Managua.

Meanwhile, tensions with Costa Rica had escalated. On November 21, Nicaraguan troops killed two Costa Rican guardsmen near the border, and took another prisoner. The Carazo government immediately broke diplomatic relations with Nicaragua, becoming the first of several Latin American countries to do so. Echeverría, Carazo’s top security official, subsequently met with Torrijos, who handed him a napkin with a written note for the Costa Rican president: “Carazo: everything that Panama has, and Costa Rica needs. Omar.”\(^{151}\) Torrijos and Pérez sent the Costa Rican government hundreds of FAL and M-14 rifles for the Costa Rican

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\(^{150}\) “Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Nicaragua and the Commander in Chief, United States Southern Command (McAuliffe),” Managua, December 20, 1978, *FRUS*: Volume XV, Central America, 434.

\(^{151}\) Echeverría, *La Guerra No Declarada*, 56.
security forces to shore up their defenses. And as Echeverría declared in a public statement, “the southern front of the Sandinista National Liberation Front has become our first line of defense” – the motivation for providing territory for the Sandinistas was the sincere belief that they served as a buffer against Somoza, who had become a direct threat to national security. In fact, on December 27, Carazo had to call Pérez – who placed a squadron of Mirage fighters at the international airport in San José – for further support because his security forces received intelligence reports that Somoza was planning on invading Costa Rica to eliminate FSLN camps. The Carazo government subsequently took a more active role in toppling Somoza and attempting to influence his replacement, its intervention mediated by “the belief that as the Terceristas grew stronger there would be greater possibilities for the establishment of a pluralistic regime in Nicaragua.”

The failure of the mediation emboldened all belligerents. Believing that he had defeated a U.S. plot to oust him, Somoza affirmed his intent to violently crush the opposition. The Carter administration’s decision to terminate aid to Somoza in January confirmed the dictator’s suspicions, and also erased Washington’s leverage (and information-gathering capabilities) over the regime. Meanwhile, with the dictator still in power after months of U.S.-led negotiations, the moderate FAO lost trust in Washington and ran further into the arms of the FSLN’s armed option. Panama and Venezuela made moves to accelerate Somoza’s military overthrow while they could still have a say in the formation of the transitional regime, and while Pérez was still in office (his term ended in March 1979). In December, Salamín told his boss that after months of backing the Sandinistas, “if we step back [Somoza] will kill you…we have no choice but to continue and topple him. It’s him or us.” But Torrijos and Pérez had no more weapons of their

152 Ibid., 110.
153 Carazo, Tiempo y Marcha, 283-84.
154 Ibid., 129-30.
own to provide, so in January 1979 they set about looking for such guns, including a harebrained scheme to enlist Gabriel García Márquez’s support in attaining weapons from Colombia’s M-19 leftist guerrilla movement. In order to adequately arm the FSLN for its next offensive, however, Panama and Venezuela would have to add a more muscular state ally to their makeshift alliance.

THE LATIN AMERICAN FELLOWSHIP OF THE REVOLUTION: JANUARY – MAY 1979

Torrijos and Pérez turned to Castro. Cuba, despite becoming revolutionary Nicaragua’s most important state ally, was not the earliest sponsor of the 1979 Revolution. After the disjointed FSLN reached its nadir in 1976, Cuban officials dialed down their engagement in Nicaragua and preserved contacts exclusively with the mountain-oriented GPP faction. As internal correspondence from the aftermath of Carlos Fonseca’s death reveal, Sandinista divisions ran so deep at this point that GPP leaders viewed their Tercerista rivals as a more immediate threat to their cause than the Somoza regime itself. Thus, the Terceristas’ 1977 and 1978 offensives did not enjoy any significant Cuban support.

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156 According to Salamín, Torrijos met with Gabriel García Márquez – a personal friend – in the fall of 1978, with the aim of figuring out how to support the Sandinistas with arms from Colombia. Torrijos sent Salamín (who thought that he would be meeting with officials from the Lopez Michelsen government) in November, where he met with Gabo, who subsequently introduced the Panamanian to Jaime Bateman – then chief of the M-19. The Colombian guerrillas had dug a tunnel into one of the Colombian army’s barracks in Bogotá, and in a well-known incident on New Year’s Eve, broke in and ran off with a large number of guns and munitions. Because of the chaos that subsequently unfolded when the army cracked down in response to the stunt, the weapons – which were supposed to be smuggled on commercial flights to Panama – never made it to Nicaragua.


158 Brands suggests that Castro “backed the FSLN since its formative years,” Latin America’s Cold War, 180. While technically true, such a claim exaggerates the extent to which the Cubans privileged the Sandinistas over the dozens of armed leftist groups in the region (as previously noted, historic leader Carlos Fonseca – despite living for years in Havana – never met Castro in person) and misses the fact that the most important Sandinista faction rose to prominence with Venezuelan and Panamanian support, much to the chagrin of the Cuban-sponsored GPP. As
It was not until the spring of 1978 that Cuban envoy Julián López met with Humberto Ortega in a meeting brokered by Manuel Mora Valverde, the historic leader of the Costa Rican communist movement, which had collaborated for several years with the San José-based Terceristas.\footnote{Report from Manuel Mora Valverde to the Communist Party of the USSR, Archivo Nacional, San José, Costa Rica, Fondo Manuel Mora Valverde, 18-2004-000129. Mora explains that “until advanced stages of the struggle, the Cuban Party was convinced that the line to follow was…the guerrilla foco defined by Che Guevara and explained by Régis Debray.”} According to Mora’s secret report to the Soviet Communist Party after the triumph of the Revolution, Ortega was hesitant to meet, allegedly saying: “I want you to know that both Cuba and the Soviet Union have always refused to help us. That’s why we’ve had to seek help from other sources.”\footnote{Mora Valverde, \textit{Ibid.}} López and Ortega immediately struck up a personal rapport, however, and as a result of their March 1978 meeting the Terceristas sent a small contingent of soldiers to Cuba for training as well as a high-level delegation – headed by Daniel Ortega – that met with Castro the next month. Only in January 1979, however, did Cuba send weapons to Nicaragua, after finally having seen the viability and value of the Terceristas’ voluntarist insurrectional strategy.\footnote{Not until after the 1978 September Offensive did Tercerista leaders return to Havana to meet again with Cuban leaders, and as Ortega explains, it was not until January 1979 that Castro “identifies fully with our [Tercerista] conception of the insurrection.” \textit{La Epopeya de la Insurrección}, 391.} The decision to provide guns came partly at the behest of Pérez and Torrijos, who sent Marcel Salamín to Havana that month to hammer out the details.\footnote{Humberto Ortega also suggests that Castro provided the weapons at Pérez and Torrijos’ request, \textit{Epopeya de la Insurrección}, 392. According to Salamín, Castro responded to the Panamanian request with great skepticism, suggesting that he provided the arms because Torrijos asked for them, not because he believed in the FSLN’s chances of success. Unpublished book manuscript, 26.} Castro agreed to provide 1,200 rifles, a set of rocket-propelled grenades, and light artillery for the conventional warfare of the Southern Front. In a strange, global twist, a substantial portion of those weapons were of U.S. origin; Cuba could not provide its own Soviet-made weapons for
obvious reasons, so it asked Vietnam to provide weapons it had recovered from the enemy during its own war against occupying U.S. forces. Castro did not take this decision of sending weapons lightly, hesitating at first: there was no way the Sandinistas could the defeat the National Guard, he told his Panamanian guest, if the revolutionary forces remained divided.

Torrijos had long shared that concern, but before they could help bring together the three factions, the Panamanians set about unifying the Tercerista tendency – itself riven by ideological and personal disputes. In January 1979 Tercerista leaders held a series of tense meetings known as the “Little Congress” at Torrijos’ vacation home near the military base of Río Hato. On one side of the debate was Edén Pastora of the Costa Rica-based Southern Front. Pastora – a favorite of Pérez, Carazo, and Torrijos – had been given the (purely ceremonial) title of Chief of the Sandinista Army in order to please the Terceristas’ foreign benefactors. On the other side were the commanders of the so-called Internal Front, led most notably by the radical figure Oscar “el Gordo Pin” Pérez-Cassar, who along with other guerrilla commanders stationed inside Nicaraguan territory abandoned their military posts and snuck out of the country for the Little Congress. The latter group resented Pastora’s lack of Marxist purity, refused to accept him in even a symbolic leadership position, and believed that the military strategy should not hinge primarily on a conventional military drive toward Managua from the south. For his part,

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164 Aside from Salamin’s account and that of Sandinista leaders cited below, a U.S. intelligence report attests to Castro’s concern with FSLN unity. In January 1979, Panamanian Manuel Antonio Noriega – then a CIA informant – expressed that the Cuban leader “is of the opinion that the FSLN has no chance of defeating Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza Debayle, unless the disparate factions unite.” “Central Intelligence Agency Intelligence Information Cable,” Washington, January 25, 1979, FRUS: Volume XXIII, Mexico, Cuba, and the Caribbean, 103.

165 See footnote 132.

166 Radical Tercerista commanders like Joaquín Cuadra Lacayo chafed under what they felt to be the Panamanian and Venezuelan imposition of Pastora as a Tercerista leader, believing not only that Pastora was “confused and disorganized” ideologically, but that his growing importance implied a move away from the “insurrectional thesis” and toward a more conventional warfare strategy on the Southern Front. Cuadra, interview with the author.
Pastora wanted more *real* influence; he threatened to take his troops and strike out on his own if he was not named to the Tercerista directorate alongside the Ortega brothers. While Pérez and Torrijos had promoted Pastora within the movement because they saw him as a guarantee of moderation in the FSLN, by January 1979 they were more interested in avoiding the Sandinistas’ further fragmentation. Thus, in a side-room meeting at the Little Congress, Salamín bluntly told Pastora not to break with the Terceristas: “Look, Comandante, let’s not fool ourselves…we’re going to state the rules very clearly; otherwise, we’ll suspend all the aid that’s been given thus far.”

By the end of the meetings, the Panamanians had helped broker a compromise: the radical figures would recognize Pastora as Chief of the Sandinista Army, and Pastora would accept equal billing to the Internal Front Commanders in subordination to a 3-man directorate composed of the two Ortega brothers and Victor Tirado. All parties signed a document sent to the Tercerista ground forces on February 6 that gave equal importance to the internal urban struggle as it did to Pastora’s southern flank. This tactical decision would prove to be an astute one.

Tercerista divisions were healed “under Torrijos’ vigilant eye,” but Castro was the true godfather of greater Sandinista unity. The points of contention were straightforward: The GPP and Proletarian factions opposed the Terceristas’ alliances with non-leftist domestic and international partners. The Terceristas, on the other hand, refused to act as co-equals with factions of the FSLN that were smaller militarily and – except for their influence over popular organizations within the MPU – lacked political wings of their own. While Torrijos had pressed

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167 Salamín, unpublished book manuscript, 50.
168 Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, “Circular Interna,” Archivo Historico IHNCA, FN; 355.02384, D597. Ironically, as described later in this chapter, the Southern Front – which Pérez, Torrijos, and Carazo invested in because it was meant to conquer territory in order to install the moderate provisional government – never made it far past the Costa Rican border. Somoza massed most of his armed forces there, producing a fixed-positions war that lasted until his overthrow, while his elite battalions defended Managua, leaving many of Nicaragua’s provincial capitals poorly defended.
169 Quote from Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos*, 245.
for unity in the past, Ramírez claims that Castro’s “mythical prestige was the key for the chiefs of the three tendencies to accept a compromise unity agreement.”\textsuperscript{170} The Cuban leader told the Terceristas that even if they managed to take power without the others’ help, the exclusion of some Sandinista groups would come back to haunt them in the long-run. Thus, Castro compelled them to accept his proposal for a nine-person National Directorate centered around the idea of parity: three Terceristas (Humberto and Daniel Ortega, Víctor Tirado), three GPP leaders (Tomás Borge, Bayardo Arce, and Henry Ruiz), and three Proletarians (Luis Carrión, Jaime Wheelock, and Carlos Nuñez).\textsuperscript{171}

In return for their power quota, Castro convinced the other factions to give their reluctant blessing to the FSLN alliance with the moderate bourgeoisie and its post-triumph plans for political pluralism, non-alignment, and a mixed economy.\textsuperscript{172} Indeed, Castro – at least in the insurrectionary period – actually exerted a markedly moderating influence on the Sandinistas. As historian Piero Gleijeses has argued, Cuban efforts to assist Third World revolutionary movements were motivated by a rational strategy of “the best defense is a good offense” – winning international allies and therefore weakening the influence of a hostile U.S. foreign policy apparatus in the process.\textsuperscript{173} Communist ideology and a sense of “revolutionary mission” no doubt played a role as well, but Castro only became deeply involved in Nicaragua when regime change seemed feasible, at which point he pragmatically backed the moderate revolutionaries over Cuba’s previous clients among the more radical and orthodox factions. The Cubans (correctly) determined that the Terceristas possessed the winning strategy, and as

\textsuperscript{170} Ramírez, \textit{Adiós Muchachos}, 116.

\textsuperscript{171} Ramírez attributes the $3 + 3 + 3 = 9$ formula to Castro. Previously cited interview with the author.

\textsuperscript{172} The document, aside from coordinating the military efforts of the different Sandinista factions, called for the organization of a provisional government which would include “all the anti-Somocista forces” and would be “broad, democratic, and non-aligned” on the international arena. “Aspectos basicos de los acuerdos de unidad FSLN,” March 7, 1979, AHÍHNA, Managua, FSLN D11G20050.

Ramírez recalls, “the first to understand that the march of the Nicaraguan Revolution should be different was [Castro], and he was the first to recommend that we respect political pluralism and the mixed economy; in other words, that we should respect the reality that we had in front of us.”174 Despite Castro’s evident support for the moderate revolutionary agenda at this time, one might ask why Carazo, Pérez, and Torrijos would so willingly accept his help if their stated goal was to avoid the Cubanization of the Nicaraguan Revolution; when asked after the fact, Carazo gave a simple response: “It was more important for Somoza to fall than to keep out the Cubans.”175

After agreeing to the “basic aspects of FSLN unity” in Havana, FSLN leaders officially put pen to paper in Panama City on March 7, 1979, finally setting the stage for a concerted revolutionary offensive. Meanwhile in Nicaragua, the FAO – whose leaders were briefly jailed after the mediation failed – re-formalized its alliance with the Doce and MPU under a new National Patriotic Front committed to the Sandinistas’ armed struggle. For his part, Somoza continued expanding his forces, and made the most of a still-ambivalent U.S. policy which had cut off bilateral military aid while still allowing the regime to finance itself through multilateral lending institutions.176 The National Guard would have to confront an FSLN that with the injection of Cuban arms had taken “a qualitative leap in its military capacity,” according to

174 Ramírez continues: “At the end of the day, the simple fact that Nicaragua is not an island like Cuba imposed grave differences. Central America continues to be a system of connected veins, and the conflict sparked by the Revolution throughout the isthmus would prove that once again, like on so many other occasions in history. It is not that Fidel did not want socialism in Nicaragua, but he envisioned a socialism different from that of Cuba. And he saw, perhaps, a new field of experimentation where [we] would not repeat the errors that in Cuba he could never recognize, nor amend.” Adiós Muchachos, 116. In another example, Castro blocked the Doce from visiting Cuba on their 1979 trips, believing that the FSLN support group should not “taint itself” by association. Ramírez, interview with the author.
175 Quoted in Pastor, Not Condemned to Repetition, 104.
176 The U.S. announced that it was suspending all military aid on February 8, 1979. This decision did not, however, prevent the Nicaraguan government from building up its military capacity. By one estimate, the National Guard’s ranks swelled from 7,500 in September 1978 to 11,000 by March 1979, arming the new troops with weapons purchased from Israel, Argentina, and Guatemala (Pastor, 101). The U.S. did not prevent those purchases until the regime was on the brink of collapse, when the Carter administration blocked a vital Israeli arms shipment; Somoza later claimed that the “precious cargo” of anti-personnel grenade rifles and ammunition would have won the war for the regime (Somoza Debayle, 238-40).
Humberto Ortega. The insurgents had also created the “strategic bridge” – wherein arms would be flown secretly from Cuba to Panama, then transferred with Venezuelan support to Sandinista camps in Costa Rica – without which “it would have been impossible to introduce the [Cuban] weapons” into Nicaraguan territory.”

Some of the most important preparatory work for the so-called Final Offensive was done beyond Nicaragua’s borders. Over 100 solidarity committees around the world sent money to the FSLN and, more importantly, mobilized international public opinion against Somoza. Other sympathizers literally joined the fight: in early 1979, significant internationalist brigades from Panama and Costa Rica joined the Sandinista ranks while some leftist Chilean exiles and Argentine Montoneros advised the revolutionary command at its Palo Alto headquarters in San José. Cuba also sent 12 high-level military and intelligence advisers, including Renán Montero, a veteran of Castro’s Sierra Maestra. On the political side, Pérez also provided a plane for the Doce to tour Central America and the Caribbean for additional support. Some countries they visited like Jamaica and Colombia would soon play a role in isolating Somoza (and the U.S.) at the OAS. Even Honduras – ruled by a U.S.-backed military junta – began acquiescing to Nicaraguan guerrilla camps in their territory.

The Doce’s most important destination by far, however, was José López Portillo’s Mexico, which after a March 1979 meeting agreed to send funds and weapons to the Sandinistas

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178 Hugo Spadafora, a Panamanian doctor and human rights activist, led two contingents – the Simón Bolívar and Victoriano Lorenzo Brigades – of some 900 Panamanian and Colombian fighters. Manuel Mora Salas – son of the Costa Rican communist leader – led the Juan Santamaria and Carlos Luis Fallas Brigades, which in total contributed at least 250 combatants [for a compilation of testimonies of Costa Ricans who joined the Nicaraguan insurrection, see José Picado Lagos (ed), *Los Amigos Venían del Sur*, (San José: EUNED, 2014)]. Thousands of people from around the world sent letters to Palo Alto asking to join the fight, with some European citizens eventually being integrated into the abovementioned brigades. According to Ortega, 90 Chilean fighters joined along with 15 Argentine advisers, *Epopeya de la Insurrección*, 398.
179 “Memorandum confidencial del Grupo de los Doce de Nicaragua para Honorables Miembros de la Junta Militar de Gobierno de Honduras,” February 21, 1979, Sergio Ramirez Papers Box 59, Folder 16. With regards to the Honduran military’s permissiveness, Henry Ruiz asserts that “Costa Rica was the rearguard. But you can’t forget about Honduras. Honduras opened up as well. There came a moment when the Hondurans were no longer persecuting us,” interview with the author.
for the first time.\textsuperscript{180} Perhaps more importantly, the Mexican Foreign Ministry – which had already recognized the FSLN as legitimate belligerents – agreed to follow the lead of Costa Rica, Panama, and Venezuela in breaking diplomatic relations with Nicaragua. The move – a violation of the Estrada Doctrine preceded only by the momentous refusal to recognize Franco’s Spain in 1939 – was carefully coordinated with Sandinista military commanders and political leaders; Mexico would only break with Somoza once the guerrillas were ready to launch the Final Offensive.\textsuperscript{181} The Mexican government had been highly supportive of the Sandinistas in the past. When Gustavo Iruegas was sent to Managua as interim manager of the Mexican embassy in September 1978 (the ambassador had just been recalled), Foreign Minister Santiago Villarroel gave him clear instructions: “Go to Nicaragua and do everything possible to help that people and their revolution.”\textsuperscript{182} From that moment on, Iruegas’ embassy became a haven for clandestine Sandinista operatives and granted asylum to nearly 1,000 dissidents.\textsuperscript{183}

Mexico – which like Venezuela was enjoying an oil-fueled moment of Third Worldist activism – was pursuing specific national interests when it ramped up its involvement in Nicaragua in March 1979.\textsuperscript{184} According to Mexican diplomatic historians René Herrera and

\textsuperscript{180} According to Agustín Lara, a Sandinista fighter who accompanied the Doce on their week-long trip to Mexico, López Portillo had Gustavo Carvajal, president of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, provide the Nicaraguans with $1 million and a shipment of assault rifles. Interview with the author, Managua, July 10, 2017.

\textsuperscript{181} A memo from Sergio Ramírez to Villarroel outlined, in great detail, the coordinated plans for Mexico’s breaking relations with Somoza, “Marco para el rompimiento de relaciones con el régimen de Anastacio [sic] Somoza,” México, April 24, 1979, Sergio Ramírez Papers, Box 59, Folder 15. The reasoning highlighted the non-military aspect of Somoza’s downfall: “The only possible exit from the Somocista dictatorship, in order to organize a democratic government of national unity, is the successful culmination of the present armed struggle headed by the FSLN. Nonetheless, the struggle is not framed only in military terms, but in political ones as well, and as the isolation of the regime – above all in the international plane – comes to be fully realized, its collapse will take place more quickly, saving much blood and suffering for the Nicaraguan people.” The point of the gesture, explicitly timed with the calling of the Final Offensive, was meant to discourage sectors of Nicaraguan society still loyal to Somoza, but also to encourage similar moves by the governments of other countries in the region. When Mexico breaks relations, they reasoned, “it would mean that the countries of greatest prestige in the continent would not only be isolating the Somocista dictatorship, but rather clearly supporting an organized democratic change in Nicaragua.”


\textsuperscript{183} Iruegas puts the figure at being between 750 and 800, \textit{Ibid.}, 196.

\textsuperscript{184} Mexican diplomatic historians contrast “the activism of José López Portillo” with the foreign policy “retreat” of Miguel de la Madrid,” whose presidency could not rely on high prices for oil: Manuel Angel Castillo, Mónica
Mario Ojeda, López Portillo intervened more decisively at this point in order to fill the vacuum left by Pérez, who had just left office. The ultimate motive, they allege, was the same one shared by Pérez and Torrijos: the risks inherent to the Sandinista Revolution would be fewer “if Somoza’s downfall was accelerated before the conflict evolved into an open international confrontation.” Absent Mexican support, the PRI government believed, “the Sandinistas would see the need to seek more decisive support from Cuba…which itself implied the danger of a direct U.S. intervention.” Thus, Mexico joined the “collective security” effort against Somoza after its government “became conscious of the political-strategic importance of stability in Central America for its own security.”185 It helped that – like in Panama, Costa Rica, and Venezuela – efforts to overthrow Somoza were wildly popular; as it had done in the past, the PRI could use its pro-leftist policies abroad to dampen dissent at home.186

Crucially, the Sandinistas were not the only ones consulted before Mexico announced on May 20 that it was breaking relations with Nicaragua. López Portillo chose not to make the move before first consulting with Fidel Castro (with whom he met in Cozumel on the 17th) and with Rodrigo Carazo (whom he met earlier on the 20th in Cancún – the Costa Rican, following discussions with Pérez and Torrijos, had previously advocated for Mexico’s diplomatic rupture).187 As Herrera and Ojeda point out, those meetings “suggest that Mexico, before embarking on a route of action, considered it important to first define intentions and

186 Renata Keller has shown how Mexican politicians used the country’s diplomatic relations with communist Cuba to bolster the PRI’s revolutionary heritage while moving away from the radical policy legacy of the Lázaro Cardenas era: Mexico’s Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). In Panama, Torrijos falsely accused his right-leaning domestic opponents of plotting with the Somoza regime to overthrow the government of Aristides Royo: “Group of 12 in Panama: Panameñistas seek Somoza’s aid,” U.S. Embassy, Panama, Unclassified, January 26, 1979, DNSA, ProQuest ID (1679047018).
187 Iruegas, 208. Carazo confirms that while other issues were discussed, the main purpose of the Cancún trip was to ask López Portillo to break relations with Somoza. Carazo, Tiempo y Marcha, 305; Echeverría, 138-40.
responsibilities with the other interested leaders.” On a symbolic level, those Yucatan meetings marked the completion of the Latin American fellowship born to discreetly carry the Sandinistas to power in Nicaragua.

It was a “fellowship” in the sense that the fraternal bonds between these leaders – and with the muchachos of the FSLN leadership – were defined by a strong affective component that went beyond hatred for Somoza, and transcended their shared strategic interests. In a meeting with the Doce, López Portillo was moved to tears when he realized that Joaquin Cuadra Chamorro and Emilio Baltodano had their own children leading Sandinista fighters on the frontlines. For their part, as French anthropologist Gilles Bataillon has argued, the youthful “muchachos” leading the FSLN (few Comandantes Guerrilleros were over the age of 30 at this point) “embodied the symbolism of political renovation” promised by the Revolution, and they, along with the presence among of acclaimed writers and musicians, endeared the Sandinistas to their foreign allies and the international press. According to Iruegas, a well-traveled diplomat in the region, “Nicaragua had a few very characteristic elements which [I] did not see later in El Salvador…the spirit which one lived in Nicaragua during the Revolution was of an inexpressible beauty.” Torrijos was similarly moved when at the aforementioned Little Congress, Francisco “el Zorro” Rivera interrupted a high-minded, theoretical discussion of military tactics and political strategy with a crude emotional plea: “Lo que necesitamos, General, son tiros en puta. If this isn’t possible, we’ll see how to make do, but what is certain, beyond any doubt, is that we’ll topple Somoza even if it’s a little slower and costlier for our people. In any event, General, we sincerely appreciate your solidarity.”

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188 Herrera and Ojeda, 432.
190 See section “Nuestros Hijos en la Montaña,” in Iruegas, 198-99.
191 Iruegas, a veteran Mexican diplomat in Central America, compares his experiences in revolutionary Nicaragua and El Salvador in Diplomacia en Tiempo de Guerra, 194-95.
ammunition.192 These leaders felt a profound sense of ownership over the Revolution not just because they felt responsible for its success and had forged a paternal relationship with the young guerrillas, but because it had literally become their fight: by May 1979, Torrijos and Manuel Mora Valverde both had sons fighting alongside the Sandinistas inside Nicaragua.193

When it came to interests and ideology, the fellowship embodied the diversity and complexity of Latin American foreign policies in the Cold War but also the central impulses that bound them together. The diversity of this group – ultra-constitutionalist Costa Rica, Soviet-aligned Cuba, “perfect dictatorship” Mexico, social-democratic Venezuela, and progressive-authoritarian Panama hardly represent an ideological monolith – is a testament to the supraideological, pan-Latin American consensus behind the Nicaraguan Revolution. Their leaders might not agree on what a modern, developed society should look like. But they knew what one should not look like: in their eyes, the crudely repressive Somoza dictatorship symbolized the worst elements of both Latin American politics and the role of U.S. imperialism in exacerbating them. All of these leaders, for example, could agree with the Venezuelan ambassador to the OAS, who at a meeting of the body’s permanent council in early 1979 called the U.S.-installed Somoza dictatorship a threat to peace on the hemisphere, and cited as evidence its participation in the covert overthrow of Guatemala’s Arbenz government and the subsequent Bay of Pigs invasion.194 As previously noted, Latin Americans’ acceleration of Somoza’s downfall was motivated by their desire to pre-empt another disastrous U.S. intervention in the hemisphere. Consequently, the Nicaraguan Revolution was born of a tacit agreement forged with and between the FSLN’s foreign state benefactors: transform Nicaraguan society into a more just

192 Hugo Torres (quote taken from Rumbo Norte, 462-63), Humberto Ortega (Epopeya de la Insurrección, 388), and Salamin (unpublished book manuscript, 72) all recall this exchange in their memoirs.
193 Martín Torrijos would later go on to serve as democratically-elected president of Panama. Manuel Mora Salas, son of the Costa Rican communist leader, was the leader of the Carlos Luis Fallas Brigade.
194 “OAS Debates Recent Incidents on Costa Rica/Nicaragua Border,” U.S. Department of State, Confidential, January 25, 1979, DNSA, ProQuest ID (1679070100).
one, but do not take actions which would provoke an aggressive reaction by the U.S.
Specifically, this meant the Sandinistas were to commit themselves to respecting the three pillars of political pluralism, a mixed-economy, and non-alignment.

The Latin American fellowship understood that it was playing with fire. Indeed, their support for the Sandinistas, which included financing the rebels but also blocking U.S. maneuvers to shore up certain elements of the Somoza regime, was privately considered by Castro to amount to a “crippling defeat to U.S. imperialism.”195 Hyperbole aside, the conspiracy was an extraordinary rebuke by Latin American leaders of all political stripes who had found a rare strength in unity and purpose. When the U.S. ambassador to Costa Rica tried to condemn Carazo for “running interference” for the Sandinistas, Carazo – hardly a leader prone to indulging in anti-imperialist rhetoric – reportedly told the North American diplomat “to go to hell.”196

As these Latin Americans groomed the FSLN-led revolutionary coalition to their liking, the U.S. government desperately searched for a moderate alternative that did not exist. Historians of the Cold War in Latin America tend to focus narrowly on the motives and consequences of U.S. foreign policy, but as Robert Pastor remembers about Carter’s diplomacy in 1979, “Decisions on the future government of Nicaragua were being made in Washington, but they were not being implemented anywhere. Other decisions would matter more.”197

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195 “Soviet Ambassador to Cuba V.I. Vorotnikov, Memorandum of Conversation with Fidel Castro,” June 25, 1979, CWIHP.
197 Pastor, Not Condemned to Repetition, 135.
On June 4, two weeks after Mexico’s diplomatic bombshell, the Sandinistas broadcast on Radio Sandino their long-awaited call for the final insurrection. Those two coordinated developments on the political and military fronts marked the beginning of the end for Somoza, and they set off a race to the finish wherein the different components of the revolutionary coalition and their foreign allies scrambled to determine exactly who would be in Managua to take power when the dust settled.

Mexico’s breaking of diplomatic relations with Nicaragua symbolized and further catalyzed Somoza’s reversal of fortune on the Latin American scene. Just days later, the foreign ministers of the Andean Pact – the association of the Venezuelan, Colombian, Ecuadorian, Peruvian, and Bolivian governments – met in Cartagena to declare the Nicaraguan crisis a threat to hemispheric peace. Privately, Ecuador and Venezuela’s top diplomats met with Somoza in Managua and urged him to resign. Tellingly, these views were not exclusive to the more democratic governments in the region. During the September Offensive of 1978, Somoza boasted to U.S. ambassador Mauricio Solaún that the OAS would never pass a resolution condemning his government, because Nicaragua could count on the support of the anti-communist military dictatorships of South America (Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay) and Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador). Just nine months later, however, those authoritarian regimes also decided that Somoza must go. None of them except Alfredo Stroessner’s Paraguay – where Somoza was later exiled and assassinated – came to Nicaragua’s defense at the crucial OAS meetings of June 1979. His days numbered,

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199 Only Nicaragua and Paraguay voted against the June 21 OAS resolution which condemned Somoza and called for his removal. Argentina and Brazil voted for the measure, while the rest of the countries mentioned – along with Trinidad and Tobago – abstained.
Somoza travelled that month to Guatemala to ask that country’s military government – and those of El Salvador and Honduras – to mount their own intervention in Nicaragua to stop the FSLN from taking power. His erstwhile allies denied the request.

Meanwhile, the unified and Cuban-armed FSLN was making serious inroads. The guerrillas timed the announcement of their Final Offensive with a general strike coordinated by the MPU, MDN, and FAO. While the insurrection’s civilian leaders paralyzed the national economy with greater success than ever before, the FSLN mobilized some 5,000 fighters across several fronts in the North, Pacific, South Atlantic, and central mountain chains. They also called on cadres located in urban centers to lead carefully timed citizens’ revolts against local National Guard positions. The political-strategic fulcrum of the Final Offensive was once again Pastora’s Southern Front, which led a force of 700 troops across the Costa Rican border with the old objective of conquering a swathe of southwestern Nicaragua for the establishment of a provisional government. Recognizing the political danger that such a strategy represented, and aware that Pastora’s troops were equipped with the heaviest of the Cuban-provided military equipment, Somoza focused much of his armed forces against the Southern Front. Indeed, by mid-June, Coronel Pablo Salazar (“Comandante Bravo”) – later recognized as the most brilliant of Somoza’s field marshals – successfully and permanently blocked Pastora and the internationalist brigades on the isthmus of Rivas, a narrow land bridge which connects the Pacific Ocean and Lake Nicaragua near the Costa Rican border. But the massing of National

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200 For an overview of the military strategy of the Final Offensive, see Humberto Ortega, Epopeya de la Insurrección.

201 The precise number is entirely up for debate and depends on who – from actual militants to armed civilians – is included in the count. The 5,000 statistic comes from Ortega (Epopeya de la Insurrección, 399). Scholars, however, have given lower estimates [2,800 FSLN fighters, plus some 15,000 adolescents in spontaneously formed militias according to Dirk Kruijt, Guerrillas: War and Peace in Central America, (New York: Zed Books, 2008), 35] as well as higher ones [an FSLN army of 7,000, according to Thomas Walker in “The Sandinista Victory in Nicaragua,” Current History, 78(454), 1980].

202 All light artillery and anti-air guns imported from Cuba were sent to Pastora’s Southern Front. Ortega, Epopeya de la Insurrección, 392.
Guardsmen along the southern flank left Nicaragua’s provincial capitals – such as Jinotega, León, Matagalpa, and Estelí – vulnerable to their own, incensed populations. When Somoza’s elite infantry battalions – stationed in Managua to protect the president and National Congress – repelled Sandinista fighters from the capital in late June, the insurgents simply beat an organized tactical retreat and joined the provincial rebellions. By the first week of July, the regime had lost most of those towns and cities. The rebels had the upper hand but could not seize Managua and achieve a total military victory without incurring massive casualties or heightening the risk of a U.S. intervention launched under humanitarian pretenses. A negotiated settlement of some kind was inevitable.

With such an agreement in mind, the revolutionary coalition’s leaders in San José made plans for a true provisional government. The 5-person Junta of National Reconstruction they announced on June 18 was the formal, living expression of the multi-class and ideologically plural alliance that overthrew Somoza. Daniel Ortega, the only Junta leader to wear a military uniform, represented the Sandinista National Directorate; Sergio Ramírez – who was not-so-secretly pledged to the FSLN – represented the Doce; Moises Hassan – also loyal, albeit discreetly, to the Sandinista leadership – spoke for Nicaragua’s social movements and popular organizations as represented in the MPU; Alfonso Robelo served in representation of the MDN and the traditional business class; and finally, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro – Pedro Joaquín’s widow – further symbolized the inclusion of the bourgeoisie, civil society (particularly the free press), and the various democratic parties that her husband had led in the legal struggle against the dictatorship. In their first “proclamation” of June 18, the Junta unveiled their governing agenda, which can best be summarized as seeking the radical democratization of Nicaragua’s politics and socio-economic structure along the three aforementioned axes: non-alignment in international affairs, including reduced dependency on the United States; a mixed-economy,
which the government would expropriate the Somoza estate, nationalize some key industries, and spend heavily on social programs but otherwise privilege market forces; and political pluralism, guaranteed by full civil liberties, an independent legislature, and free and regular elections.\textsuperscript{203}

The inclusion of Chamorro and Robelo in the Junta, and the deliberately non-Marxist framing of its revolutionary agenda, was designed to satisfy the FSLN’s main political-strategic goal at this late juncture: avoiding a U.S.-led foreign intervention of any kind.\textsuperscript{204} The composition of the Junta symbolized the pluralism of the incoming revolutionary government, and its promises of democracy were enough to secure the insurrection’s pan-Latin American support. The same day of the proclamation, the Andean Pact recognized the Junta as a legitimate belligerent. Ecuador in particular went further, breaking relations with Nicaragua. U.S. diplomats had urged these South American countries against such actions, arguing that legitimizing the FSLN-allied Junta would diminish the possibilities of finding a more agreeable post-Somoza alternative. Thus, when the Andean Pact ignored the advice and went ahead anyway, the move “stunned the [Carter] administration, which had not fully grasped,” according to Bob Pastor, “and was not yet ready to accept, just how different the Latin American view of the Sandinistas was from its own.”\textsuperscript{205}

This raised an important question: had the Sandinistas successfully masqueraded as democrats for political expediency? Future behavior, as well as documentary evidence from the period, shows that the National Directorate saw the FSLN as a Leninist revolutionary vanguard organization, and was uninterested in creating a Western-style multi-party system.\textsuperscript{206} But the

\textsuperscript{203} "Primer Proclama del Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional," June 18, 1979, AHIHNCA, JGRN D15G1 0007.
\textsuperscript{204} Ortega, \textit{Epopeya de la Insurrección}, 419.
\textsuperscript{205} Pastor, \textit{Not Condemned to Repetition}, 113.
\textsuperscript{206} Todor Zhivkov, the long-serving leader of Communist Bulgaria, noted in a memo after a meeting with Fidel Castro that the Cuban leader told him as such: “The Sandinistas rebels are mature revolutionaries, sharing Marxist-Leninist beliefs. Cuban comrades advise them against giving publicity to their beliefs and speaking publicly about Marxism-Leninism. They should be raising other slogans for the time being—for democracy, revival of the nation, etc. So far they are heeding the advice,” “Memorandum of Todor Zhivkov – Fidel Castro Conversation,” Havana, April 9, 1979, CWIHP. Manuel Mora, in his previously cited report to the Soviet communist party, wrote assuredly
analytical value of that question is somewhat limited, because the internally divided FSLN was only one component of the anti-Somoza coalition which was poised to take power, and Latin American leaders – who knew that the Sandinistas could not have gotten this far without their non-leftist allies – recognized the situation as such. In turn, the enthusiastic support of Latin American democracies, and the acquiescence of the region’s anti-communist dictatorships, made it impossible for U.S. diplomats to publicly depict the Junta as a Castroist fraud. In congressional testimony in June, the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American affairs told the floor that “our democratic friends in Latin America have no intention of seeing Nicaragua turned into a second Cuba, and are determined to prevent the subversion of their anti-Somoza cause by Castro.” Privately, of course, the Carter administration held a different view; they agreed that Somoza should go, but actively sought to preserve as much of his state as possible in order to block the emergence of a Sandinista government.

In late June, Latin American countries dealt those efforts a fatal blow at the OAS. On June 20, foreign correspondent Bill Stewart was summarily executed by National Guardsmen in Managua; the murder, caught on camera by his ABC crew and repeatedly televised, turned U.S. public opinion against Somoza and was therefore seen as having shifted Washington’s policy. The Carter administration, however, had decided months previously that Somoza should leave the picture. Of far greater consequence for U.S. policy were the OAS meetings that began the

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that Humberto Ortega “definitely considered himself communist, Marxist-Leninist…his organization was interested in being known by the people of Nicaragua as very broad, which is to say, with a fundamentally democratic character. But the Chiefs of Staff of his organization and all of its important leaders were Marxist-Leninists.”

207 “Statement by Viron P. Vaky, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, Committee on Foreign Relations, House of Representatives,” June 26, 1979, DNSA, ProQuest ID (1679049730).


209 If anything, the Stewart assassination was a boon for the Carter administration’s efforts to shape events in Nicaragua. As it sought to replace the Nicaragua regime with a moderate, non-Sandinista government, the public outcry “quieted the thunder from the right in the United States” which had urged Carter to come to Somoza’s rescue. Pastor, Not Condemned to Repetition, 118. As Pastor’s description shows, the decision to call the OAS meeting the next day had been made previously and had nothing to do with Stewart’s murder.
following day, which culminated on June 23 with a resolution, supported 17-2 by American foreign ministers (with 5 abstentions, mostly from anti-communist military governments), calling for the “immediate and effective” replacement of Anastasio Somoza and the formation of a democratic interim government in Managua. While Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher voted for the measure and publicly celebrated its passing, in private the U.S. delegation was left licking its wounds. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who called this special meeting of OAS foreign ministers, had floated an initial proposal which similarly condemned Somoza but also called for the creation of an international, OAS-sanctioned peacekeeping military force to manage the transition in Nicaragua. Hearing echoes of the United States’ 1965 military intervention in the Dominican Republic, which was similarly carried out under the guise of multilateral peacekeeping, Mexico and Panama – whose foreign minister ceded his seat on the floor of the OAS to Doce member Miguel D’Escoto, who made the case for the Junta – led Latin American countries in blocking Vance’s plan. As a minor concession to Washington, these countries agreed to drop any overt references to the Sandinistas in their own, successful resolution.

In the wake of the resolution’s passing, Carlos Andrés Pérez urged the Junta to send a letter to the OAS Secretary General Alejandro Orfila on July 12 in which it nodded at the resolution with a promise to “call Nicaraguans to the first free elections” in the country’s history. They attached their “plan for achieving peace” which promised an immediate cease-fire and generous treatment for the National Guard. Aside from serving as the reference upon which

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210 The full text of the June 23 resolution is reproduced in its entirety in the Inter-American Human Rights Commission’s (IAHRC) 1981 “Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Nicaragua.” The key items of the resolution are its calls for “the establishment of the Government of National Reconstruction” and for democratization (“The holding of free elections as soon as possible” and “guarantee of the respect for human rights of all Nicaraguans”).

211 The resolution simply called for “the establishment of the Government of National Reconstruction,” leaving the Carter administration with room to find such a government that was agreeable to its interests. Ibid.

212 Junta de Gobierno, “Plan del Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional Para Alcanzar la Paz”, Sergio Ramírez Papers, Box 60, Folder 11. Specifically, the peace plan promised that the Sandinista army and the remaining sectors
the revolutionary government would later be judged, the letter to the OAS further cemented hemispheric support for the Junta’s ambition of being the undisputed heir to the Nicaraguan state. Indeed, as Costa Rica’s Echeverría saw it, the OAS resolution – which called for an interim government “composed of the principal representative groups which oppose Somoza” – “incorporated the principal aspects that had been discussed since late 1978 and during the meetings of Panama [in early 1979].”213 Castro privately celebrated the OAS resolution as showing that “today ever more Latin American countries are exhibiting disobedience to the demands of the United States.”214 For his part, Somoza finally accepted that the end was nigh. Like the case of the Algerian *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) in the early 1960s, the Sandinista-led revolutionary junta was treated as the *de facto* government of Managua by the entire hemisphere even before the National Guard had been defeated.215 Proving that this was truly a “diplomatic revolution” as much as anything else, it was on the day that the OAS condemned his government that Somoza drafted his letter of resignation.216

The Carter administration, which ultimately supported an unsatisfactory resolution in order to preserve at least a minimal say in the formation of post-Somoza Nicaragua, had spent the previous two months pursuing wildly unrealistic ideas for a caretaker government. To cite one example, in early July, the new ambassador Lawrence Pezzullo – who had been in Managua for less than a month – suggested that instead of negotiating with the FSLN-dominated Junta, the U.S. should have Somoza hand power over to his long-serving foreign minister, Julio Quintana.

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213 Echeverría, *La Guerra No Declarada*, 143.
214 Soviet Ambassador to Cuba V.I. Vorotnikov, “Memorandum of Conversation with Fidel Castro,” Havana, June 25, 1979, CWIHP.
216 Somoza Debayle, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, 266. After this point, Somoza kept the letter in his pocket for seventeen days while he waited for assurances from the U.S. that it would give him safe haven in Miami, and that it would not let the Junta take power unless the National Guard was preserved in some form.
“The transitional president,” Pezzullo predicted, “would ride a wave of public joy occasioned by Somoza [sic] departure” and “sap an unknown, though perhaps considerable amount of FSLN support and thereby permit moderates to play a bigger role in forming transition government.” Such a scheme was fanciful, to say the least. In reality, the FAO’s repeated and unequivocal statements of support for the FSLN, along with the Latin American consensus shown at the OAS, had proven that the Junta was the only game in town. By end of June, the White House had slowly begun to accept the State Department’s argument that the administration should seek the moderation of the Junta itself, instead of focusing exclusively on its outright replacement.

However, as Torrijos had told the U.S. ambassador to Panama in early June, it was unfortunate for the Carter administration that it “hadn’t bothered to buy a share of Sandinista

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218 U.S. policymakers went to great lengths before facing this reality. When the OAS resolution passed, interpreting it as an opportunity to come up with its own “Government of National Reconstruction,” the State Department ordered its ambassador in Costa Rica to recruit FAO leaders for this purpose. Prominent among them were Rafael Cordova Rivas, Jaime Chamorro (the younger brother of Pedro Joaquin), Adolfo Calero (a business leader), and Ismael Reyes (chief of the Nicaraguan Red Cross). But they refused to join a parallel government; Calero told Pezzullo that the moderates distrusted the U.S. government due to its failure “to react vigorously against Somoza after he had turned down the reasonable [plebiscite] proposal last December [1989],” [“Telegram from the embassy in Nicaragua to the Department of State,” Managua, June 29, 1979, FRUS: Volume XV, 616]. Marvin Weissman, the ambassador in San José, reported a few days later “there was little chance” of producing an alternative government, because “the opposition figures we identified have either openly supported the Provisional Junta or are fearful of playing any independent role,” [U.S. Embassy, “The Current Scene,” San José, Secret, June 29, 1979, DNSA, ProQuest ID (1679050591)]. Comically, and in evidence of the futility of these efforts, one of the U.S. government’s top picks, the National University President Mariano Fiallos, was – unbeknownst to them – secretly loyal to the FSLN; [“Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter,” Washington, July 2, 1979, FRUS: Volume XV, 639-641]. Cyrus Vance travelled to Tokyo to meet with a National Guard commander that had fallen out with Somoza and was living in diplomatic exile in Japan; [“Telegram from Secretary of State Vance in Tokyo to the Department of State and the White House,” Tokyo, June 24, 1979, FRUS: Volume XV, 567-68]. But efforts to recruit moderate National Guard commanders for the expanded or alternative Junta repeatedly fell through as it became clear that these military leaders were still receiving directions from Somoza.

219 While the U.S. gradually moved in this direction, a June 28 meeting of the NSC’s Special Coordinating Committee revealed that there still existed a “basic divergence of views” over administration strategy vis-à-vis the Junta: “State basically believes that the Sandinistas are likely to gain control and that we should work to increase the relative strength of the moderate forces in the Junta. Similarly, State is reluctant and, in some cases, opposed to undertake any action to try to preserve the National Guard (GN) as a continuing instrument after Somoza’s departure for fear that this would prolong the civil war and ultimately drag the United States in on the Guard’s side. Defense and I believe that some aspect of the guard must be preserved or the moderate political forces will simply be overrun by the Sandinistas once Somoza leaves, since they will be the only ones with the guns,” [“Message From the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Aaron) to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski),” Washington, June 28, 1979, FRUS: Volume XV, 600-01.
stock.” While Panama and several other Latin American countries had cultivated and taken advantage of its say in the composition and orientation of the revolutionary coalition, the U.S. government had little leverage – short of threatening unilateral intervention – other than its relative control over Somoza’s exact departure date. Thus, when U.S. envoy William Bowdler returned to Central America to meet with Torrijos in Panama City on June 27, ahead of his direct talks with the FSLN and Junta in San José, he came with a much reduced set of objectives: first, the U.S. government wanted to dilute the Sandinistas’ power in the provisional government, and therefore sought the expansion – if not the outright replacement – of the 5-person Junta to nine members; second, with the aim of avoiding complete FSLN control of the armed forces, Bowdler hoped to force the guerrillas to accept the inclusion of National Guard commanders somewhere at the top of the revolutionary government.

Carter summoned Torrijos to a meeting in the Oval Office on July 3, where he leaned on his Panamanian friend and counterpart to ask the revolutionary coalition to accept these conditions before Pezzullo, who was meeting with Somoza regularly in Managua, asked the dictator to leave the country. Tellingly, Torrijos agreed to float the ideas to the Nicaraguans as if he, Pérez, and Carazo – rather than Carter – had come up with the proposal. Under pressure from these Latin American leaders, and encouraged by Castro, the Sandinistas agreed to an

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220 “Memorandum from Robert Pastor of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski), Washington, June 5, 1979, FRUS: Volume XXIX, 563.
221 William Bowdler, who arrived in Panama on June 27 and met with Torrijos, told him that the U.S. now sought to negotiate with the provisional junta to expand its membership and restructure “the armed forces so as to ensure an adequate counterbalance to FSLN elements.” “Telegram from the Embassy in Panama to the Department of State and the Embassies in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica,” Panama City, June 27, 1979, FRUS: Volume XV, 588-89.
222 The purpose of the meeting was “to enlist General Torrijos’ help in putting into effect the Transition Formula,” which called for the expansion of the junta to make it more broad-based, ideally with the inclusion of a new, moderate Director of the National Guard. “Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter,” Washington, July 2, 1979, FRUS: Volume XV, 639-40. Such a formula would achieve the dual goals of diluting the Sandinistas’ influence in the political leadership while also avoiding their monopoly on military force.
expanded Junta and voiced no opposition to the moderate figures proposed for inclusion.\textsuperscript{223}

Ironically, however, the Junta’s moderates blocked the proposal. Naturally, Chamorro and Robelo feared that an expanded junta would dilute their own power as much as it would weaken Ortega, Hassan, and Ramírez, but the real reason was their distrust of a U.S. government which after many months of negotiations and bloodshed seemed suspiciously reluctant to simply give Somoza the boot. Robelo saw “no reason why the U.S. should lay down conditions on how we should run Nicaragua” and “no logic in broadening the Junta when it has been backed by COSEP and the FAO.” A furious Chamorro threatened to resign, calling the scheme “an unwarranted intervention in Nicaraguan affairs.”\textsuperscript{224} Highlighting the “us versus them” dynamic of the Nicaraguan Revolution, Torrijos suddenly reversed his support for the Junta expansion and began referring to the idea as the “American plan,” giving it the kiss of death.\textsuperscript{225}

The Nicaraguans did, however, concede the more substantial of the two demands. When Bowdler finally met with them in San José on July 10, the Junta promised that it would incorporate moderate elements of the National Guard into a hybrid military structure led by a Joint Chiefs of Staff composed of a roughly equal number of Sandinista and ex-Guard commanders.\textsuperscript{226} Castro, who took credit for this gesture in public and private, pushed this move

\textsuperscript{223} Worried that U.S. participation would make the plan reek of “intervention” and therefore it would suffer from a “kiss of death,” [Telegram From the Embassy in Nicaragua to the Department of State,” Managua, June 29, 1979, \textit{FRUS: Volume XV}, 616-7], the White House had Torrijos present the plan as his own via his leftist cabinet minister Romulo Bethancourt Escobar, who provided the Junta with a document the next day [“Esquema de transición,” July 3, 1979, Sergio Ramírez Papers, Box 60, Folder 11.]; Borge consulted with Castro via telephone before accepting the Junta broadening. From an FBI informant in Havana: “CASTRO claimed that Cuba was/is responsible for influencing the Sandinista ruling junta to “moderate” the revolution, i.e., setting a moderate course in carrying out the final stages of the revolution and in implementing the policies of the new (Sandinista) Nicaraguan Revolutionary Government. CASTRO told Source that he had he wanted to, he could have really “screwed up” the Nicaraguan situation in terms of violence before and after the downfall of the Somoza Government (and perhaps with respect to the membership and policies of the ruling Sandinista junta that emerged following Somoza’s downfall). “Report Prepared in the Federal Bureau of Investigation,” Miami, November 30, 1979, \textit{FRUS Volume XXIII}, 184-85.

\textsuperscript{224} Lawrence Pezzullo, \textit{At the Fall of Somoza}, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994), 171.

\textsuperscript{225} Pezzullo, \textit{Ibid}. According to Ramírez, Bethancourt lost his patience with the junta when the expansion fell through, but backed down when it became clear that it was Chamorro – not the FSLN – who had threatened to resign. Previously cited interview with the author.

\textsuperscript{226} Both Humberto Ortega and Sergio Ramírez are unambiguous on this point. Ortega writes that he was to meet with General Federico Mejía of the National Guard to “agree the plan for the military transition and to organize the
as essential for preventing either a U.S. intervention or the immediate outbreak of civil war once the Junta took power.\textsuperscript{227} For the other Latin American allies and the United States, the logic was simple: if the FSLN won a monopoly on military power, the non-Sandinista elements in the revolutionary government would become practically subordinate to the National Directorate. The hybrid military plan was, in effect, a small dose of \textit{somocismo sin Somoza}. Scholars, bent on explaining the emergence of social revolution in Nicaragua, and perplexed by the revolutionary government’s defeat in free elections only 11 years later, have overlooked this crucial fact; just days before triumphantly marching into Managua, the pragmatic Sandinista leadership had settled for something slightly less than – following Samuel Huntington’s classic definition – the “rapid, fundamental, and violent” change to Nicaraguan society, at least when it came to the country’s political institutions and government activities.\textsuperscript{228}

The preservation of some part of the National Guard – which had not yet been defeated – was a key part of the final plan for post-Somoza Nicaragua, which was officially agreed upon at a meeting at Carazo’s beach house in Puntarenas, Costa Rica on July 11. That last meeting, with Bowdler present, represented a true microcosm of the Nicaraguan Revolution: in attendance

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\textit{joint command},” \textit{Epopeya de la Insurrección}. Ramírez writes that “we came to accept that there would by a hybrid Chiefs of Staff, integrated by “clean” officials of the national Guard and by an equal number to guerrilla commanders.” \textit{Adiós Muchachos}, 256. Somoza, for his part, only agreed to leave the country once it became clear that “the idea at that point was to turn over the government to the opposition and fuse the Guardia Nacional with the Sandinistas. If anything could have pleased me at that juncture,” he continued, “it was the fact that the Guardia Nacional would be kept intact. It was for that reason that my resignation was not submitted the day I wrote it. By July 16\textsuperscript{th}, I had the assurances I wanted,” \textit{Nicaragua Betrayed}, 266-7.

\textsuperscript{227} “R. Castro related that at one time F. Castro had advised the Sandinistas to appoint one of the former Somoza officers who went over to the revolutionary side as minister of defense,” “Soviet Ambassador to Cuba Vorotnikov, Memorandum of Conversation with Raúl Castro,” September 1, 1979, CWIHP. According to Salamin, Castro lectured the Ortega brothers on the history of the Cuban Revolution and showed them letters he received during that struggle from sympathetic officers in Batista’s National Guard in order to “show them that reaching an understanding with the Nicaraguan army was neither a sin nor did it go against the Revolution…In that way, Castro disarmed the ideological resistance that they had against an agreement with the military…” Salamin, unpublished manuscript, 51-52. In a speech he gave shortly after the Sandinista triumph, Castro publicly referred to these concessions and implicitly took credit for them, “Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz en el acto central conmemorativo del XXVI aniversario del asalto al cuartel Moncada,” Holguín, Cuba, July 26, 1979.

\textsuperscript{228} Samuel Huntington, \textit{Political Order in Changing Societies}, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 264.
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were the broad-based Junta of National Reconstruction, Humberto Ortega and Tomás Borge, Rodrigo Carazo along with some of his cabinet members, top-level Torrijos emissary Jorge Ritter, and now-ex-President Carlos Andrés Pérez. Also present was ex-President Pepe Figueres, who delivered a letter from Manuel Mora Valverde – himself acting as a sort of de facto representative for the absent Cubans – in which the communist leader affirmed Castro’s intention to refrain from turning Nicaragua into a Cuban military base and to continue respecting the pluralistic and liberal nature of the Revolution.\textsuperscript{229} After Carazo and Pérez made one final, failed attempt at convincing the Nicaraguans to expand their Junta, the Revolutionary coalition reiterated its commitment to a democratic process and – more importantly – to the non-destruction of the National Guard in its entirety. The next day, Bowdler assented to the plan: the U.S. government, for the first time, had faced the reality that the Junta – due to its members’ authentic leadership of the anti-Somocista cause, and because it enjoyed such wide-ranging support from Latin American countries of all political orientations – was the legitimate government of Nicaragua, and recognized it as such. In return, and as an additional display of good faith, the Junta promised Bowdler that the new government would name a defected National Guard Commander – Bernardino Larios – as Defense Minister in a cabinet which (other than Borge as Minister of the Interior) featured few out-and-out Sandinistas. On July 13, Humberto Ortega ordered Sandinista forces to stand down in the first step of what became known as the Puntarenas Plan: Pezzullo would have Somoza resign, and upon his departure from the country the next day, a pre-designated interim president would immediately transfer power to the Junta, which would subsequently decree a full cease-fire, oversee the integration of the

\textsuperscript{229} In particular, Bowdler hoped to ensure that the FSLN would not set up firing squads or torture defeated National Guard troops. Mora wrote, “through conversations with people very close to Fidel Castro, I feel authorized to affirm that Fidel’s thesis is that the sovereignty of Nicaragua should be respected, and that Cuba will never interfere in its political life…” Previously cited report to the Communist Party of the USSR.
hybrid FSLN-National Guard armed forces, and implement the rest of the democratizing plan laid out before the OAS.

Although the FSLN and Junta made a major concession – the preservation of the National Guard in some form – to minimize the risk of U.S. intervention, the Puntarenas Plan still represented a stunning rejection of North American hegemony with little precedent in the history of the hemisphere. On July 13, a despondent Brzezinski told his president that he “felt a considerable degree of unease” because he sensed “the passing of the baton of influence over the future of Central America from the US to Cuba.” Given that it was too late to intervene unilaterally and because Latin American countries refused to support any multilateral intervention, the National Security Advisor told Carter that working with those countries to moderate the FSLN was “the best we can do.”230 The stage was meticulously set, on the other hand, for precisely the sort of outcome that the Latin Americans had hoped for. The Sandinistas, unified around the Tercerista strategy, had rapidly produced the downfall of the Somoza government. Better yet, they promised to co-govern with moderate sectors of Nicaraguan politics under a mixed revolutionary junta whose agenda was, despite its promise of radical social transformation, a far cry from the Cuban-style radicalism of the FSLN’s secret *Programa Mínimo* from a few years earlier.231

Those plans unraveled, however, as quickly as they had been laid. Pezzullo, promising Somoza that the National Guard would not be destroyed – and suggesting that he might be able to return to Nicaraguan politics someday – persuaded the dictator to tender his resignation on July 16th. Following promises that he and his family would be well-received in Miami, Somoza’s family left the country on the 17th – a date unofficially celebrated in Nicaragua as the “Day of

230 “Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter,” Washington, July 13, 1979, *FRUS Volume XV*, 672-73.
231 “Programa Mínimo del Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN),” Sergio Ramírez Papers, Box 57, Folder 6. The program called for, among other radical items, permanent compulsory military service.
Joy.” Following the protocol of the Puntarenas Plan, Pezzullo and Somoza’s pre-designated interim President, Francisco Urcuyo Maliaños, assumed power that morning. Meanwhile, Humberto Ortega travelled to the Costa Rica-Nicaragua border to negotiate the cease-fire with Federico Mejía, now the highest-ranking General of the National Guard.

But Mejía never showed up. In a shocking twist, Urcuyo did not immediately transfer power to the Junta. Instead, he gave a bizarre press conference in which he called on the FSLN to lay down its arms for the good of the country and announced his intention to serve out the rest of Somoza’s term through 1981 as Nicaragua’s “constitutional president.” It is unclear why Urcuyo, whose rogue presidency would only last 43 hours, sabotaged the Puntarenas Plan. Some say that he did so on telephoned instructions from Somoza in a last, desperate ploy to force a U.S. intervention to crush the FSLN. Urcuyo’s memoir, where he claims – against all other accounts – that nobody told him he was supposed to transfer power to the “communists,” suggests that he may have simply suffered from delusions of grandeur. Whatever the reason, the immediate consequence was that the National Guard, facing a completely disadvantaged military situation, began to disintegrate as FSLN columns marched on Managua. The next day, Carazo – cognizant that the Puntarenas plan, and its plans for a political victory for the revolutionaries, was only workable if the Junta reached Managua before the Sandinistas fighters – frantically urged Ramírez, Chamorro, and Robelo (Ortega and Hassan had already departed) to leave Costa Rica for Nicaragua immediately. Because it was still too unsafe to land in Managua, the Junta landed in León on the 18th, where they were installed as the official government of Nicaragua on Carazo’s urging. Urcuyo, under pressure from Somoza – himself presently being threatened

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233 Throughout the negotiations, Carazo had “made a strong point to watch the timing of the [Puntarenas Plan], doing everything possible to insure [sic] that Somoza does not leave before a provisional government takes over in Managua and the FSLN/GP is brought to agreement on essential commitments.” “Telegram From the Embassy in Costa Rica to the Department of State (From Bowdler),” San José, June 29, 1979, FRUS Volume XV, 608.
with deportation by U.S. diplomats upset over his possible sabotage – abandoned the country. Absent their leader, and facing annihilation, the National Guard had completely disbanded by the sunrise of the 19th. Henry Ruíz and the Northern Front were the first of several Sandinista columns to occupy the capital by the end of the morning.234 The Junta had lost the race to the finish.

As Ramírez explains in his memoir, the implications were as straightforward as they were seismic: “The circumstance which gave all the power to the nine commanders of the FSLN’s National Directorate – los nueve, as they came to be known – was determined by Urcuyo Maliaños’ refusal to pass his provisional mandate over to the Junta, as had been agreed.”235 On the 19th, before the Junta even arrived in Managua, the National Directorate met at Somoza’s bunker and overlooking the dictator’s tabletop war map, discussed plans for the transition based on their total military defeat of the regime. This picture was not the one envisioned by the revolutionary coalition’s Latin American allies, but it also came as a complete surprise to the Sandinistas themselves, who had prepared for a partial, political victory. As Oscar René Vargas, an FSLN leader dating back to the organization’s earliest years, explains, “The Sandinista Front thought it was going to have a piece of power and no more…We thought we were going to be one factor in decision-making…But when the Guard fell apart, we found ourselves in complete command. It was a better situation than we had imagined in our wildest dreams.”236

234 Ruíz, one of the most Soviet-oriented and radical leaders of the National Directorate, suggests that his forces may have resisted the implementation of the Puntarenas Plan: “Humberto Ortega was not in favor of the total defeat. I was in favor of that total victory, that was my position…I would have found it difficult, with troops behind me. I was no longer a guerrillero in the mountain, I now had troops. ¿What would have happened if they resisted? I don’t know; many times I’ve stopped to think…if the forces we had would have accepted the cease-fire. Who knows, those of us on the ground maybe would have continued forward. Because [the regime] was weak. And after so many murders, so many cruelties by the National Guard. And with the momentum we had, there was no place in the imaginary of the struggle for the idea that we would go and negotiate a piece of power to share with the other. Not with Somocismo. It’s fortunate that the historic result was the disintegration of the Guard, a mass fleeing. And we filled that vacuum. That was the total victory.” Previously cited interview with the author.
235 Ramírez, Adiós Muchachos, 106.
236Quoted in Kinzer, Blood of Brothers, 73. Commander Jaime Wheelock says that “because in order to impede a military intervention from the U.S. at the last minute, we accepted a “purged” Guard. We were not going for the whole deck [of playing cards]. We just wanted Somoza to leave, which in itself was an important victory. And there
CONCLUSION: THE MONKEY AND THE LEASH

The Revolution’s Latin American allies could ponder these ramifications at a later date. It was time to face a grim and immediate reality: by one Nicaraguan analyst’s estimate, the insurrectionary war left 35,000 dead, another 100,000 injured, and some 150,000 displaced in a country of only 3 million people.\(^{237}\) The economy was obviously in tatters. How would the new government, the leadership of which was incredibly young and had no governing experience to speak of, rule and rebuild this country, let alone achieve radical social transformation? For now, they could celebrate: just two years before, nobody in Nicaragua or beyond – except for one small faction of the FSLN and a few, isolated segments of the political elite – thought that Somoza’s ouster was anything more than a pipe dream. And as Carlos Mejía Godoy’s Sandinista Anthem – which identifies the “yankee” as the great “enemy of humanity” – played over loudspeakers in a city center packed with jubilant Nicaraguans, onlookers were reminded that the FSLN and its allies had pulled off an extraordinary upset against the United States.

The notion that Latin American leaders might treat the U.S. as a domesticated “monkey,” which despite its dangerous impulses can be subtly controlled, runs counter to the dominant narrative of the region’s history, one which emphasizes its dependent relationship vis-à-vis its northern neighbor. Indeed, it is usually North American leaders who disparagingly anthropomorphize their southern counterparts; exactly ten years after these events, U.S. President

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George H.W. Bush would famously refer to then-President Daniel Ortega as a “little man” and an “unwanted animal at a garden party.”

That Washington could be construed as “dangerous” by Latin American leaders (and not the other way around) has been reflected recently by historian Greg Grandin, who inverts traditional Cold War studies by writing about Latin America’s historical role in “the containment of the United States.” The integrated, South-South coalition of states which backed the FSLN – a level of Pan-American consensus scarcely achieved ever since – was the region’s response to the recrudescence of U.S. intervention in Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s. Though uniquely Latin American, this was indubitably a Cold War story. U.S. policy was motivated – to a fault – by an obsession about how events in Nicaragua fit into its efforts to contain communism and the USSR. At the same time, the FSLN’s radical project – like other revolutionary movements in the region – was part of the broader ideological struggle playing out in the Third World between socialism and capitalism. The confluence of these two forces – revolutionary movements and a heightened interventionist role by the United States – was the essence of Latin America’s late-Cold War, and the driving factor behind the region’s many transformations during this period.

Putting the 1979 victory in this transnational context helps account for the importance that Nicaragua acquired for Latin America in the rest of the decade. For the same reasons that regional actors intervened there in the 1970s, Nicaragua – and its nascent revolutionary process – would become intertwined with the great political debates and conflicts of Latin America’s 1980s. Somoza’s overthrow had been the product of a truly Latin American insurrection, within Nicaragua and against the United States. As a consequence, the armed Left took state power in

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Latin America for the first – and only – time since Cuba. That dramatic episode, however, was a mere prologue to a far deeper set of conflicts and changes in the region which would only surface once the Nicaraguans got to work and started molding the shape of their revolution to come.
Chapter Two

In the Labyrinth of Latin American History:

The Consolidation of the Sandinista Revolution in Regional Perspective, 1979-81
In the previously cited speech given in Managua a few months after Somoza’s overthrow, Mexican President José López Portillo described the Nicaraguan Revolution in epic terms:

In the painful labyrinth of Latin American history, you [the Nicaraguans], in the final two decades of this century, represent yet another critical juncture. After so many false exits, you can build – with your revolutionary responsibility – a way out for Latin America.

At the beginning of the century that critical juncture belonged to Mexico, which waged and won the first social revolution of this century. We made it a reality; through the path to liberty, we sought the path to justice. But on occasion, it has become bogged down and justice has been sacrificed in the name of liberty…Halfway through this century another revolution represented the historic critical juncture in the American labyrinth: the Cuban Revolution. Through the path to justice it has sought to achieve liberty and, on occasion, it too has appeared to become bogged down.

That is why you, the Nicaraguans, at the end of this century, with those two turning points in Latin America’s labyrinth as precedents, represent the possibility that liberty, justice, equality, and security can be conjoined and become the hope for our future…

…That is why the eyes of the world are upon you. You are Nicaragua today, but America tomorrow.240

Although clearly sympathetic to its cause, López Portillo’s words point to greater truths about the Nicaraguan Revolution. Somoza’s overthrow had been a regional effort. Thus, as the Nicaraguans struggled to control the state and define the shape of their revolution to come, those processes acquired regional significance – they reverberated across the continent and overlapped with broader Latin American debates about the region’s history, underdevelopment, and its place in the Cold War.

The Nicaraguans who found themselves with the greatest control over the revolutionary process were initially surprised to wield such influence. “We were not going for the whole deck,” recalls Commander Jaime Wheelock Román, of the FSLN’s expectations for the transition.241 Playing a weak hand relative to their moderate domestic allies and international partners, Sandinista leaders had accepted significant concessions ahead of Somoza’s toppling. In

241 Jaime Wheelock Román, previously cited interview with the author.
theory, they had conquered only part of the spoils of victory: a minority of the new government’s cabinet ministers were declared Sandinistas, and the FSLN did not enjoy an absolute majority in the plans for a new legislative body. Crucially, the executive leadership of the new government was shared with two moderate bourgeois leaders.  

But in one fell swoop, with an unexpected military victory, the Sandinistas vastly improved their position. Naturally, the collapse of the National Guard killed plans for a hybrid military. Instead, the FSLN’s National Directorate, despite the appointment of a former National Guardsmen as Defense Minister, held full control over the Interior Ministry and the armed forces, now re-organized as the Sandinista Popular Army. While it would not become apparent for several months, the FSLN’s newfound monopoly on violence had relegated the Junta of Reconstruction to a secondary plane on July 19th. The Puntarenas Plan, crafted deliberately in Panama and Costa Rica to ensure a smooth and democratic transition, had been compromised.

Additionally, the revolutionary coalition’s ideological heterogeneity – an asset during the insurrectionary period – was bound to become a source of unsustainable contradictions when it came time to govern. In September 1979, just three months after the mixed revolutionary junta was installed, a leaked Sandinista pamphlet known as the 72-hours document (after the three-day

242 According to Ramírez, it was “a plural government the likes of which had never been seen in Nicaraguan history, but one that would only last a few months, because in December [1979] we opted for Sandinista hegemony, creating a cumbersome apparatus which left out the great majority of our allies,” Adiós Muchachos, 67.

243 Tomás Borge headed the Interior Ministry (responsible for intelligence, counterintelligence, and state security) and General Humberto Ortega was named chief of the Sandinista Army.

244 “When all military power, and therefore all political power, became concentrated in hands of the FSLN’s National Directorate, the Junta quickly moved on to a secondary plane in real terms, even though it conserved its formal attributes. This slide had been warned by Violeta Chamorro and by Alfonso Robelo, the two members of the Junta which did not belong to the FSLN,” Adiós Muchachos, 106. Ramirez elaborates on how the new Junta of Reconstruction had little engagement with these national security organizations, in previously cited interview with the author: “The Junta passed on to a secondary plane, which is to say a strictly “governmental” plane, to lead the government, but not to occupy itself with issues of national security. Security begins to be organized apart from the government. Because the Interior Ministry becomes a reserve apart from the government, with secret organizations which the Junta has nothing to do with: intelligence, counterintelligence, state security; on the other hand the Army (entity which the Junta has nothing to do with), and ministries such as the Agrarian Reform Ministry, where Jaime Wheelock’s power was such that what he did was coordinate with the Junta, but the Junta did not give instructions to Jaime Wheelock.”
assembly of cadres which preceded its drafting) called the present moment a “phase of
democratic transition” on the path toward the full “transformation of the social relations
production.” The need to avert a U.S. intervention forced the FSLN into an alliance with the
bourgeoisie, it argued, but after the National Guard’s collapse Nicaragua knew “no power other
than that represented by the FSLN.”

In retrospect, Sandinista leaders have argued that the
document’s radical vision was less a serious expression of policy than an attempt at cohering an
eager party base, and to convince it of the FSLN’s revolutionary intentions despite the ongoing
alliance with the capitalist class. Indeed, the Nicaraguan Revolution never came close to the
implementation of the hardcore Marxist-Leninist vision for politics, economy, and society laid
out here. Still, even if the National Directorate was pragmatic in practice, its apparent desire to
move in a more radical direction raised questions about the durability of the broad revolutionary
coalition.

Despite these contradictions, the first Junta succeeded in consolidating the new
Nicaraguan state and reconstructing the country. Humanitarian relief and reconstruction aid
flowed from across the Americas to help rebuild “a destroyed country,” as Carazo termed it.

245 The FSLN’s National Directorate was visibly aware of their reversal of fortune and the implications for the broad
government Junta, telling its cadres: “The Government of Reconstruction…entered Managua triumphantly under
conditions that were not at all like those that prevailed at the moment of its creation. The war had been won by
Sandinismo and the people recognized the absolute victory of Sandinismo above all else,” “Análisis de la coyuntura
y tareas de la Revolución Popular Sandinista – tesis políticas y militares presentadas por la Dirección Nacional del
Frente Sandinista de Liberación Ncional en la Asamblea de Cuadros ‘Rigoberto López Pérez’” September 21-23,
1979, 7. Portions of the “Seventy-Two Hours” Document are also translated and reproduced in Reproduced in The

246 “The documento de las 72 horas was an internal Front document, by a Directorate which took power before it
thought would…It was necessary to have a rough idea of what the future might look like. Of what direction to go
in…it was important that we as a Directorate could show to the Nicaraguan public, which had struggled for the
Revolution, that we sincerely wanted to make changes.” Jaime Wheelock Román, previously cited interview.

247 “Modesto” calls the document “an attempt to reconcile the [ideological] contradictions we had between us.” Henry
Ruiz, previously cited interview with the author.

Indeed, as the 72 hours document noted, even the FSLN’s own Programa Mínimo was timid – and a reflection of
short-term alliances made in the insurrectionary period – compared to the transformational vision outlined here:
“…the alliance that took the form of the National Reconstruction Government, the cabinet and, to a major extent,
the FSLN’s programa mínimo, under the circumstances of the new offensives by the insurrection, was designed to
neutralize Yankee interventionist policies in light of the imminent Sandinista military victory.” “Análisis de la
Much of it was inspired by the ulterior political motive of holding the revolutionaries to their promise of non-alignment. Having failed to block the Sandinistas’ path to power, President Carter welcomed Junta members Ortega, Ramírez, and Robelo to the White House in September 1979 and proposed a strengthening of ties; his administration believed that the FSLN was “wearing a moderate mask” and substantial economic relief aid might help “nail it on”, a strategy which many Latin American diplomats encouraged. Panamanian help train the new Sandinista police force to ensure, in Torrijos’ words, that “the colorization of this revolution will be neither Castro nor Iran.” Mexico sent important financial assistance so that Nicaragua would not have to rely exclusively on either Soviet or U.S. aid; excessive involvement from either country, its Foreign Ministry believed, might destabilize the country. With Havana’s advice, the FSLN quickly re-organized the armed forces and established territorial control; following the Cuban model, they also rapidly integrated the populace into the state-building process through the grassroots Sandinista Defense Committees. Significantly, the new government consolidated its takeover while abolishing the death penalty and avoiding the televised show trials and public executions seen in the Cuban and Iranian Revolutions. The earnest implementation of the slogan “relentless in combat, generous in victory” honored key promises made at Puntarenas and indicated that the Nicaraguan experiment might live up to its uniquely humanistic image.

248 A senior State Department official quoted in William Leogrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-82*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 30. The U.S. sent somewhere between $18.5 and $23 million in relief aid in the immediate wake of the insurrection; Congress approved a package of $75 million in February, 1980. Colombian President Julio César Turbay told Assistant Secretary of State Vak “the best bet to counter the Cuban-Soviet strategy is to copy it and support the moderates. Humanitarian assistance, Turbay continued, provides a rationale for intervention that cannot be denounced as intervention. U.S. assistance must be substantial enough to be visibly the most important and larger than that provided by Cuba or the Soviet Union.” “Paper Prepared in the White House,” Washington, July 30, 1979, *FRUS Volume XV*, 724.


250 Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores “Notas de Nicaragua,” September 11, 1979, Archivo Genaro Estrada, III-3379-1; As Ojeda and Herrera note, upon the triumph of the Revolution “Mexican diplomacy directed its efforts in two senses: to try to protect the new revolutionary government in Nicaragua from the attacks by North American foreign policy and to try to moderate the new Nicaraguan government in order for it to conserve the pluralistic characteristics of the revolution.” *Op cit.*, 433-34.
The mixed Junta also fulfilled key, consensually defined promises from the “Plan for Achieving Peace” it presented at the OAS. First, they approved a “Fundamental Statute” which restored civil liberties and enshrined the most expansive list of human rights Nicaraguans had ever seen, including a section on “economic rights.” Soon after, and less than a month after taking power, the Junta signed a decree which ordered the expropriation of the vast holdings of the Somoza estate. While critics would later point to arbitrary confiscations as evidence of the FSLN’s “totalitarianism,” the outgoing dictator’s expropriation (and the economic policy of redistributing his wealth through a program known as the *Area de la Propiedad del Pueblo*) was a key commitment of the insurrectionary coalition, and widely popular.251 In the health and education realm, early social reforms to expand basic public services – best symbolized by the 1980 Literacy Campaign, which reduced illiteracy from around 50% to roughly 12% in nine months – were the most materially impactful policies of a decade-long revolution which generally failed to fundamentally alter the socioeconomic structure of its society.252

In summary, despite the last-minute collapse of plans for a shared military, the evolution of post-Somoza Nicaragua in its first months seemed to smoothly proceed along the lines drawn by the transnational coalition in Panama and Costa Rica. On the one hand, the bourgeois-Sandinista alliance was able to rapidly implement bold reforms; after conversations with Miguel D’Escoto (a Doce member and the new Nicaraguan Foreign Minister) and Humberto Ortega in December 1979, the Cuban Vice-Minister for Foreign Relations reported favorably on the surprising revolutionary zeal of the Junta’s moderate members.253 On the other hand, Carter

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251 In fact, the moderate members of the Junta enthusiastically backed a provision to confiscate not just Somoza’s holdings but also those of his “next of kin” and “known associates.” Wheelock, interview with the author. According to Wheelock, Violeta Chamorro was the first to sign the decree.
253 “Memorandum: Conversación con el Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores de Nicaragua Miguel D’Escoto,” December 18, 1979, Centro de Documentación MINREX, Havana, Box 2.
administration officials concluded that their worst fears for the transition had been “overdrawn.”

Even in that first year, however, cracks began to show. In April 1980, Chamorro and Robelo abruptly resigned from their posts over the National Directorate’s attempts to bring the government further under its control. The first mixed Junta’s collapse suggested that the moderates’ presence in government was more a function of short-term alliances and negotiations with international allies than a truly constitutive element of the revolutionary agenda. Even Sandinista leaders recognized this to be the case.

This chapter describes how the FSLN, emboldened by its military victory and empowered by its popular support, seized control of the state and moved the agenda towards the more radical goal of fundamentally re-making the structure of Nicaraguan society, down to the creation of a utopian “New Man” and “New Woman” imbued with revolutionary values. The Sandinistas’ moderate political allies were marginalized and the class groups they represented saw their interests severely challenged by the government’s redistributive economic policies. The radicalization of the Revolution toward a more socialist direction – which owed primarily to the ideological and strategic consensus of the FSLN’s 9-man National Directorate – and the concomitant collapse of the multi-class coalition was paralleled by the gradual disillusionment of some of the Latin American leaders that had collaborated to oust Somoza.

254 The Ambassador in Nicaragua, in November 1979, reported to Washington: “We face in Nicaragua today what six months ago had been the worst case situation: complete victory and domination by the Sandinista forces, the elimination of the National Guard and, with it, the loss of counter-balancing military forces to assure moderates an opportunity to play a political role. Yet the Sandinistas have been restrained and we are able to maintain a position of influence despite our long and close association with the Somoza dynasty. From this experience it is clear that the worst case scenario (bloodbath, etc) was overdrawn, and that the influence of the United States, especially in Central America, is more pervasive than we often estimate,” “Telegram from the Embassy in Nicaragua to the Department of State,” Managua, November 5, 1979, FRUS: Volume XVI, 747. Commenting on the first year of revolution, Robert Pastor writes: “The ideological rhetoric was disconcerting, but the policies that emerged from the government reflected a commitment to the revolution’s three objectives – pluralism, a mixed economy, and nonalignment – albeit with reservations.” Not Condemned to Repetition, 165.

255 The FSLN’s own documento de las 72 horas referred to the Government of National Reconstruction as little more than “the political alternative designed to neutralize yankee interventionism.” “Análisis de la coyuntura y tareas de la Revolución Popular Sandinista,” 7.
Regional leaders paid special attention to the Sandinistas’ international orientation. Though non-aligned in meaningful ways, the revolutionary government’s growing ties to socialist countries – and most importantly – its support for Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador, provided a perfect pretext for U.S. aggression and therefore violated the unwritten terms of the tacit agreement that propelled them to power in the summer of 1979. Some right-leaning governments identified Managua as a threat and moved to undermine the Sandinista government; these were soon joined and later eclipsed by the hawkish Reagan administration, the inauguration of which marked the end of détente in the Third World. Yet other Latin American leaders, haunted by a past of North American meddling, found that the threat of U.S. intervention was worse than any danger posed by Cuban-leaning revolutionaries in the poorest country in Central America. Thus, the consolidation of a truly Sandinista government in Nicaragua, coupled with the onset of the so-called Reagan Offensive, set the stage for the international battle which would define the final decade of Latin America’s Cold War: a contest between an East-West vision of global affairs – in which leftist radicalization in the region appeared as a foreign socialist menace – and a North-South conceptualization of Latin American history, which identified the endogenous, social roots of revolutionary agitation and therefore sought local solutions to the conflicts those upheavals had unleashed.

**THE CONSOLIDATION OF A “SANDINISTA” REVOLUTION**

The July 19 revolution seemed to augur a historic opportunity for political renewal on a continental scale. An internal memo from the Costa Rican presidency outlined the unprecedented nature of Somoza’s overthrow and its international implications:
Recent events in Nicaragua have opened an enormous hope in all Latin American countries, and particularly in those ruled by dictatorial regimes. For the first time in the history of our countries’ international relations, a democratic liberation movement has received the support, first of all, of continent’s democratic regimes and also, at least the neutrality of other governments which in other eras would have offered their moral and material support to the sustenance of the dictatorial system.

The Revolution, the document observed, was poised to lead to the liberation of other countries ruled by dictatorships, but only if and when Nicaragua established a regime which respected human rights, allowed for ideological pluralism, and pursued an authentically independent and self-determined foreign policy. Thus, the revolutionary government’s leaders must be enormously responsible in the decisions they took, because “at play” were the “fates of many brother peoples of Latin America.”

Echoing the sentiment, Spanish socialist party leader Felipe González declared that for other democratic transitions in Central America, “Nicaragua can and should be an example, a symbol. Its leaders have no right to fail.”

Much of that promise rested on the fate of the mixed Junta, which was weighed down by contradictions from the beginning. Since its installation, Alfonso Robelo was caught between the revolutionary and centralizing impulses of the Sandinista Front and the conservative outlook of COSEP, the federation of business associations he used to preside over. In the first few weeks and months, the country’s producers’ associations and chambers of commerce complained that the decree which expropriated the Somoza estate could result in arbitrary or targeted confiscations of political opponents. Robelo shared some of those concerns, but for several months downplayed his criticisms in order to keep his seat on the Junta and therefore preserve

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256 “To the extent that Nicaragua moves toward a regime of respect toward human rights, which admits ideological pluralism and that seeks the implantation of a democratic regime...and that it pursues a policy of authentic independence and self-determination in the international arena, other peoples of our America will see their possibilities increased of liberating themselves from the dictatorial regimes which oppress them and count on the solidarity that the Nicaraguan people counted on.” “Memorandum sobre la situación de Nicaragua y su incidencia en América Latina,” Archivo Nacional, San José, Fondo Presidencia, Signatura 261.

257 González added that there was a broad international consensus for a democratic transition, citing the fact that Carlos Andrés Pérez, Omar Torrijos, and Fidel Castro had set aside differences to help Nicaragua. “Ejemplo para otros países centroamericanos,” El País, August 2, 1979.
his say in the policymaking process. In March 1980, he declared that his pro-business
*Movimiento Democratico Nicaragüense* (MDN) was “totally dedicated” to the Revolution, of
which the FSLN was “the decisive factor” and the private business sector “the motor.”

The straw that broke the camel’s back, however, was the Sandinista government’s
restructuring of the Council of State (the new government’s yet-to-be inaugurated legislative
body) in order to bring it under party control. According to the original government plan
presented at the OAS, the FSLN would control only 12 of 33 seats. At a meeting at Sergio
Ramírez’s house on April 16, 1980, the FSLN-loyal members of the Junta proposed to expand
the legislature to 47 seats in order to incorporate the various popular organizations (for example,
the Nicaraguan Women’s Association, the Sandinista Youth, various FSLN-affiliated workers’
unions) created in the wake of Somoza’s overthrow. As Junta member Moisés Hassán recalls,
this “imposition” – which gave the Sandinistas a *de facto* absolute majority in the legislature –
was a clear violation of the spirit and letter of the agreements reached in Panama and Costa Rica
in the early summer of 1979, where he was present. Faced with a 3-2 Sandinista voting
majority on the Junta, Robelo could not block the move and instead resigned a few days later in
protest of “fundamental changes” to the original plans for the transition; Chamorro also resigned
after citing health and personal reasons, although she too became a vehement critic of the FSLN
in due course. Reporting on the Council of State’s restructuring and the collapse of the first
Junta, the Mexican Foreign Ministry – itself part of a (self-styled) revolutionary, one-party state

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259 Hassán recalls the violation of the “San José Accords” – his shorthand term for what I call the Puntarenas Plan, or
more generally refer to as talks held by the transnational coalition in June and July of 1979 – in an interview with *El
Ortega was out of the country at the time the issue was debated inside the Junta, Jaime Wheelock voted in his stead,
an act which he points out “breached all legality.” Ramírez, previously cited interview with the author.
— wondered in a memo if the Nicaraguan government had “ceased to represent a true coalition, instead becoming a regime of ‘limited pluralism’”. 260

Indeed, the re-balancing of the legislature was part of the FSLN National Directorate’s greater efforts to consolidate a level of control over the Nicaraguan state which they believed their armed struggle and popular support had entitled them to. At the time, the remaining members of the Junta simply denounced Robelo’s resignation as a counterrevolutionary provocation. 261 In retrospect, however, Humberto Ortega has argued that Robelo and the private sector wanted a legislature that functioned like a “bourgeois parliament under their hegemony”; the new “popular democratic” assembly, Ortega suggests, corresponded to the “real balance of forces” established by the Sandinista Front’s military overthrow of the National Guard and its predominance in any every area of Nicaraguan society other than private enterprise. 262 Beyond the legislative branch, consider Jaime Wheelock’s perspective on the reasons for Sandinista centralization:

The FSLN exercised unopposed hegemony; it made the major decisions for change. This did not seem to jibe, however, with the FSLN’s declared desire to govern based on broad and effective citizen participation. But the FSLN’s strength lay primarily in the fact that it had been the architect of the overthrow of Somoza. It had accumulated, if not a consensus, at least the support of the most numerous and best organized popular sectors. And, of course, the FSLN represented, in a more radical sense, the mission to bring the significant change Nicaragua demanded. The Sandinistas’ right to assume a high degree of control over the state came from the overwhelming political legitimacy acquired by Sandinismo… 263

Indeed, bottom-up, popular pressures also contributed to the consolidation of FSLN rule. In the immediate aftermath of Somoza’s overthrow, those mass organizations created by the Sandinistas demanded representation in the Council of State and threatened unrest if denied

participation.\textsuperscript{264} In fact, workers’ unions on the extreme left persistently demanded more radical economic policies and the exclusion of moderates and traditional elites. Faced with spontaneous land seizures by a zealous population whose aspirations had been unleashed by the victory, the government expropriated properties in order to bring this organic agrarian reform under state control.\textsuperscript{265} Following this appraisal of the Front’s political strength, the National Directorate in December 1979 pushed through a reform which substituted many moderate ministers in the cabinet with Sandinista replacements.\textsuperscript{266} These changes toward greater FSLN control were explained by, as Ortega’s argument suggests, the sudden, unexpected change in the Sandinistas’ position \textit{vis-à-vis} their allies in 1979 – where they had depended on moderate and foreign allies to have any hope of sharing power – and their uncontested military hegemony after Somoza’s ouster.\textsuperscript{267} That game-changer widened the FSLN National Directorate’s imaginary of the politically possible; as Nicaraguan analysts Silvio de Franco and José Luís Velázquez point out: “Once the Tercerista leadership became aware of the realities of power, which they had previously underestimated, they realized that sufficient political space had opened up to allow

\textsuperscript{264} “Bi-weekly Report,” U.S. Embassy, Nicaragua, Confidential, November 9, 1979, DNSA (ProQuest ID: 1679069133).

\textsuperscript{265} Wheelock, in interview with the author, explains how the decrees to expropriate the Somoza estate were not entirely top-down initiatives, and often sought to simply legalize popular land seizures which had already taken place: “I participated, for example, in the discussion for Decree 329, which established the expropriation of all properties which in some way had been seized or occupied by peasants. There was a Decree 3, and a Decree 38, which affected somocismo. But the Junta saw that, four or five months later, that there was a number of farms that were in hands of people which had taken them during the way, and others that had been seizure immediately after Somoza fell. So we made an effort: there were struggles to unify the situation and control it in some way, looking for ways to remove people who had occupied lands that did not belong to them. And on the other hand, to impede the development of spontaneous agrarian reform…What I said during this situation was, “What can we do? This is a social situation and what has happened here is that a wave has emerged since before the triumph of the revolution and what we have to do is make sure that wave – before it turns into a tsunami – crests softly, but there also has to be some sort of response, in order to avoid chaos.” For a review of the arguments made by the so-called “ultra-left” against the revolutionary government, see Central de Acción y Unidad Social, “Apuntes sobre la grave crisis económica del país y del viraje de la revolución,” October 6, 1981, AIHNCA, CAUS-0016.

\textsuperscript{266} In any event, as the FSLN Secretary General of the Foreign Ministry puts it, from early on “the orders came from the National Directorate.” Alejandro Bendaña (who also served at various points as the FSLN government’s ambassador to the United Nations), interview with the author, August 24, 2016.

\textsuperscript{267} As political scientist Thomas Walker explains, “The Sandinistas enjoyed a number of political assets, 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.” “Introduction,” in \textit{Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua}, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 9.
the [FSLN] to go beyond a simple social democratic experiment. This was the beginning of the attempted “transition to socialism” project.”

While aggressive U.S. policies later in the decade pushed the FSLN to seek greater control, the earlier consolidation of a Sandinista-dominated, socialist-oriented government in the 1979-81 period is better explained by internal factors. Humberto Ortega retroactively explains that the alliance with the traditional elite failed because bourgeois politicians did not comprehend the need for an “army-party-state” form of government which the “threat of a war of aggression [from the U.S.] turned into an imperative.” At the time of the first Junta’s collapse, however, the U.S. government was sending massive economic aid to the Nicaraguan government with the hope of encouraging its moderation. To that same end, since July 1979 the CIA had been funding moderate political organizations, but the Carter administration saw intervention – such as the later efforts to arm, finance, and organize a military insurgency – as “out of the question, particularly given the warmth with which the revolution was greeted by its democratic neighbors.” In fact, just a few months after Chamorro and Robelos’ resignations, ambassador Lawrence Pezzullo marked the first anniversary of Somoza’s overthrow with the oft-cited statement that the Nicaraguans were carrying out an “acceptable model of revolution.”

As Wheelock’s explanation demonstrates, the FSLN’s National Directorate did not move away from previous plans for a shared government because it felt compelled to do so by actors in Washington. Many of their demands, such as their insistence on having partisan security forces –

268 Silvio de Franco and José Luis Velázquez, “Democratic Transitions in Nicaragua,” in Democratic Transitions in Central America, 88.
270 Pastor, Not Condemned to Repetition, 159. On the day of the Sandinista victory, Carter signed a presidential finding which directed the CIA “to assist democratic elements in Nicaragua to resist efforts of Cuban-supported and other Marxist groups to consolidate power by disseminating non-attributable propaganda worldwide and in Nicaragua in their support and in opposition to Cuban involvement.” “Paper Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency,” Washington, undated, FRUS: Volume XV, 737.
271 Pezzullo’s full comments were: “The most dreadful theses about this country have not come to pass. Nicaragua is an acceptable model of a country after a revolution – and that's crucially important for the whole region.” “Nicaragua: An Unfinished Revolution,” Newsweek, July 28, 1980.
Somoza’s praetorian guard was replaced by the Sandinista Popular Army – obviously clashed with the Junta’s stated commitment to representative government and the separation of powers. But the Sandinistas felt that they were democratizing Nicaragua along other, more important axes. Free and universal healthcare, popular housing, educational crusades, the expansion of labor rights and, most importantly, efforts to more equitably redistribute the gains from economic growth – all of these changes were steps toward the “economic democratization” they believed necessary to correct what they saw as the country’s entangled legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and uneven capitalist development. As Ortega himself admits, the rapid implementation of transformative reforms and the consolidation of revolutionary gains required “revolutionary centralism” with power concentrated in the FSLN’s 9-man Directorate.\textsuperscript{272} That collective leadership, despite rivalries from the insurrectionary period, cohered around its ideological vision: its more orthodox members hoped to quickly emulate Cuba and the Soviet Union’s “real socialism,” but even their moderate compañeros believed they were working towards the ultimate goal of maturing conditions for a full transition to socialism.\textsuperscript{273}

The creation of a liberal-democratic system was less important than the program for radical social transformation, as the refusal to hold elections demonstrated. Robelo had resigned in April 1980, in part, over this issue. Days after the resignation, FSLN National Director Bayardo Arce privately told Western diplomats that the triumph of the revolution was “the triumph of the FSLN” and therefore they had the right to govern on their own; elections, he

\textsuperscript{272} Ortega, \textit{Odisea por Nicaragua}, 116. The Directorate, he writes, “imposed itself clearly as the central generator of the country, and everything must be subordinated to this power which only gives space to certain consultation with the different forces of the national context.”

\textsuperscript{273} While the different branches of the FSLN argued over tactics during the insurrectionary period, they were more or less on the same page programmatically, as Ortega explains: “Some of us Sandinista leaders argued that the revolutionary character of our process for historical change should be ‘nationalist-democratic-popular,’ within the greater framework of national liberation. All this, in order to assure that in future conditions could mature to allow for socialism, but without specifying what type of socialism. Others, more orthodox, believed that we were in the phase of “national and social liberation,” and therefore privileged the models of “real socialism” from the Soviet orbit, particularly that of Cuba.” \textit{Odisea por Nicaragua}, 112.
added, would only be held until after the implementation of key reforms and the people had become conscious of gains made under the Revolution.\textsuperscript{274} The continued support of non-Sandinista middle- and upper-class leaders seemed to bolster the FSLN’s claim that their armed victory was a form of popular sovereignty. Indeed, Robelo and Chamorro were swiftly replaced on the Junta by Arturo Cruz, a Doce member and Inter-American Development Bank technocrat, and Rafael Córdoval Rivas, a close ally of the late Pedro Joaquín Chamorro and Conservative party leader. Despite this apparent approval of Sandinista hegemony, FSLN director Henry Ruíz recalls today that they “should have held elections immediately.”\textsuperscript{275} In those early days, Wheelock explains, “some Sandinista leaders assumed that the democratization of Nicaraguan politics would serve as a tactic to reduce support for, and thereby prevent, U.S. aggression against the Sandinista government.”\textsuperscript{276} But later in the decade, when the FSLN tried to solve internal and external problems by holding full elections and drafting a robust, liberal constitution, the Reagan administration was now in a position to help scuttle those efforts.

As the summer of 1980 wore on, the business sector increasingly called for elections, and the issue began to resonate on the international scene. On August 22, 1980, at a ceremony held in Managua to commemorate the end of the literacy crusades, guest of honor Rodrigo Carazo took the podium to remind the FSLN of the commitment it made before the OAS to hold free and fair elections. Only the people, the Costa Rican insisted in front of a plaza packed with Sandinista sympathizers, could choose and therefore legitimize their government. Shortly thereafter, Humberto Ortega took the stage to offer a bitter rebuke:

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\item \textsuperscript{274}“Telegrama 65,” Managua, May 9, 1980, AGE III-3433-1; Ortega offered the following excuse for the electoral delay: “Objectively, we required a longer period of time before going to general elections, because this was not a crisis of a government in previously established democratic system, which was the case in Costa Rica in the revolution of 1948, an episode where the caudillo José Figueres had to be at the front of a transitional Junta for nearly 2 years. In Nicaragua, the change from a dictatorial regime was more radical, and therefore the transition had to be longer.” \textit{Odisea por Nicaragua}, 114.
\item \textsuperscript{275}Ruiz, previously cited interview with the author.
\item \textsuperscript{276}Wheelock, “Revolution and Democratic Transition in Nicaragua,” 74.
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For the Sandinista front, democracy is not measured only in political terms, nor is it confined merely to participation in elections...Democracy begins in the economic order, when social inequalities begin to weaken, when workers and peasants improve their standard of living. This is the beginning of true democracy – and never before.

At the end of his speech, Ortega announced that elections would be held in 1985 – six years after Somoza’s overthrow – but warned that “they are elections to improve the power of the revolution, but they are not a raffle to see who has power, because the people have the power through their vanguard, the Sandinista Liberation Front and its National Directorate.”

The public dispute reminded Carazo of an early milestone of the Cuban Revolution, in which then-Costa Rican president Pepe Figueres, who had supported the anti-Batista rebels, made a similar plea for elections on his visit to newly-revolutionary Havana in March 1959. He was also similarly rebuked by Castro. Much like that incident marked a distancing between the Cuban revolution and the non-Marxist Latin American forces which supported it, for Carazo the dispute symbolized the greater cooling of relations that was taking place between revolutionary Nicaragua and one of the countries most responsible for bringing it into being.

Humberto Ortega’s speech was read by business leaders as the “FSLN stat[ing] its intention of remaining in power forever.” The organized private sector became the most consistent source of criticism because, as political economist Rose Spalding has written, early Sandinista policies “delivered a heavy blow to the traditional bastions of economic power in Nicaragua.”


Carazo recalls the incident in an interview with La Prensa, “Hablar de elecciones incomodaba a líderes sandinistas,” July 14, 2009 and in his memoir, Tiempo y Marcha, 398-99.


years, there was an extremely distributionist thesis. According to that view, a skewed distribution of resources was the prime factor in the economy’s failure to meet human needs.”

In pursuit of this redistribution, the Sandinistas took control of the nations’ banks and financial institutions, created state trading monopolies, massively expanded the state bureaucracy and most importantly, expropriated the Somoza estate. Producers agglomerated in COSEP saw these policies as evidence that the Sandinistas did not actually want a mixed economy, and they increasingly argued that the government was arbitrarily targeting political opponents – including those which had nothing to do with the ancien régime – for confiscation, a criticism which some FSLN leaders have accepted in retrospect.

Citing these grievances, COSEP pulled out of the Council of State in November 1980. Polarization reached new heights with the killing by security forces of Jorge Salazar, the young and charismatic leader of the Agricultural Producers’ Union, who the FSLN accused of conspiring with ex-Somocista guardsmen to lead an armed insurgency. The deterioration in

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282 According to Velázquez and de Franco, the government grew from 35,000 employees in 1979 to 187,929 by the end of the Revolution, Democratic Transitions in Central America, 92.
283 Enrique Bolaños (COSEP President), “Análisis del Programa de Gobierno,” 1983, Biblioteca Enrique Bolaños, Colección: Presidente Bolaños-Escritos. Wheelock blames the decree which expropriated the Somoza estate for being too capacious: “…indicating that not only were they the properties of Somoza, but of those associated with Somocismo. And that opened up a whole series of problems here that were not necessarily created by the leadership of the Front, but rather by the government which was trying to respond to situation that had arisen. Because [in the law] are included people who were not members of the Somoza family, but that had thirty properties because [for instance] they had been chief of the Guard command in Matagalpa, or commanders of the Army,” previously cited interview with the author.
284 Salazar had been killed by government security forces, who alleged that he had been conspiring with ex-Somoza National Guardsmen to carry out a military coup. In fact, the Carter administration had become aware through intelligence sources of possible coup attempts by moderates [“Memorandum From the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs to President Carter”] but decided that “the coup plot is not in our interest.” Specifically, Ambassador Pezzullo argued “the Cubans were probably responsible for spreading the word about a coup in order to flush out dissidents, and then at the appropriate moment, their allies in the FSLN would get rid of the coup plotters and tighten their control over government [“Memorandum from Robert Pastor of the NSC Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski),” Washington, October 21, 1980, FRUS: Volume XV, 769]. Pastor alleges that U.S. ambassador Lawrence Pezzullo, believing the coup rumors to be a sophisticated entrapment, warned Salazar against going through with any conspiracy [Not Condemned to Repetition, 183]. Regardless, according to then-FSLN militant Vilma Nuñez, who has for decades headed the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights, cites “the assassination in cold blood in 1980 of producer and business leader Jorge Salazar” as an “emblematic case” of human rights abuses committed by her party’s government. Salazar’s death, she points out,
government-business relations, in turn, seemed to enable the FSLN to press forward with more radical, socialist-oriented reforms. In the summer of 1981, the FSLN announced the Ley de los Ausentes, a controversial decree which gave the government the power to confiscate idle lands as well as the properties of business leaders who had left the country after 1979; the Ley de Cooperativas regulated the transfer of those lands into State hands for the creation of either state-owned or collectively-owned agricultural communes. They also announced in July the beginning of the agrarian reform – the centerpiece of the Sandinista’s program for social transformation – (analyzed in-depth in Chapter 3), which would eventually become decisive because it increased tensions “not just with big producers, but medium and small and producers too, some of whom took up arms and joined the counterrevolution.”285 A minimum of dialogue was always kept – a CIA estimate noted how the Mexican government, in hopes of keeping the grand alliance intact, influenced the Sandinistas to maintain such dialogue – but by August 1981 Sergio Ramírez was celebrating that the country’s “backward” and “primitive” bourgeoisie had become permanently powerless.286

In a more ominous blow to the Sandinistas’ pluralistic, social-democratic visage, Edén Pastora – who had become Vice Minister of Defense and chief of the Sandinistas’ civilian militias – quit the government in June 1981. In a handwritten letter which echoed Che Guevara’s letter of resignation to Fidel Castro, Pastora told Humberto Ortega that he felt compelled “to go

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286 Ramirez, “Los sobrevivientes del naufragio,” reproduced in the Central American Crisis Reader, 239. “Mexico has maintained contacts with Nicaraguan business representatives in the Superior Council of the Private Sector (COSEP), advising a COSEP delegation in Mexico City last March to remain patient with the Sandinistas. At the same time, according to both Nicaraguan Ambassador in Washington Arturo Cruz and National Democratic Movement leader Alfonso Robelo, the Mexicans recently seem to have influenced the Sandinistas to maintain a dialogue with the opposition,” Bureau of Intelligence and Research, “Mexican-Nicaraguan Relations: Can Mexico Moderate the Sandinistas,” Secret, August 12, 1981, DNSA (ProQuest ID: 1679049643); Mexican officials kept their own record of that March meeting: “Memorandum de Conversación con COSEP,” Tlatelolco, March 9, 1981, AG-SRE III-3490-1.
after the smell of gunpowder” and lead internationalist brigades in national liberation struggles elsewhere in Latin America. The true motives for his resignation were unclear at the time, but in any event, his resignation was a poor marker of the evolution of the Puntarenas vision for post-Somoza Nicaragua: after all, when Panama, Venezuela, and Costa Rica began collaborating to overthrow Somoza in Fall of 1978, their strategy was, in Carazo’s words, to “support Pastora 100 percent.” Pérez and Torrijos actually saw Pastora’s exit as an opportunity; they made efforts to coax the guerrilla leader back into Nicaragua in exchange for the government making democratic concessions.

Within a year, however, Pastora was making his true feelings clear: “I fought 23 years for a government that was pluralist, nationalist, democratic, revolutionary and anti-imperialist, but this government has violated all of those things.” Given his popularity abroad and close ties to other Latin American governments, the Sandinista National Directorate was more concerned about Pastora’s defection than rumors of organizing by Somoza-era National Guardsmen, who around this time began receiving CIA support. “We should not forget,” stated a National Directorate prognosis on Pastora’s counterrevolutionary plans, “that this is the real counterrevolution, which will have international scope, serious financial support and dangerous propaganda means. The [Somocista] guardsmen will go on to a secondary plane…” The Directorate’s concerned response to Pastora’s defection shows how the most serious threat to the

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288 Quoted in Pastor, Not Condemned to Repetition, 102.
289 In a letter to Willy Brandt from July 13, 1981, Pérez wrote: “We continue carrying out efforts to avoid the twisting of the course of the pluralistic project. With respect to the resignation of Commander Edén Pastora (Comandante Cero), we believe that we can use it to provoke some favorable reactions among the Sandinista commanders. In Panama we are taking measures in that respect, which involve his return.” “Letter from Carlos Andrés Pérez to Willy Brandt,” Caracas, July 13, 1981, Princeton Firestone Library, Sergio Ramírez Papers, Box 61, Folder 11.
Revolution came from *within* the revolutionary coalition of 1979. Tellingly, Pastora had signed his July 1981 resignation letter “Sandinista yesterday, Sandinista today, Sandinista forever.” Similarly, Doce member Arturo Cruz, who quit the government a few months after Pastora, insisted in his resignation speech that “he would continue in the revolution until the end.”

Cruz, Pastora, Robelo, and Violeta Chamorro had all played pivotal roles in overthrowing Somoza and bringing the FSLN to power, and co-governed with the Sandinistas in the early period; these same people would become some of the most visible figures of the incipient, U.S.-backed political and military struggles to overthrow the revolutionary government. As the multi-class coalition continued to unravel in the summer of 1981, Carlos Andrés Pérez wrote to Willy Brandt, the former social-democratic West German Chancellor and then-president of the Socialist International that “The situation in Nicaragua is grave, delicate…The ambiguity of the policies implemented by the Sandinista government” were producing serious disputes within the global center-left movement.

Other Latin American leaders who had backed the FSLN in 1979 with the hope of moderating it also shared these concerns. According to his advisor Marcel Salamín, on the eve of Torrijos’ death (he died in a mysterious plane crash that same month), the Panamanian leader had a trip planned to Havana where among other things he hoped to press Castro on his previous commitment to push for a pluralistic regime in Nicaragua. According to Salamín, Torrijos was not surprised by the radicalization of the Revolution, but felt that Castro was not doing anything to ensure the pluralistic outcome envisioned by the Latin American fellowship in 1979 talks. Juán José Echeverría, Carazo’s Security Minister, says that “the evolution taken by the

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293 Carlos Andrés Pérez, previously cited letter to Willy Brandt from July 13, 1981.
294 Marcel Salamín, previously cited interview with the author.
Sandinista process surprised and frustrated Costa Rica.”

Carazo himself was investigated by the National Assembly for his administration’s illegal gun trafficking to the FSLN insurrection, which polls showed had enjoyed wide approval in 1979 but by 1982 was deeply unpopular.

Between 1979 and 1981, the revolutionary government in Nicaragua had taken a shape not quite envisioned by the transnational coalition in Panama and Costa Rica before Somoza’s overthrow. The multi-class, ideologically plural revolutionary coalition had collapsed. However, the new system was pluralistic in significant ways: the revolutionary government had restored press freedoms (opposition daily La Prensa, burnt down by Somoza’s National Guard, with few exceptions operated free of censorship in this early period), announced amnesties for National Guardsmen during the July 19, 1979 seizure of state power, and as Rose Spalding notes, the Sandinistas – fearing a collapse in production – pragmatically sought dialogue with its foes in the business elite, developing a “Sandinista variant of the mixed economy.”

Indeed, as Pérez wrote to Willy Brandt, Nicaragua would not “necessarily end up radicalizing, in the hands of the Soviet Union and Cuba,” but the outcome depended much “on our firmness and ability to pressure.” Inside Nicaragua, the promise of a new type of revolutionary experiment remained alive. Another consequence of FSLN hegemony, however, was direct Sandinista control over the Nicaraguan foreign affairs. As the following sections demonstrate, it was revolutionary policies

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296 Echeverría explains the link between the radicalization of the Nicaraguan Revolution and Carazo’s political misfortunes: “…when Somoza’s resignation was announced, here [in Costa Rica] there was a nationwide party, the people went out on to the streets to celebrate. Little by little, until 1982 I would say, in which one started to feel that the orientation of the Nicaraguan government was going astray, there started to be an attitude by people who had been against Carazo’s position [of supporting the insurrection]. And the Sandinistas start to consolidate power and there appear a number of articles in the newspapers saying ‘I told you so.’ Ibid. “Informe sobre el tráfico de armas,” San José, C.R.: Asamblea Legislativa. May 14, 1981.
297 “In the new development model embraced by the new revolutionary government, traditional economic elites were displaced from the economic center; the state assumed direct responsibility for the transformation of the Nicaraguan social and economic order. In practice, however, the regime moved quickly to pragmatic adaptations. An ever-shifting concept of national unity pushed the government to identify sectors and subsectors of the traditional elite with which to seek an accommodation. Even under the most optimistic projections, the state could hardly hope to replace the extensive private sector that remained after 1979, and speedy reactivation of production required the participation of a wide swath of producers,” Spalding, 95.
in this realm which were of greatest consequence for the rest of the region – and eventually, for the fate of the revolutionary government in Managua.

THE SOURCES OF SANDINISTA FOREIGN POLICY

It was no coincidence that the Nicaraguans had listed a new-look foreign policy, alongside promises of political and economic change, as a co-equal pillar of their revolutionary agenda. For the radical Left, as FSLN diplomat Alejandro Bendaña wrote in the early revolutionary period, “a radical reorientation of Nicaragua’s international posture was a logical consequence and an immediate necessity of a revolution fought to attain genuine national independence.”\(^{298}\) The Sandinistas were inspired by the anti-American legacies of their early-20th century namesake as well as that of the Cuban Revolution. Its ideologues sincerely believed that Nicaraguan underdevelopment was the result of a symbiotic relationship between the Somoza regime, the country’s capitalist and financier classes, and U.S. economic empire.\(^{299}\) At the same time, while they did not make the same integrated economic critique of North American imperialism, much of the country’s middle- and upper-classes similarly held the U.S. government responsible for the installation and prolongation of the dictatorship. Thus, foreign affairs were destined to be of central importance for a revolutionary project born, to a large degree, from the belief that Nicaragua’s problems were external in nature.

In fact, as the FSLN consolidated power and attempted to radically re-make society, external forces only increased in importance for the country. Even before the U.S. and its allies


\(^{299}\) The title of Jaime Wheelock’s Marxist historical analysis of the Somoza regime and its class alliances illustrates this economic critique: Imperialism and Dictatorship: Crisis of a Social Development.
sought to destabilize the new government, the international sphere became the Nicaraguan Revolution’s frontline of defense; from the outset, “foreign policy was seen as fundamental,” recalls guerrilla leader and diplomat Victor Hugo Tinoco. Shedding light on the basis of Sandinista foreign policy is similarly fundamental for understanding the outsized significance that the Nicaraguan Revolution acquired at the inter-American level throughout the decade.

The revolutionaries’ first major step abroad came in September 1979, when Nicaragua joined the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM). In his speech at that year’s NAM conference in Havana, Junta member Daniel Ortega unsurprisingly marked a break with the past by depicting the U.S. as the enemy of “the people” on a global scale – meanwhile, the exiled Somoza was boasting that “no president anywhere supported the policies of the United States more devoutly” than he had. More importantly, Ortega hinted at the reasoning for joining the movement; he spoke about how Third World states “are playing an important role and exercising a growing influence in the international sphere, in the struggle of peoples against imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, apartheid, racism, including Zionism and every form oppression.” While anti-American and Third Worldist slogans were part of the DNA of the Latin American radical Left, Ortega’s enthusiastic nods to national liberation movements reflected instrumental goals. Since the birth of the United Nations in 1945, decolonization in the Third World had led to a tripling in the number of member states by this time. Sensing an opportunity, the new Nicaraguan government dramatically expanded relations with African and Asian countries – doubling them, overall – because, as Sandinista diplomat José León Talavera explains, such countries “were

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300 Victor Hugo Tinoco, interview with the author, Managua, August 23, 2016. Tinoco served first as Nicaragua’s ambassador to the United Nations and later as Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs, where he was directly responsible for Nicaraguan delegations in bilateral peace talks with the U.S. and the various multilateral peace initiatives of the decade.

301 Somoza, Nicaragua Betrayed, 78.

302 Daniel Ortega’s speech before the Non-Aligned conference in Havana, September 3-9, 1979, is reproduced in The Central American Crisis Reader, 208.
fundamental for the balance of forces in voting in international organizations.” Throughout the decade, Nicaragua turned the UN and satellite institutions like the International Court of Justice into forums for the denunciation of U.S. aggression, and the numerous favorable resolutions they achieved depended on the consistent voting support of such countries.

Non-alignment was a strategy for survival. Ortega devoted much of his NAM speech to asking the international community for aid and debt relief; the UN emitted a resolution the following month recommending massive economic assistance “with the utmost urgency” to the war-torn country. Nicaragua took aid from wherever it came. Upon taking power, for instance, the Junta initially refused to receive the diplomatic credentials of the existing ambassador of Taiwan, because that country had sold weapons to the Somoza regime. But the mood quickly changed, and a toast was shared, when they realized the Taiwanese diplomat was brandishing a check for $100,000. Other sources which seem particularly unlikely in retrospect, such as the anti-communist military governments of Guatemala and El Salvador, provided emergency credit to the cash-strapped government. As Talavera explains, the new government’s foreign policy ethos was “very simple. It was a product of a revolution which had to be defended. It implied having good relations with everybody.”

Moreover, this friendly and non-aligned posture dovetailed in important ways with the government’s internal policies. As Bendaña, then ambassador to the UN, promised at the time,

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303 José León Talavera, interview with the author, Managua, August 23, 2016. Talavera served first as Nicaragua’s ambassador to Honduras, worked later in the FSLN’s Department of International Relations, before serving most of the decade as a Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs.

304 UN General Assembly Resolution 34/8, “International assistance for the rehabilitation, reconstruction, and development of Nicaragua,” 46th plenary meeting, October 25, 1979.

305 Ramírez, Adiós Muchachos, 70.

306 “Nicaraguan Emergency Relief Assistance [Sources, Types, Amounts, and Descriptions of Relief Efforts],” U.S. Department of State Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, October 19, 1979, DNSA (ProQuest ID: 1679047013).

307 Talavera, previously cited interview with the author. Wheelock says that the first foreign policy goal of the Revolution was to “consolidate peace and seek cooperation with all the world’s nations, including the socialist camp. It was the period or stage of reconstruction which demanded the greatest possible cooperation.” Note to the author, February 12, 2017.
“the truism that a nation’s foreign policy is the extension of its domestic policy applies to Nicaragua. The Sandinista commitment to political pluralism at home found its counterpart in a foreign policy seeking to maintain friendly relations with as many countries as possible.” To apply another truism to Nicaraguan foreign relations in the revolutionary period, international observers argued that the Sandinistas were more or less the company that they kept. Thus, for critics, the FSLN’s ties to the Eastern Bloc were evidence of its totalitarian ambitions at home; for sympathizers, such as the center-left parties of the Socialist International, the belief that the Sandinistas would not embrace full Soviet-alignment was proof that they would establish an inclusive political system at home, and vice-versa. Non-alignment was crucial to the Revolution’s uniquely humanistic visage which, with an added romantic polish burnished by a generation of internationally-acclaimed writers and artists arisen in its wake, generated massive solidarity movements and mitigated U.S. intervention by helping sway Western opinion against such policies.

While the early revolutionary government maintained cordial relations with the United States and became an outspoken member of the NAM, it also showed signs of preferring especially good relations with the socialist camp. Only five days after taking power, the FSLN National Directorate travelled to Havana to celebrate their triumph with Fidel Castro – a sight which disturbed some Latin American allies – and military, diplomatic, technical, and cultural

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308 Bendaña, “The Origins of Sandinista Foreign Policy,” 326. Spalding notes this dynamic when it came to economic policy: “The inclusion of private elites in the new model was also a response to geopolitical objectives; charges of Marxist-Leninism and communism could be held at bay and the Cold War rhetoric more successfully challenged if a substantial private sector was retained,” Capitalists and Revolution in Nicaragua, 95.

309 Bendaña attributes great importance to solidarity movements: “Did solidarity have any impact? Its impact was that Nicaragua was not invaded and it did not suffer the same fate as Grenada. That’s the answer.” Previously cited interview with the author. In his memoir, Ramírez notes the magnitude of the Nicaraguan solidarity movement: “People from all over continued coming to Nicaragua to do all sorts of things, in a solidarity operation which was paralleled only by that which was inspired by the cause of the Republic during the years of the Spanish Civil War,” Adiós Muchachos, 14.
ties of all sorts were rapidly developed.\textsuperscript{310} Vietnam, Albania, North Korea, and the USSR also opened relations by the end of 1979. A Soviet embassy was not established in Managua until February 1980, after which a high-level delegation – including Ramírez, Hassan, Wheelock, Borge, and Humberto Ortega – visited Moscow to establish formal ties between the Sandinista Front and the Communist Party of the USSR. Still, the agreements formalized amounted to little more than technical and education cooperation and the establishment of routine consultations between the two parties’ leaders; the transfer of light weaponry in the 1979-81 was only executed through third parties like Algeria, Libya, Cuba and Vietnam.\textsuperscript{311} Moreover, the financial assistance from socialist countries in this period was dramatically outmatched by that which came from Western and Latin American countries; the same gap applied to Nicaragua’s volume of trade.\textsuperscript{312} Even Arab states – linked to Nicaragua via the Palestine Liberation Organization, which had ties to the FSLN dating back to the 1960s – provided more direct aid in this period.\textsuperscript{313}

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, much of that Western money sought to both moderate FSLN leaders and empower non-Sandinista elements in the government at the former’s expense.\textsuperscript{314} The National Directorate cunningly responded to such efforts by courting and

\textsuperscript{310} Marcel Salamín recalls: “One of the things that surprised us…was that a few days after making it to Managua, on July 26 [Sandinista leaders] were with Fidel Castro celebrating the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions. This was a serious blow to those forces which had faced the enormous risk of putting their skin – and that of our countries – in the game in a gamble for democratization in Central America and Nicaragua. We thought this behavior was irresponsible and put us all in danger.” Interview with the author, January 27, 2017, Panama City.


\textsuperscript{312} “Donations and Financial Assistance to Nicaragua in 1980,” U.S. Embassy, Nicaragua. December 23, 1980, DNSA (ProQuest ID: 1679048209); “Nicaraguan Emergency Relief Assistance [Sources, Types, Amounts, and Descriptions of Relief Efforts], U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, October 19, 1979, \textit{Ibid.}, (ProQuest ID: 1679047013). During the period 1979-82, only 18.5% of loans came from socialist countries.


\textsuperscript{314} The Carter administration, and most of the Latin American countries which helped overthrow Somoza, believed that “moderate tendencies in the GRN can be strengthened by effective cooperation from a wide range of European
welcoming all such assistance, except for military cooperation – which it only accepted from socialist countries. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the takeover, the Carter Administration offered to train officers from the newly-formed Sandinista Popular Army at U.S. Southern Command facilities in the Panama Canal Zone. The FSLN refused. They reasoned, correctly, that the purpose of U.S. military cooperation was not only to preempt assistance from Soviet-aligned sources, but also to surveil their inchoate security apparatus. As Pastor admits, “[Tomás] Borge did not want a military relationship with the United States for the same reasons that the United States wanted one.” While they accepted Panamanian assistance in training their new police forces, the Sandinistas politely rejected military assistance from Latin American countries which it perceived as being too close to the United States, such as Venezuela.

Sergio Ramírez explains the ideological and logistical reasons for preferring Eastern-bloc military assistance:

The Frente’s Directorate had decided that this was a fight to the death against imperialism. This fate was already written and could not be avoided. And therefore, if we were going to arm ourselves against imperialism it could not be with weapons for which they could later refuse repairs and munitions, and therefore it could not be Western weaponry. It had to be Soviet weaponry because that way supplies would always be assured.

To illustrate this thinking in practice, Ramírez cites his encounter with Greek socialist Prime Minister Andreas Georgios Papandreou in 1981:

When I made a visit to Greece and met with Papandreou, in his home office, in that one-on-one conversation he said to me: “What do you need?” I responded, “We need fuel, we need foodstuffs.” And he said, “And weapons?” To which I said, “Yes, of course.” The

and hemispheric governments,” “U.S. Cooperation with Costa Rica and Panama on Nicaraguan Assistance,” U.S., Department of State, Confidential, August 25, 1979, DNSA (ProQuest ID: 1679068767).
315 Humberto Ortega told the U.S. Embassy that such military cooperation would not be possible due to “political difficulties with using a facility which previously provided training to the Nicaraguan National Guard.” “Editorial Note,” FRUS: Volume XV, 740.
316 Pastor, Not Condemned to Repetition, 169.
317 “On August 1, 1979, Venezuela’s Foreign Minister José Alberto Zambrano visited Managua and offered military aid and advice to the new Defense Minister, ex-guardsmen Bernardino Larios. Larios accepted the offer enthusiastically, but Humberto Ortega told the Venezuelans that Nicaragua had already received enough arms from Cuba.” Robert Pastor, citing an interview with the Deputy Director of the Venezuelan National Security Council, recounts this anecdote in Not Condemned to Repetition, 169.
first thing [Papandreou] authorized was the shipment of 10,000 guns, because Greece had a factory which produced the M16, which was standard issue in NATO…The Sandinista Popular Army never used those guns. It never armed frontline soldiers with those rifles. [What that says] is that our standard issue was the AK [Russian-made Kalishnakov rifle] under that philosophy. Those [M16s] stayed in the reserves for training purposes…Because it was a political decision – that the Soviet Union was the one that would provision weapons for the army.  

As the original multi-class coalition began collapsing, its outgoing members denounced Nicaragua’s rapprochement with the East as a betrayal of the promise of non-alignment. In early 1980, the State Department reported with satisfaction on the Sandinistas’ surprisingly pragmatic foreign policy, but U.S. analysts were becoming increasingly concerned. In November 1980, another FSLN trip to the Eastern Bloc produced loans from Bulgaria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia; although the amounts still were rather small when compared to the credit received from multilateral lending institutions like the IMF and Inter-American Development Bank. Nevertheless, for the State Department’s intelligence division, the March and November trips to the East marked an “immediate shift in Nicaraguan foreign policy from ostensible nonalignment to a pro-Soviet stance.” The CIA took special note of Nicaragua’s refusal to vote that year for two UN General Assembly resolutions condemning the recent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Unlike other countries like Cuba and Vietnam, Nicaragua did not vote against the resolutions; it followed the lead of a small group of non-aligned countries like India and

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318 Ramirez, previously cited interview with the author.
320 In January 1980, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was still optimistic on Nicaragua’s non-alignment: “In foreign affairs,” he wrote to Carter, “Nicaragua’s orientation and rhetoric are militantly Third World, but its behavior is quite pragmatic. Though Cuban influence is strong and possibly growing, the GNR has nonetheless officially denounced Iran for seizing our Embassy in Tehran, and has sought normal relations with the Salvadoran Junta.” “Memorandum From Secretary of State Vance to President Carter – Nicaragua: A Status Report,” Washington, January 7, 1980, FRUS: Volume XV, 752.
Algeria in abstaining from the vote, believing that the resolution served as a pretext for greater North American military involvement in the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere in the Third World.\textsuperscript{323}

Reagan administration State Department staffer Robert Kagan, bristling at the notion that the Sandinistas “were pushed into the arms of the Soviets and Cubans by American policy,” cites the early Afghanistan vote as evidence to the contrary.\textsuperscript{324} Indeed, the documentary record does not support critics’ assertion that “problems with the United States, the contra war, the developing economic crisis…combined to necessitate a cautious policy of engagement with the socialist countries.”\textsuperscript{325} The Sandinistas began this cautious engagement since 1979 simply because, as Wheelock describes it, “Sandinista foreign policy was inclined to seek alliances with the Soviet Union and Cuba.”\textsuperscript{326} As Ramírez’s comments on military assistance make clear, the FSLN identified the USSR as its long-term strategic partner. Nevertheless, Reagan administration apologists are wrong to suggest that its intervention did not push Nicaragua further into the Soviet orbit. As subsequent chapters show, the FSLN government responded quickly and predictably to aggression by seeking military aid from socialist countries, and by seeking trade and assistance with the East when the United States – historically Nicaragua’s largest trading partner – imposed severe economic sanctions. The above debate on the impact of Washington on the Nicaraguan Revolution, reminiscent of the earlier debate on whether or not the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations transformed Castro into a Soviet-aligned communist, is mostly concerned with the origins and effectiveness of U.S. foreign policies; it largely eludes a serious appreciation of the local motivations of Sandinista foreign affairs.

\textsuperscript{323} Bendaña, previously cited interview with the author.
\textsuperscript{326} Wheelock, \textit{Democratic Transitions in Central America}, 74-75.
Seen from Managua’s perspective, it would be most accurate to identify two separate but complementary tracks of Sandinista foreign policy. Nicaragua could not, and therefore would not, attempt to vault across the Iron Curtain – even if some Sandinista leaders expressed such a hope in private. Geographical proximity to the United States was a major constraining factor. Moreover, friendly governments and populations in Latin America and Europe did not want to see Nicaragua become a Soviet satellite state; full alignment with the USSR therefore would have deprived the Sandinistas of a life-saving mitigating factor on Washington’s interventionist policies. In any event, Soviet officials were ambivalent about the prospects of revolution in Central America, wary of unnecessarily threatening the U.S. in its strategic “backyard”, and therefore unwilling to commit increasingly scarce resources to a frivolous cause.

At the same time, despite its fierce nationalism, it was similarly impossible for Sandinista diplomacy to achieve full non-alignment at this stage of the Cold War. As historian Mark Atwood Lawrence has explained, non-alignment as a movement and ideal peaked in the 1960s, when post-colonial governments organized to reject membership in bi-polar alliances which subordinated their autonomy to the interests of the superpowers. Both the U.S. and the USSR however, believed that non-alignment was a ruse designed by the enemy to achieve an advantage. Therefore, the superpowers – and increasingly, China – took steps to undermine the

327 The KGB’s chief for Latin America, Nikolai Leonov, travelled to Managua in the fall of 1979 and reported on his meeting with Daniel Ortega. Leonov wrote that Daniel Ortega “regarded the USSR as a class and strategic ally, and saw the Soviet experience in building the Party and state as a model to be studied and used for practical actions in Nicaragua.” According to Leonov’s notes, Ortega told him that the FSLN would differ from Castro in being cautious with the U.S. but that its “strategy is to tear Nicaragua from the capitalist orbit and, in time, become a member of the CMEA [the Soviet-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance].” Cited in Christopher Andrew’s analysis of the files of defected KGB archivist Vasili Mitrokin, The World Was Going Our Way, (London: Basic, 2006), 119.

328 “The Soviet attitude towards the prospects for revolution in Central America was ambivalent. The invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 made Moscow both wary of further military commitments and anxious to repair the damage to its international reputation by successes elsewhere. Its desire to exploit the Sandinista revolution was balanced by nervousness at the likely relation of the United States…In an attempt to diminish the risks inherent in the challenge to US influence in Central America, Moscow was happy to leave the most visible role to Fidel Castro.” Ibid., 122.

329 Bendanã, interview with the author: “the generation of Carlos Fonseca…saw the world, Communism versus Capitalism. And eventually [they believed], communism would impose itself. Because there was a favorable balance of forces globally. That was their strategic analysis. At that senior level, they accepted the bipolar notion.
NAM, which by the 1970s had “faded into the background of global politics” due to this pressure but also because Asian, African, and Latin American states often pursued competing economic and strategic interests. Revolutionary Nicaragua pursued a newfound autonomy, but like all other countries, had to “lean to one side,” to paraphrase Mao’s declaration of revolutionary China’s international orientation decades earlier. The FSLN chose the Soviet Union instead of the U.S., the capitalist model of which they believed to be in decay, and the government of which had militarily intervened in the country’s affairs dozens of times since Independence.

Faced with the impossibility of single-mindedly pursuing either strategy, the Sandinistas pursued both in tandem. This duality was reflected in the organizational structure of FSLN foreign policy. The Foreign Ministry (and related governmental institutions like the Foreign Trade and Foreign Economic Cooperation Ministries) handled formal relations with the United States, Western countries, and multilateral organizations like the UN and OAS. Another set of party apparatuses – most notably FSLN’s Department of International Relations (DRI), modeled after the Cuban Communist Party’s Departamento de América – managed relations with Latin American leftist parties and guerrilla movements, global solidarity committees, and the party-states of the socialist world. While both sets of institutions ruled over distinct spheres of influence, they were united under the coherent policy direction of a Foreign Policy Committee which was usually composed of Daniel Ortega (first as Junta coordinator and after the 1984 elections, as President), Army Chief Humberto Ortega, DRI director Julio López Campos, and the Minister and Vice-Ministers of Foreign Relations.

Throughout the decade, Nicaraguan foreign policy alternated between its formal, diplomatic strategy – centered on the West and the non-aligned states – and its informal, political relations to equally important effect.330 Without military aid from the socialist world, the cash-

330 Talavera, interview with the author: “We thought that relations should be handled on two planes: the formal, diplomatic plane and the political plane, where the gamma of relations was more varied.”
strapped government would not have been able to wage a civil war which would claim nearly as many lives as the insurrectionary struggle. In the face of U.S. intervention, close ties to the East were therefore indispensable. Nevertheless, while the Sandinista Army never allowed the Contra to hold any major urban centers, they did not annihilate the armed opposition all together. Instead, and in proof of the importance of formal diplomacy, subsequent chapters show how the war only ended when the Sandinista government negotiated with its internal opposition as a result of multilateral peace talks with Latin American countries and later with its Central American neighbors.

REVOLUTION WITHOUT BORDERS?

On both foreign policy fronts, Havana was the most important partner. Carter administration officials watched with trepidation as hundreds of Cuban doctors and technical advisors came to Nicaragua to help consolidate the Sandinista regime; it urged the Carazo administration to send Costa Rican volunteers to lead the 1980 literacy campaign, but the FSLN preferred Cuban teachers. They also bemoaned the presence of Cuban advisors at senior government levels, an issue of concern for outgoing moderates as well. While critics went on to grossly exaggerate Havana’s influence on Nicaragua’s domestic policies and revolutionary model, the Castro government was hugely impactful on Sandinista defense and security affairs, even in the immediate reality of reconstruction. As political scientist Jorge Castañeda wrote years after the fall of the FSLN, “the real Cuban influence in Nicaragua came precisely at this [early] juncture. Without the Cubans, the Sandinista army, police, and state security could not

have been created. Without these institutions, the Sandinistas could not have survived the revolutionary decade, under extraordinarily adverse circumstances.”

Those adverse circumstances – U.S. intervention and, eventually, a full-scale civil war – would become “the issue” of the Revolution according to Army Chief of Staff Joaquín Cuadra, who says because of this Cuba had a “decisive influence in the whole revolutionary process.” That influence, combined with the Sandinistas’ unique appreciation of how best to defend their revolution, pushed the FSLN toward one of the most fateful decisions of the revolutionary era: seeking a second revolutionary victory in El Salvador.

When it came to internal revolutionary policies, Cuba provided the model but did not impose it. The Sandinista Defense Committees – block-by-block neighborhood organizations designed to distribute goods, provide basic services, self-police communities, and connect citizens to local governments – were clearly modeled after Cuba’s own Revolutionary Defense Committees. While much greater in scope and execution, Nicaragua’s famed literacy campaign was similarly inspired by a similar project in Cuba in 1961. There is no evidence, however, that Cuban officials ever had the final say in policymaking decisions. FSLN leaders jealously guarded their autonomy; Joaquín Cuadra recalls an early confrontation with his own advisor, the Cuban revolutionary leader Arnaldo Ochoa, over the latter’s attempt to shape military strategy: “I don’t know what you think you’re doing,” he remembers saying, “with your experience in

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332 Jorge Castañeda, Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold War, (New York: Vintage, 1993), 111. In the case of internal security, the Cuban presence was such that the chief of counterintelligence was Renán Montero, a Cuban revolutionary fighter who was given Nicaraguan citizenship.

333 Joaquín Cuadra, previously cited interview with the author.

334 While having a Cuban advisor quickly became a symbol of prestige in the revolutionary government – this was a central complaint that Eden Pastora made when he abandoned the Revolution – local officials kept the final say in decision-making, as explained here by Ramirez, in interview with the author: It was seen as a symbol of prestige. That the Cubans were the ones who knew. And many times I heard a Cuban say, “It was the same way over there, we had that same problem, don’t worry.” It was a kind of paternalistic thing, well-intentioned. Sort of like, “We came here to help you make your revolution.” But I wouldn’t tell you that they came here to direct it. I honestly don’t believe that, that they would come to impose their thinking, no. They came to say, “The situation is like this, like that. You all make the decision.” I think that was Fidel Castro’s instruction: “Don’t go turn them into vassals, don’t go tell them what to do, you all go over there to advise, with much caution.” I always felt that sort of caution.”
Africa, in Ethiopia; but this is something else entirely. Nobody made the revolution for us here. We did ourselves, we won it. This [civil war] is fought by us, the dead are ours. It’s not Cubans that are dying here.”

When the Sandinistas’ domestic policies sometimes hewed closer to Cuba’s version of “real socialism,” they often did so against the advice of Castro, who even defenders of Reagan’s foreign policy have acknowledged as having encouraged the FSLN to allow for some degree of a market economy and political pluralism. As Ramírez explains in his memoir, despite Cuba’s involvement in the 1979 insurrection,

…this does not mean that at the moment of the Sandinista victory, Fidel Castro insisted on offering the Cuban model to be copied in Nicaragua…It is not that Fidel did not want socialism in Nicaragua, but he thought of a socialism different to that of Cuba. And he saw, perhaps, a new field of experimentation where we would not repeat the errors that in Cuba he could never recognize, nor amend. The worst enemies of this concept were, nevertheless, ourselves; unwilling to hear warnings, even when they came from the mouth of the oracle. Many wanted to assimilate the Cuban model in everything, including in the most banal issues. It was a blind form of trust.

The circumstances of the Revolution’s creation – an ideologically plural, multi-class coalition backed by a wide gamma of transnational actors who were invested in seeing a democratic outcome – led Nicaragua to bear obvious differences to its Caribbean counterpart: market forces operated, people circulated freely, opposition political parties were allowed to exist to a certain extent, and critical civil society operated to a far greater degree. Castro’s influence on internal Nicaraguan affairs was less important than the effect it had on FSLN security and defense affairs.

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335 Cuadra, previously cited interview with the author; Cuban diplomats attempted to play up the Sandinistas’ autonomy. Cuban Vice Premier Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, in a secret meeting sponsored by Mexican diplomats, told Reagan’s Secretary of State Alexander Haig “we are close friends with the Sandinistas. [But] it would be a serious mistake to believe that the Sandinistas rely on the advice that we give them. On the contrary, they have a very clear concept of that which they are required to do,” “Transcript of Meeting between US Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. and Cuban Vice Premier Carlos Rafael Rodriguez,” Mexico City, November 23, 1981, CWIHP, [http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111221](http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111221).


337 *Adiós Muchachos*, 116.
A particularly decisive manifestation of that influence was the Sandinistas’ support for the Marxist guerrilla insurgency in El Salvador. Ruled by a variety of personalistic and collective military dictatorships since roughly the time of the elder Somoza’s installation, the neighboring country witnessed the rise of a number of armed leftist groups in the 1960s and 70s. The sudden triumph of the first armed revolution in Latin America after Cuba – next door, no less – was a veritable game-changer for El Salvador. In October 1979, seeking to avert the utter collapse which had befallen Somoza’s National Guard, moderate sectors of the Salvadoran military overthrew a Conservative Party president and installed a joint civilian-military “Revolutionary Junta” which promised centrist social reforms and dialogue with the political Left. That modest reform project quickly collapsed under pressure by the country’s conservative business elite, and the government instead addressed the threat of a potential Nicaragua-style popular uprising by intensifying military repression against political opponents like the Jesuit Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was famously gunned down at the altar in March 1980. In turn, the ratcheting up of regime repression inspired the country’s long disunited rebel groups to begin unity talks.

As historian Andrea Oñate has pointed out, another “decisive instigator” of Salvadoran guerrilla unification was “the exemplary role of the Nicaraguan revolution.” The unlikely success of the Nicaraguan insurrection made victory in El Salvador – where the armed Left was better-resourced, longer-running, and larger – more plausible; the slogan after July 1979 became “¡si Nicaragua venció, El Salvador vencerá! (if Nicaragua vanquished, El Salvador shall vanquish!)”. More importantly, the Sandinista example – where a mortally divided movement settled its personal rivalries and tactical differences ahead of a successful seizure of state power – provided an attractive blueprint.

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In October 1980, fourteen months after the FSLN takeover, the leaders of the four main Salvadoran rebel groups and the national communist party unified under the single banner of Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (FMLN). Oñate rightly emphasizes the role played here by Castro, whose surrogates had spent over a year mediating between the disparate factions, making unification – as he had done with the Sandinistas – the key condition for his support. But it is difficult to understate the centrality of the Nicaraguan Revolution for the timing and capacity of this new revolutionary operation in El Salvador. The FMLN established its base-of-command in Managua immediately after its founding, and the Nicaraguan capital became the place where Salvadoran guerrilla leaders discussed strategy and, in some cases, violently settled internal rivalries – in a famous incident, historic FPL leader Cayetano Carpio “Marcial” mysteriously committed suicide in his Managua hotel room a few days after the gruesome murder of his second-in-command, and ideological rival, Comandante “Ana María” Montes in April 1983.\(^{339}\) Sandinista commanders and their Department of International Relations mediated Salvadoran relations with Havana.\(^{340}\) And as Oñate points out, “in addition to Cuba, Nicaragua was also central to FMLN’s firepower”; since the moment they took power, the Sandinistas began stockpiling weapons in warehouses in Nicaragua for what they believed would be the second Central American revolution.\(^{341}\)

In sponsoring the FMLN, the Sandinistas reneged on earlier promises and consciously violated the organizing principle of the broad transnational fellowship which propelled them to

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\(^{340}\) The analysis of the Mitrohkin Archive shows that “at a secret meeting in Havana attended by Castro and Humberto Ortega, [Salvadoran communist] Schafik Handal and the leaders of El Salvador’s four other Marxist factions united as the Dirección Revolucionaria Unida (DRU)...The DRU was given a secure base in Nicaragua and, in consultation with Ortega, agreed to imitate the Sandinistas’ strategy against the Somoza regime by seeking to create a military machine powerful enough to the defeat the army of the state. Thousands of Salvadoran revolutionaries were given rapid military training in Cuba; several hundred more were trained in Nicaragua.” The World Was Going Our Way, 123.

power – that they should remake Nicaraguan society as they wished, but without unjustifiably provoking the intervention of the United States in the process. On September 24, 1979, two months after Somoza’s overthrow, President Jimmy Carter received Junta members Daniel Ortega, Alfonso Robelo, and Sergio Ramírez at the White House, promising millions in reconstruction and relief aid so long as they stuck to their commitment to pluralism, human rights, and more than anything, their promise to not export their revolution abroad. Ortega explained that revolutionary upheaval in Central America was the result of pre-existing social tensions, and assured Carter that Nicaragua “is not a factor in the radicalization of El Salvador; it was not in the past, nor the present, and will not be in the future, nor in Guatemala.”

By that time the following year, however, CIA analysts observed moderate amounts of Nicaraguan arms reaching the Salvadoran guerrillas and judged there to be a “very high likelihood” that these shipments represented “official FSLN policy.” True enough, as Ramírez notes, “Carter submitted the aid package to Congress and, at the same time, arms began being sent off to El Salvador.” The same CIA report cautioned that the evidence was inconclusive, however, so the Carter administration ignored a conservative outcry in Congress and re-certified its aid program to the Nicaraguan government, believing Western aid had “strengthened more moderate tendencies” and “helped preserve a degree of political openness and a free press.”

Sandinista advice and weapons shipments ramped up substantially in the fall of 1980. Worried that the incoming administration of hawkish President-elect Ronald Reagan would

342 “Memorandum of Conversation – Summary of the President’s Meeting with Members of the Nicaraguan Junta,” Washington, September 24, 1979, FRUS: Volume XV, 743-44.
344 Ramírez, previously cited interview with the author: “Carter, with certain reservations, was supporting us in good faith. We went to the White House, invited by him: Daniel, Robelo, and me. He said he was going to help us with a package of seventy million dollars, the meeting lasted some twenty minutes, and then he left us with his aides. Then we went to the State Department to arrange the details of the seventy million. He submitted the aid package to Congress and, at the same time, arms began being sent off to El Salvador.”
increase lethal aid for the Salvadoran military, the newly-unified FMLN made Cuban-advised plans for a “Final Offensive” reminiscent of the Sandinistas’ successful summer 1979 uprising. As caches of captured FMLN documents and aerial surveillance soon revealed, the Sandinista military spent the fall months re-routing Cuban-provided arms to El Salvador via land, air, and sea. On the eve of the Final Offensive in January, believing that they now had the conclusive evidence they had previously lacked, Carter instructed ambassador Pezzullo to confront the Sandinistas. Tomás Borge was glib in his response: “he could not discount that some arms were passing through Nicaragua or that some people connected with the government were assisting,” but repeated that it was not official policy to get involved.  

Meanwhile, Cuban revolutionary leader Manuel Piñeiro (commonly known as Barbarroja – Redbeard) had travelled to Managua to direct the rebel strategy in El Salvador. The following day, Radio Liberación – the clandestine FMLN radio station broadcasting from a hidden location in Nicaragua – called on all Salvadorans to rise in popular insurrection against their government. Within two days, the Final Offensive had failed to generate such a popular uprising, and the guerrilla assault was repelled. Immediately thereafter, the Carter administration suspended its aid package to the Nicaraguan government, marking an end to the period in which Washington sought to moderate the Sandinistas through friendly relations and ample support.

After taking power in January 1981, shortly after the Final Offensive, the Reagan administration turned the suspension of U.S. aid into a permanent cut-off. The new White House shared the previous administration’s fears of revolutionary contagion in Central America but

347 Ramírez, previously cited interview with the author: “Cuba supported [the policy of exporting revolution], because here when we started organizing the taking of El Salvador by the FMLN, which was a failure because they obviously were not prepared for that, for that great FMLN offensive, Fidel sent here Barbarroja to our Joint Chiefs of Staff. The military strategy was built from here, so Piñeiro came to participate in that.”
differed on the appropriate strategy to prevent its spread. As political scientist William Leogrande has written:

Even if the Sandinistas seemed responsive to U.S. demands, the Reaganites regarded such moves as merely temporary and tactical – designed to buy time while the Leninists consolidated themselves. Nothing the Sandinistas did could penetrate this seamless web of ideological certainty. The threat to U.S. interests, in the hard-liners’ view, stemmed from the very existence of the Sandinista regime. The only choice for the United States was to find a way to dislodge the Sandinistas from power, or acquiesce in the creation of a “second Cuba”.  

Leogrande’s point is illustrated by Nicaraguan transcripts of the Sandinistas’ August 1981 meetings with Reagan’s Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Thomas Enders. The envoy struck a reasonable enough tone, telling Daniel Ortega and Foreign Minister Miguel D’Escoto: “Just as you all consider your revolution to be irreversible, so do we.” In that meeting and in his discussions with the FSLN National Directorate, Enders was crystal clear on the issue of arms shipments to El Salvador and the expansion of the Sandinista Popular Army, but hardly mentioned internal politics at all. “We don’t share the same ideology as some of you,” he told the comandantes, but it was up to Nicaraguans to decide their country’s economic direction, “just as we decide what’s best for the United States.” Based on this understanding, Enders submitted a deal in which the U.S. would restart aid if Nicaragua downsized its military and stopped trafficking arms abroad. By the end of 1981, however, hardliners had moved the Reagan administration away from dialogue and normalization and began insisting on Nicaragua’s “democratization” as an item on the negotiating agenda as a means to thwart such

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349 “Reporte de la reunión entre Thomas Enders y el Comandante de la Revolución Daniel Ortega Saveedra,” August 12, 1981, Managua, Personal Archive of Alejandro Bendaña, Former Secretary General of the Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry (henceforth, Archivo Bendaña), Box 3.
efforts altogether. Meanwhile, in December 1981 the U.S. President signed a finding which authorized his government’s financing of a proxy army in Nicaragua.\(^{351}\)

The Reagan administration’s duplicity in this regard has been well-documented by historians of U.S. foreign relations, but scholars have failed to seriously ask why the Sandinistas pursued a policy which they always knew would provoke the ire of North American policymakers. Indeed, even when the Sandinistas dialed down their arms shipments to El Salvador after the Final Offensive, it never cut off coordination and continued smuggling weapons across the Gulf of Fonseca: in his memoir, Ramírez humorously recalls how the smugglers – known as *cayuqueros* after the small, difficult-to-detect canoes they piloted – were honored at the July 1981 anniversary celebrations by being seated just one row below Venezuelan President Luis Herrera Campins.\(^{352}\)

There were moral and ideological reasons for supporting the FMLN. The Salvadorans had sent money and fighters to assist with the 1979 insurrection, so Sandinista leaders felt a moral debt to their revolutionary counterparts.\(^{353}\) Thus, even as Daniel Ortega promised to Enders his government’s non-interference in El Salvador, he cautioned that among the Nicaraguan populace “there exists great sympathy to collaborate with the Salvadoran people.”\(^{354}\)

\(^{351}\) In fact, Enders later admitted he “was one of those who took the lead in proposing the contras,” Leogrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 110; This presidential finding was published on December 1, 1981, but the Reagan administration released a version of this finding with updated language on September 19, 1983. The findings vaguely authorized “the provision of material support and guidance to Nicaraguan resistance groups.” https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB210/1-Reagan%20Finding%209-19-83%20(1C%2000203).pdf

\(^{352}\) Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos*, 146. He adds that “in the months after [the Final Offensive], they could observe that the aerial shipment of arms had ceased, but still, in April 1981 they suspended all forms of economic aid to Nicaragua, as a preventative punishment. In any case, the arms kept flowing toward El Salvador until the end of the war, through a fleet of *cayucos* which crossed the waters of the Gulf of Fonseca at night; they were small boats which no electric tracking could detect.”

\(^{353}\) Wheelock, interview with the author: “First, we had a moral commitment with the FMLN, which had helped us greatly during the [insurrectionary] war,” Torres, interview with the author: “…the compañeros of the FMLN had shown solidarity with us. Despite their limitations, they had given us weapons, not great amounts (they were weapons they recovered from the Salvadoran military), and they sent a few members to fight in Nicaragua and to get killed, more than anything.”

And if U.S. foreign policy in Latin America was blinded by Cold war myopia, it is worth noting that the Sandinistas were similarly predisposed to distrust Washington. As Hugo Torres, then the Sandinista Army’s Director of Intelligence, explains, “Who actually believed that the attitude of the U.S. would change by the fact that we would stop sending arms to El Salvador?”355 Given the way that things played out under the Reagan administration, Cuadra agrees that relations might have been simplified but the reality of aggression would not have changed much.356

But Tomás Borge’s declaration of a “revolution without borders” – a catchphrase used incessantly by Reagan officials to denounce Managua – was not just an ideologically-driven, otherwise empty slogan; the exportation of revolution was a rational strategy which, if miscalculated at times, responded to the specific realities of defending a besieged radical government in Nicaragua.357 The inspiration was the Cuban strategy of creating problems abroad as a means of focusing its defense beyond its borders.358 But the strategy differed in fundamental ways; unlike island Cuba, Nicaragua is squarely in the middle of a Central American isthmus composed of several countries connected by land borders.359 FSLN strategists therefore moved to turn this weakness into a strength. Beyond the hope that a friendly revolutionary regime in El Salvador was an achievable reality, Sandinista support for the FMLN – and other guerrilla groups in Central America – was part of a strategy to regionalize a potential conflict with the U.S. and heighten the costs of a direct military intervention, the coming of which they believed

355 Torres, previously cited interview with the author.
356 Cuadra, interview with the author: “Indeed, it was an issue which, in retrospect, you might say, “If it hadn’t been for El Salvador, things would have gone better for us. It would have stopped the Contra from being formed.” I think it would have been less complex, but it would not have changed much.
357 The State Department actually titled one of its key reports to Congress “Revolution beyond our Borders: Sandinista Intervention in Central America,” September 1985, DNSA (Proquest ID: 1679104736).
358 Cuadra, interview with the author: “I think there you have some part of the Cuban influence. Cuba has always had its defense beyond its borders – creating problems or conflicts, or exporting their revolution.” The Sandinistas’ conviction, Ramirez explains, “was the only defense we had was to have another revolution. It was an audacious thinking, but one that was analyzed many times…it was better to have a war next door, than to be isolated.”
359 On commenting on the difference between the Nicaraguan and Cuban revolutions, Ramirez writes, “At the end of the day, the simple fact that Nicaragua is not an island like Cuba imposed grave differences. Central America continues to be a system of connected veins, and the conflict sparked by the Revolution throughout the isthmus would prove that once again, like on so many other occasions in history,” Adiós Muchachos, 119.
to be inevitable. As Bendaña notes, “In this sense the phrase ‘revolution without borders’ actually made sense: ‘If you guys set a foot here, we’ll start a ruckus in El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, etc.’” Torres is even more precise in explaining this policy: the “political consideration was to create one or two Vietnams, to disperse the enemy. To regionalize the focus of attention of the U.S. so that it wasn’t just Nicaragua.”

This foreign adventure was as important for Nicaragua’s revolutionary process as anything that happened inside the country. For Ramírez, support for the FMLN “became decisive…that’s where everything got f-ed up.” Joaquín Cuadra laments that “it had a terrible cost for us” and Humberto Ortega has been quoted as saying that “we paid a tremendous price for our internationalist romanticism.” The failure of the Final Offensive and Carter’s swift response led the FSLN to hide Salvadoran rebel leaders in Managua, close Radio Liberación (a move which the U.S. had been demanding for months), and cease the most large and conspicuous arms shipments which were made by air. But it was too late; Nicaragua’s efforts to export revolution in Central America henceforth provided an ideal pretext for the Reagan administration, which found the Sandinista government unacceptable a priori, to pursue the FSLN’s isolation on the international stage and its undermining internally.

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360 Bendaña, previously cited interview with the author; Cuadra elaborates: “In fact, in our National Defense Plan, in the face of a U.S. invasion we had two areas: the fight against the [U.S.-backed] Contra…and there was another which was the preparation of the country for a direct U.S. invasion. In the preparation of the country for that war, there were units ready so that in the case of an invasion, they would go off to fight in Costa Rica and Honduras…A bit of that was the Cuban influence. Unlike them, however, we had somewhere to flee, on the continent. So the belief that we had to continue supporting El Salvador fits in there…” previously cited interview with the author.

361 Torres, previously cited interview with the author. He explains support for the FMLN in terms of “two considerations: solidarity – the act of proving that we were a movement fighting for the same cause as them—and the factor of opening up several focos.” On another occasion, Talavera recalls, the Sandinistas made plans with the Costa Rican Communist Party to plant explosives in several of that country’s oil refineries. The threat of generalized violence in San José – which they communicated to the Costa Rican government through the French government of Mitterrand, which had been mediating secret talks – was meant to dissuade the government allowing further Contra operations in its territory; Talavera, previously cited interview with the author.

362 Ramírez, previously cited interview with the author.

363 Quoted in Kagan, Twilight Struggle, 164.
The impact on the rest of Latin America was more complicated. A January 1981 conversation between Wheelock and U.S. Ambassador Pezzullo, in which the former challenged the latter to provide concrete evidence of Nicaraguan involvement in El Salvador, was prophetic on this issue:

Wheelock threatened: “if you can’t reveal to us any details of these operations, when you suspend assistance and make it public, you won’t be able to prove your case, especially in Latin America. It will appear as if you took arbitrary action.” [Pezzullo] replied, “the evidence would be terribly embarrassing to you.”...[Wheelock] then said, “it would be a political act which will undercut out economy. We won’t have the funds to make repayment, our credit standing will suffer, and the effects will be catastrophic.” Wheelock added that it will appear as “economic aggression by the US,” and Ortega added that “all Latin America will support us.” [Pezzullo] said “you will also be revealed for having supported a guerrilla movement in a neighboring country which violates the principle of self-determination that you hold dear, and would be indefensible in international terms.”

In effect, Pezzullo and Wheelock were both right. In the early revolutionary period, the Sandinistas’ activist foreign policy evoked a bifurcated reaction in Latin America, pitting those who held East-West notions of conflict in the region versus those who saw those same upheavals as a symptom of the region’s underdevelopment and unequal relations with the United States.

On the one hand, the Sandinistas’ Cuban-oriented and –influenced foreign policy, its arms buildup, and assistance to regional rebel movements induced the anxiety of several Latin American governments. This even applied, to a certain degree, to some of the key countries which helped overthrow Somoza: both Carazo and Torrijos refused to join the Revolution’s first anniversary celebrations when they learned that Fidel Castro would be the keynote speaker.

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365 As a Mexican Foreign Ministry analysis of relations between Nicaragua and Costa Rica noted, the cooling “culminated with the refusal of President Carazo to assist the Revolution’s first anniversary celebrations,” “Memorandum para Información Superior,” Tlatelolco, D.F., September 10, 1980, AG-SRE III-3433-1. Pastor notes that Castro’s invitation came at the price of Torrijos’ attendance as well, Not Condemned to Repetition, 176.
Nicaragua’s relations with Costa Rica, in particular, witnessed a marked cooling which took an abrupt turn for the worse when Carazo was replaced by the strongly anti-communist president Luis Alberto Monge in 1982. Though he came from Pepe Figueres’ ostensibly center-left Liberationist Party, the newly-inaugurated Monge immediately expelled several Nicaraguan diplomats and accused their government of supporting a leftist plot to undermine his country’s democratic system.\textsuperscript{366} Beginning that year, much as Carazo had done for the FSLN in 1978-79, the new Costa Rican government turned a blind eye to the local activities of Contra rebels seeking to overthrow the government in Managua. Despite professing neutrality, Monge’s government – in exchange for continued U.S. economic aid required to revive a faltering economy – immediately began hosting CIA activities as well.\textsuperscript{367} Similarly, relations with the Venezuelan government of Luís Herrera Campíns cooled in this period, and by late 1980 the FSLN was accusing it of conspiring with right-wing parties to destabilize the government.\textsuperscript{368}

The region’s anti-communist military dictatorships were quicker to identify revolutionary Nicaragua as a threat and acted accordingly. Honduras’ ruling military junta resented Sandinista support for Salvadoran insurgents, which for years had operated inside Honduran territory (their country, unlike Nicaragua, shares a land border with El Salvador).\textsuperscript{369} They also decried the rapid growth of the Sandinista Popular Army, which at its zenith possessed roughly twice the strength of either the Salvadoran or Guatemalan militaries at their respective peaks in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{370} Thus,

\textsuperscript{367} For a review of these policies, see Lowell Gudmundson, “El conflicto entre estabilidad y neutralidad en Costa Rica,” \textit{Foro Internacional}, July 1985: 37-54. An internal Monge administration memo draws a stark line between the previous administration’s “intervention” in Nicaragua (in favor of the FSLN) and the current one’s supposed neutrality, “Sintesis del Informe sobre la labor del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Culto durante los primeros seis meses de la administración del señor president don Luis Alberto Monge,” San José, Costa Rica, Archivo Histórico del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 10309.
\textsuperscript{369} “Estado que guardan las relaciones entre Nicaragua y este país,” Telegrama no. 861 from Ambassador to Honduras Renato Irigoyen to Tlatelolco, October 1, 1980, AG-SRE, \textit{ibid}.
\textsuperscript{370} J. Mark Ruhl, “Curbing Central America’s Militaries,” \textit{Journal of Democracy}, 15 (3), July 2004: 138; In 1982, at around 20,000 troops, the Sandinista Popular Army already had more persons under arms than the National Guard.
in February 1981, the Honduran foreign minister told U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig that his country – which had earlier acquiesced to the presence of FSLN insurgents during the final months of the Somoza regime – was prepared to cooperate with any of Washington’s plans to undermine the Nicaraguan government. As a matter of fact, they had already been pursuing actions of their own. Before Reagan was sworn in, and nearly a year before he signed a one-paragraph “presidential finding” – which authorized the creation of proxy armies in Central America – Honduran General Gustavo Martínez Álvarez mounted an operation to fund, train, and house a small army of ex-Somocista guardsmen organized as the September 15th Legion. In 1981, these bands – as well as disaffected indigenous communities from northern Nicaragua who also received Honduran support – began making tentative armed incursions across the Nicaraguan border.\(^\text{371}\)

The Hondurans received crucial support and financing from the military government of Argentina (where Alvarez had received his military training and his rabidly anti-communist worldview). The Argentines, as Ariel Armony has argued, were on an ideological crusade but also saw a threat to their real interests in Central America: exiled Argentinian leftists had participated in the Nicaraguan insurrection, and their continued presence in the country prompted the fear that they might use Nicaragua a platform for intelligence operations back home in South America.\(^\text{372}\) Though the CIA began training anti-Sandinista exiles on U.S. soil and eventually took full ownership of what became known as the Contra, Honduras and Argentina – responding to their own fears and interests – pioneered its creation. Indeed, the first step taken by U.S.

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intelligence in 1982 was to successfully unite the disparate Nicaraguan rebel groups which these Latin American countries had nursed into being.373

But other countries, as Wheelock had promised, seemed less concerned by the radical government in Managua than they were threatened by the Reagan administration’s bellicose response to it. Therefore, when he expressed his concerns over the radicalization of the Nicaraguan Revolution to Willy Brandt in the summer of 1981, Carlos Andrés Pérez added an important qualification:

However, it would not be fair to ignore the conflictive circumstances in which the Nicaraguan movement has been placed by the new North American administration – based on the a priori notion that for the United States the Sandinista Revolution is unacceptable, a position which has sowed panic or heightened the distrust of the country’s private sector. And it has served, also to dangerously polarize Sandinista leaders, making more radical the radicals and weakening the position of the moderates.

Pérez had good reason to believe that Washington was worsening the situation in Nicaragua. When the Reagan administration permanently cut off bilateral aid to the FSLN government in April 1981, millions of dollars in loans from Cuba and Libya – as well as the first major wheat shipments from the USSR – filled the void. While Western hostility seemed to be having a negative effect, Pérez cautioned that friendliness from the world’s democracies should not come in the form of a blank check, either. Social-democratic solidarity, he told Brandt, should come “without conditions, but cannot be called unconditional.” This nuanced policy of support for the Sandinistas, was meant partly to keep the FSLN on the road to a pluralistic form of revolutionary renewal – Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa, after visiting Managua that same month, wrote that democratic countries should lend their support to the Sandinistas so that they might not

373 As Leogrande notes, CIA director William Casey thusly presented the Reagan administration’s plans for a proxy army to lawmakers in Congress “as an accomplished fact. Argentina and Honduras had already begun building the exile army; Washington was simply ‘buying in’ to an ongoing operation,” Our Own Backyard, 286.
“hear the siren song” coming from the Soviet bloc. At the same time, this policy was meant to counterbalance what these Socialist International leaders viewed as the real threat in the region. According to the Venezuelan ex-president, Washington’s moral and material support for anti-communist military regimes in Central America was boosting the regional “ultra-right” and threatened to retard the process of democratization on the isthmus. In his view, Reagan had also amplified the threat of violence; Pérez lamented his depiction of a pessimistic “but honest and objective portrait of a situation which could lead to an armed international conflict, which would affect the whole region of Latin America and the Caribbean and lead to very negative changes in relations with the United States.”

Pérez exemplifies how the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua complicated the traditional fault lines of the Cold War. The United States government and the region’s right-wing military regimes increasingly viewed Sandinismo as a Soviet menace, but many Latin American leaders like Pérez – who was vilified by his own country’s radical Left because of his long-running anti-communist views – did not see revolutionary upheavals in Central America as a problem in and of themselves. Rather, they saw them as the result of decades of uneven socio-economic development and political exclusion and repression, often abetted by the United States. And they understood the success of revolution in Nicaragua in particular as the result of a region-wide consensus around this view. For this reason, Nicaraguan and Cuban diplomats were eager to emphasize that a remarkable variety of Latin American countries supported the FSLN in 1978-79. Cuban Vice-Premier Carlos Rafael Rodríguez outlined this perspective in a secret meeting with Secretary of State Haig (sponsored by Mexican diplomats) in 1981:

It is not only we who say it would be a mistake to conceive of that which has happening now in Central America as a result of external subversive activity; even

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374 Mario Vargas Llosa, “Nicaragua: Año Dos,” found in the collection Contra Viento y Marea, (Barcelona: Seix y Barral, 1983), 436.
such moderate leaders as Lopez-Portillo are completely open in their adherence to this view... I believe that Carlos Andres Perez is a right-wing Social Democrat and holds the same assessment... We helped the Sandinista front in every way the we could, with all of the means that we were able to deploy. But we were not the only ones who helped them. You know that there were several governments in Latin America who helped them substantially more than we did. Thus, this was a situation, which was regarded by Latin America as a fatal tumor which it was necessary to remove.376

The fatal tumor to which Rodríguez referred, of course, was the Somoza dictatorship, which he viewed as an abnormal growth created and cultivated by U.S. imperialism. For the other countries who backed the Sandinistas in 1979, the Somocista regime was a potentially cancerous tumor, too, because its continued existence tended to fuel the desire in the region for radical change of the Cuban variety, and this in turn raised the specter of unwanted U.S. intervention. At a global level, the Cold War was an ideological conflict between capitalism and socialism; in Latin American, however, that contest and its manifestation in the form of the East-West superpower conflict was mediated by appreciations of the North-South divide which had characterized the region’s development for much longer, dating back to the collapse of the Euro-American empires in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Illustrative of these overlapping paradigms was Mexico, for whom the triumph of the armed left in Nicaragua was a pivotal moment. Fed by their country’s own revolutionary mythology, Mexican intellectuals and statesmen viewed the Sandinista process through a romantic lens: when an aide asked López Portillo what kind of formal treatment they should give the Nicaraguan delegation on the president’s final visit to Managua in 1982, he replied: “the treatment which we would give to any state of Mexico.”377 But while sympathy no doubt played a role, as Jorge G. Castañeda – son of López Portillo’s foreign minister at the time – has written,

377 Ramírez, Adiós Muchachos, 74.
Mexico’s support for the Sandinistas “was based exclusively on self-interest…becoming a regional power required a left-leaning Caribbean Basin.” Unlike U.S. policymakers, Castañeda explains, Mexican officials did not view radical leftist movements in Central America as a threat to their country’s internal stability. Rather, in the wave of radical change in Central America they eyed an opportunity: if new regimes born from revolutionary movements saw Mexico as a “true and trusted ally,” then they believed they could counteract North American hegemony by carving out a political sphere of influence in Central America and the Caribbean Basin. Détente had provided an opening for such diplomatic audacity, but as Ojeda and Herrera have written, “the characterization that the [Reagan administration] made of the Central American conflict as a typical case of an East-West confrontation, began to generate problems for Mexico’s position.”

Therefore, as the Sandinistas consolidated power in Nicaragua, Mexico sought to both bolster the revolutionary regime and moderate its behavior. The PRI government sent generous loans to help the reconstruction government avoid balance-of-payments issues, helped negotiate Nicaragua’s debt before multilateral lending institutions, and in February 1980 assumed alongside Venezuela the vast majority of Nicaragua’s oil needs. But preserving a new ally in Managua required, as Castañeda explains, “conciliating the interests of this new regime with U.S. interests.” Therefore, they used their generosity as leverage: as previously mentioned, Mexico played a key role in maintaining a minimum of business-government dialogue in the early revolutionary period and also became the FSLN’s main intermediary with the U.S. government, especially after a hostile Reagan administration took power. 

378 Jorge G. Castañeda, “Don’t Corner Mexico!” Foreign Policy, 60, 1985: 75-90.
381 “Mexican-Nicaraguan Relations: Can Mexico Moderate the Sandinistas?” Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Secret, August 12, 1981, DNSA (ProQuest ID: 1679049643).
sought to moderate the Sandinistas, in supporting them they were boldly rejecting Washington’s East-West characterization of revolutionary upheaval in Central America. Indeed, support for the FSLN was part of a wider initiative – driven by the belief that U.S. attempts to annihilate Central American guerrillas threatened to create a fully-regionalized conflict on Mexico’s southern border – which involved the Franco-Mexican Declaration of August 1981, in which the French and Mexican governments shocked U.S. policymakers by declaring El Salvador’s FMLN as legitimate belligerents and a “representative political force” with a right to participate in political negotiations to end that country’s civil war.382

Mexico’s partnership with France on that occasion was emblematic of another distortion in typical Cold War international relations occasioned by the Nicaragua Revolution; when Latin American countries sought to reject Washington’s implantation of East-West narratives onto regional conflicts, they found a critical ally and enabler in Western European democracies. In the early 1980s, social-democratic parties won national elections across Europe, taking control of governments in Austria, France, Italy, Spain, and Greece, among others. A spate of new prime ministers espoused a North-South appreciation of Third World revolutionary upheavals and therefore sympathized with the developing world’s post-colonial movements. A notable example was François Mitterrand, who when asked about Nicaragua told Le Monde in 1981: “How can we not understand popular revolt? It’s not about communist subversion, but of the refusal of misery and humiliation. The West would be better advised to help these peoples than to force them to live under the boot. When they call for help, I would like for Castro not to be the only one that hears them.”383 The French Socialist president put his words into action: in December

383 “Un entretien avec M. François Mitterrand,” Le Monde, July 2, 1981. Willy Brandt agreed with this rejection of U.S. policy; in a letter to Spanish Socialist Felipe González, he noted that the SI “has obligated itself, within the scope of the capabilities of our association, to defend developments in Nicaragua from external infringements and influences.” “Letter by the President of the Socialist International, Brandt, to the Chairman of the Committee of the
1981, his government secretly negotiated an arms deal with the FSLN worth around $20 million.\(^\text{384}\) In selling weapons to Nicaragua, France – a Western democracy and NATO ally of the United States – willingly found itself on the same side of the international fence as the USSR.\(^\text{385}\) Reagan administration officials saw this break with U.S. policy as an unprecedented and unacceptable violation of the Monroe Doctrine. As a RAND Corporation analysis described, it was not just the Soviet Union, “but also resurgent European powers, notably France and Germany,” that were challenging Washington’s uncontested hegemony...

…they are contributing as much to stabilizing as to destabilizing [Central America’s] politics. Simultaneously, local governments and anti-government actors in the region are also soliciting support from outside the hemisphere, independent of the United States. Although West European involvement can contribute to the region’s economic and political development, this general push-pull process is fostering the internationalization of local conflicts and eroding U.S. leverage.\(^\text{386}\)

Sandinista foreign policy, from the beginning, reasoned that it too might erode U.S. leverage if it managed to exploit the animosity that the Reagan administration’s crude East-West framing aroused in Latin American leaders who were haunted by a past of unilateral North American intervention in the region’s affairs. José León Talavera explains why FSLN leaders assiduously courted relations with South American countries, making sure to have a top-level delegation at every presidential inauguration on the continent: “there were nationalist waves which allowed – from Carlos Andrés Pérez to President Alfonsín [of Argentina], or even in Brazil – for us to be seen with sympathy. Sometimes they would view us as a small buffer which perhaps cushioned them against some of the United States’ aggressive policies, and it was of interest to them to see somebody laying into the gringos in the area so that they could better

express their own autonomy.” The new Nicaraguan foreign ministry’s “base” policy document showed how keen the Sandinistas were on driving a wedge between Washington and the rest of the region’s countries. Anti-communist leaders in Latin America might bemoan the danger of the Cubanization of the Nicaraguan Revolution, but they likely to agree with one of the document’s principal statements that the Reagan administration’s “conceptualization, which pretends to explain the region’s crisis as part of the East-West conflict, is incorrect, because the peoples of Central America have rebelled against this situation throughout history, long before the existence of the Russian and Cuban revolutions.”

The FSLN worked hard to exploit this perceived commonality among most strains of Latin American political thought. Even U.S. diplomats marveled at how Daniel Ortega, in response to a threat-filled speech by Alexander Haig at a 1981 OAS General Assembly, responded with his own “very skillful speech” in which he used a history of U.S. interventions in Latin America to point the blame at Washington for the rise of radical revolutionary movements in the region.

The Sandinistas took glee in exploiting the heavy-handed tactics of Reagan administration officials who lacked awareness of Latin Americans’ nationalist political sensibilities. For example, during their meeting with Enders in August 1981, the National Directorate deflected questions about their ties to Castro by emphasizing the support they had received from a multitude of Latin American countries, including Costa Rica’s Carazo, who by this point had cooled significantly on the Nicaraguan Revolution. Enders shocked his guests by

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387 Talavera, previously cited interview with the author.
388 “Posición de Nicaragua ante la Crisis Centroamericana – Documento de Base,” Archivo Bendaña, Box 4.
389 “Ortega Replies to Secretary's Speech,” U.S. Embassy in Nicaragua, Confidential, December 5, 1981, DNSA (ProQuest ID: 1679051349). A good example came at an earlier speech in October, where Ortega argued: “The "accusation" levelled at the Sandinista People's Revolution that it is the cause of rebellion in Central America lays bare the hypocrisy of those who are truly responsible for the dramatic Central American situation. The beginning of any solution to the crisis in the region lies in recognizing that that crisis is the product of the exploitation to which the Central American countries have been subjected and in developing a set of measures in keeping with that reality.” “Speech by Commander Ortega Saveedra,” UN General Assembly 36th session, 29th Plenary Meeting October 7, 1981, New York: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/36/PV.29.
retorting that they were ridiculous to cite Carazo, who the envoy suggested had acted illegally in supporting the FSLN and was also personally corrupt. Sensing an opportunity to find common ground, Bayardo Arce shared a transcript of the insulting conversation with the Costa Rican president.

Carazo was so offended that he personally demanded an apology from the U.S. ambassador in San José, and wrote a letter informing his friend José López Portillo of the incident. Although he began by describing what he considered an affront to both him personally as well as to Costa Rica’s venerable democracy, Carazo also underscored the underlying tensions and difference of views which had motivated the tiff. Concluding the missive, he promised to not collaborate with the U.S. on its intervention in Nicaragua and strongly rejected its East-West characterization of Central American politics: “If the superpowers wish to fight amongst themselves, they should do it in their own territories and not in ours.”

CONCLUSION

In February 1982, exactly two years after the speech cited at the beginning of this chapter, López Portillo returned to revolutionary Managua to address its citizens. Much had changed since his last visit. The broad-front government envisioned by the transnational coalition at Puntarenas had given way to hegemonic Sandinista rule. The destruction of the old

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390 Carazo took issue with the following statement from Enders to FSLN National Directors Arce, Humberto Ortega, and Tirado López: “President Carazo Odio is not supported by anybody, he stole millions of dollars in sending arms to you all, he has been denounced by the National Assembly. I don’t understand how you could use him as an example of “good relations” [in contrast to ties to Cuba]. Even you should feel repugnance because that man has sold his office for private enrichment…” After failing to receive a formal apology from the U.S. ambassador Francis McNeil, Carazo confronted Enders at a conference in Belize on September 21, 1981: “Ayuda Memoria y documentos: Coincidencia entre Rodrigo Carazo y Thomas Enders,” Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica, Fondo Presidencia, Signatura 9278.

391 The letter is reproduced in its entirety in Carazo’s autobiography, Tiempo y Marcha, 404.
regime had unleashed long-simmering desires for rapid change, and the Sandinistas harnessed
this popular energy to control the state and advance a radical agenda for re-making Nicaraguan
society along socialist lines. Early FSLN reforms massively expanded rights, enfranchised wide
swaths of previously marginalized citizenry, and redistributed wealth; those same policies also
challenged many in the traditional elite and middle classes, who were further alienated by the
revolutionary government’s intolerance of dissent. By the Revolution’s third year, many of its
moderate, non-leftist progenitors had become its fiercest critics.392

This change over time was apparent in López Portillo’s second speech. Whereas his 1980
address focused on revolutionary Nicaragua’s promise for the region, in the 1982 iteration the
Mexican leader found himself defending the Sandinista Revolution’s continued existence. By
this time, the U.S. government had come to see the FSLN government as a Soviet “foothold” in
Central America. Certain anti-communist regimes in the region, threatened additionally by
Sandinista efforts to export their revolution elsewhere in the region, shared this thinking and
joined Washington in actions – most notably, the creation of a proxy army of Nicaraguan exiles
– designed to undermine the government in Managua. In the face of this superpower threat,
López Portillo told Nicaraguans to continue on the revolutionary path they had chosen. Further,
he warned that “an intervention in Central America and the Caribbean would represent a gigantic
historical error…It would provoke a continental convulsion and a resurgence of a profound anti-
American sentiment among the best people of all Latin America.”393

The triumph of the armed Left in Nicaragua had opened a can of worms – closed shut
since the Cuban Revolution – which would define the end of the Cold War in Central America.

392 Wheelock later attested to this change over time: “We began to govern in 1979 with a broad consensus and a
great deal of legitimacy. This and other factors led to a certain authoritarian behavior, which made the alliances we
forged in 1979 somewhat formal. We didn’t really govern with the participation of our allies, who became very
frustrated.” Quoted in Castañeda, Utopia Unarmed, 108.
393 “Discurso del president mexicano José López Portillo, en ocasión de recibir la Orden Augusto César Sandino,”
By seizing state power with wide popular support, advancing a radical agenda, and supporting revolutionary movements abroad, the Sandinistas posed a vexing question: what was the nature of social upheaval in Latin America, and how legitimate were the political organizations born from those movements? CIA analysts had come to believe that the “Soviets have by and large successfully implemented a policy of encouraging unrest in various Central American states,” but López Portillo offered a different explanation for the roots of this agitation:

In the same way that most of the Asian and African [anticolonial, independence] struggles could not be forcefully inserted into the East-West or capitalist-socialist dichotomies, the Central American revolutions of our times resist these Manichean classifications…

…I can assure my good friends in the United States that what is happening in Nicaragua; what is happening in El Salvador and the winds that blow throughout the whole region; these do not represent an intolerable danger for the fundamental interests and national security of the United States; what is a danger is the risk of historical condemnation for violently infringing the rights of the peoples (which without a doubt the United States claims for itself) to self-determination, independence, and the exercise of their autonomy.394

Thus, the first two years of the Sandinista decade witnessed a setting of the stage. As both U.S. intervention and popular resistance to the Sandinista policies dramatically increased in the middle of the 1980s, the growing bloodshed inside Nicaragua would be paralleled by an international battle of ideas and diplomacy between these two emergent narratives. The evolution of those two conflicts would define both the survival of Managua’s revolutionary government as well as the shape of Central American politics in the aftermath of the Cold War.

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Chapter Three

Putting East-West to the Test:

Intervention, Civil War, and the Latin American Response, 1982-1985
On March 15, 1982, rebels led by ex-Somocista National Guardsmen blew up two bridges in northern Nicaragua. Describing themselves as “comandos,” but better known by their Sandinista epithet as contras (as in counter-revolutionaries), these groups had been launching sporadic incursions from across the Honduran border since the first months of the Revolution. This time, however, was different. Unlike previous forays, this mission enjoyed logistical support – including the explosives they used as well as detailed maps – from the Reagan administration’s Department of Defense, which in January had received a presidential order to train and arm “democratic forces” in Central America.395

This “opening shot of the Contra War” seemed to confirm all the relevant actors’ assumptions.396 The Nicaraguan government saw the attacks as the beginning of the imperialist invasion it had long predicted. In response, it declared a general state of emergency, curtailed civil liberties, and levelled accusations of conspiracy and treason against critics such as former ally Alfonso Robelo, who they jailed. In turn, the political opposition claimed new evidence to bolster their previous claims of the FSLN’s totalitarian ambitions and found reason to justify harsher methods of resistance. A month after the attacks, Edén Pastora cited the government crackdown in a new declaration of intent to remove the Sandinista National Directorate from power. Pastora had alleged some distance from the CIA-backed rebels operating on the northern border, but for the FSLN, this former Sandinista commander was just another cog in the North American interventionist machine. To face these threats, Daniel Ortega made a highly-publicized trip to the Eastern Bloc and concluded significant arms deals with the USSR and Bulgaria in

395 “National Security Decision Directive Number 17: Cuba and Central America,” Washington, January 4, 1982. NSDDD 17 was the formalization of the presidential finding cited in the previous chapter, which itself was based on a November 16, 1981 meeting of the National Security Council. The directive increased military assistance to El Salvador and Honduras and directed U.S. policy to “provide military training for indigenous units and leaders both in and out of country” and “support democratic forces” in Nicaragua; https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-17.pdf. U.S. media outlets discovered in March that NSDD17 led to the creation of a $19 million fund, to be administered by the CIA, for covert operations in Nicaragua.

396 Turn of phrase borrowed from journalist Stephen Kinzer’s previously cited book on revolutionary Nicaragua, Blood of Brothers, 97.
May. This turn of events validated the fears of the Latin American moderate Left. Peruvian
novelist (and future Nobel laureate) Mario Vargas Llosa had summed up these concerns after a
visit to Managua in late 1981. If the world’s democracies did not block Washington’s hostilities
against the FSLN government, he asked, “why would it be strange to expect that the Nicaraguans
would turn to hear the siren song coming to them from the other side?”

The period 1982-1985 witnessed the worst violence of the decade, as the Sandinista
Popular Army mobilized to counter a growing military threat seeping in through national
borders. For another Latin American literary luminary, albeit one with a far stronger leftist bent,
the U.S. government was exclusively to blame for the carnage. “Once more,” wrote the
Argentine novelist Julio Cortázar after visiting the frontlines in 1983, “David has stood up to the
monumental Goliath.” In many ways, the biblical reference aptly captured the essence of this
particular Cold War standoff; the largest military power in human history was exerting overt and
covert economic, diplomatic, political pressure on an impoverished, mostly agrarian country of
roughly three million inhabitants. Nicaraguan diplomacy found strength in this narrative, one
which resonated with a generation of idealistic U.S. citizens who protested the growing

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397 The U.S. press noted how the warm reception enjoyed by Ortega in Moscow was typically “reserved for leaders of ‘fraternal countries’”; “Soviets Give Ortega Red Carpet Treatment,” The Washington Post, May 5, 1982. While Junta colleague Sergio Ramírez toured Western Europe in search of financial support, Daniel Ortega was received at the Kremlin by Leonid Brezhnev before signing with the Soviet premier a “technical-economic development agreement,” (Humberto Ortega, La Odisea por Nicaragua, 130). In some sense, the sudden uptick in U.S. covert action was viewed in Managua as an almost welcome opportunity to forge closer ties with the socialist world. Daniel Ortega explained to Todor Zhivkov, historic communist leader of Bulgaria, in a letter later in the year: “North American imperialism, historic enemy of our people, is carrying out a whole plan of aggressions...In the context of this highly dangerous situation, we view with great satisfaction the fact that we have made very significant strides in the strengthening of our relationships with the fraternal republics of the socialist camp, in particular with the People’s Republic of Bulgaria. The economic and scientific-technical collaboration and financial assistance provided to our country by the Party and government which you lead, is highly valuable for the stabilization of our battered economy.” “Letter from Daniel Ortega Saavedra of the FSLN to Todor Zhivkov,” November 12, 1982, CWIHP, http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111119.

398 Mario Vargas Llosa, “Nicaragua: Año Dos,” found in the collection Contra Viento y Marea, (Barcelona: Seix y Barral, 1983), 436.

399 Julio Cortázar, “Vigilia en Bismuna,” Proceso, March 12, 1983. The article is reproduced in Nicaragua tan violentamente dulce, a 1984 collection of old and new essays written by Cortázar analyzing and defending the revolutionary process in Nicaragua. On the eve of his death in 1984, the Sandinista government repaid his friendship that year by bestowing upon him the “Orden de la Independencia Cultura Rubén Darío,” the highest recognition awarded by the Nicaraguan state in the realm of cultural affairs.
intervention.\textsuperscript{400} But for the Nicaraguan writer Gioconda Belli, herself a student of Cortázar and a Sandinista propagandist tasked with selling this narrative abroad, it was precisely this “very Manichean vision of good and evil, of imperialism, of David and the Goliath” which led to the FSLN’s ultimate failure to transform Nicaraguan society.\textsuperscript{401} While this framework worked well at the United Nations, which the Sandinistas successfully turned into a forum for the denunciation of Washington’s interventions in the Third World, it obscured the complexities of the local conflicts generated by the government’s revolutionary agenda. Most notably, this FSLN view missed the fact that for the thousands of peasants who felt excluded by the Sandinistas’ nation-building project and opted to join the U.S.-backed Contra, they were David and the Nicaraguan state was the Goliath.

How should historians characterize the armed conflict in Nicaragua in the 1980s, which claimed nearly 30,000 lives (a toll which nearly matched that of the insurrectionary war against the Somoza regime)? Sandinista strategists conceived of this conflict as a “war of foreign aggression,” a perspective echoed in scholarship which calls it a “proxy war” and emphasizes the Reagan administration’s role in financing and training the Contra to pursue its own foreign policy objectives.\textsuperscript{402} A minority of academic observers have sharply diverged from such characterizations, instead downplaying evidence of U.S. involvement in favor of the domestic

\textsuperscript{400} See, for example, Christian Helm’s analysis of West German solidarity with the Nicaraguan government, where he notes how “the Sandinistas successfully framed the conflict as a new version of the biblical fight between David and Goliath, which facilitated further global sympathy and solidarity”; “Guns, Doves and Utopia: Cartoons and Posters in West German Nicaragua Solidarity,” in Making Sense of the Americas: How Protest Related to America in the 1980s and Beyond, eds. Jan Hansen, Christian Helm, and Frank Reichherzer, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 197-224. Nicaraguan diplomats actively cultivated this biblical metaphor: senior FSLN diplomat Alejandro Bendaña explained Nicaragua’s survival of U.S. intervention in these terms in a 1989 interview, “David resistió a Goliat: 10 años de política exterior,” Envío no. 95, July 1989.
\textsuperscript{401} Gioconda Belli, interview with the author, January 19, 2017.
\textsuperscript{402} The studies of U.S. intervention in Nicaragua are too many to list here. See, for example, Holly Sklar, Washington’s War on Nicaragua, (Boston: South End Press, 1988); William Leogrande, Our Own Backyard; and Michael Grow’s analysis of Nicaragua in U.S. Presidents and Latin American Interventions: pursuing regime change in the Cold War, (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2008). Historian Lawrence Whitehead once argued that it “seems doubtful whether the counter-revolutionaries would ever have amounted to a serious force” absent U.S. involvement in “The Prospects for a Political Settlement: Most Options Have Been Foreclosed,” in The Central American Impasse, eds. Lawrence Whitehead and Giuseppe Di Palma (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 229.
roots of violence in order to argue “the conflict in Nicaragua…was a civil war caused by Sandinista policies.” This binary in the North American academic literature – proxy war versus civil war – is a reflection of the deep debates that the Reagan administration’s Third World interventions provoked among U.S. citizens surrounding the role they believed their country should play in the world. Such a clear-cut distinction between foreign intervention and fratricidal political violence does not hold up against the historical record of how the Nicaraguan conflict developed, but the binary is useful for understanding the political stakes that Sandinista leaders faced when pondering what type of war they were fighting. Indeed, as David Armitage argues in his recent intellectual history of civil wars, debates over the characterization of a conflict have the real power of shaping said conflict’s outcome, determining how belligerents actually fight the war and informing the ways in which external powers choose to respond.

In the Nicaraguan case, the question of whether the Sandinistas’ war with U.S.-backed rebels represented a civil war or a war of foreign aggression was intricately tied to the questions unleashed by the Nicaraguan Revolution itself, about the causes of revolutionary upheaval, the legitimacy of leftist governments, and the right of the United States to answer those questions unilaterally. In reality, documents and testimony from the Sandinista Front show that – like most Cold War armed conflicts in the Third World – they fought both a superpower intervention and a civil war; the local and external dimensions of violence fed back into one another in a tragic loop. This chapter explores the roots and development of that war in the context of the greater transnational debate augured by the Left’s seizure of state power in Central America, the defining one of Latin America’s 1980s.

If the consolidation of the FSLN government in 1979-1981 witnessed a setting of the stage, where those questions were first posed, then the period 1982-1985 was a dramatic first act where the major players hardened their positions and the stakes of the conflict were further defined. The U.S. government saw a worsening threat in Nicaragua, and turned up the economic, diplomatic, and military pressure on Managua. North American sponsorship of proxies, combined with the Sandinistas’ inability to understand local sources of discontent – especially with respect to their ambitious agrarian reform – mired the country in civil war during this period. The revolutionary government was consumed by the war effort, derailing its policy efforts to transform Nicaraguan society. Though the revolution’s domestic agenda stalled, however, the revolutionizing effects it wrought on the international scene did not stop. On the contrary, they deepened as the Sandinista government clung to survival. While the Reagan administration pursued regime change in Central America as part of a perceived struggle between East and West, Latin America’s democratizing countries – notably, through the Contadora peace process – challenged U.S. power in the hemisphere with a reinvigorated commitment to continental sovereignty.

CIVIL WAR, INTERVENTION, AND THE REVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

When the Sandinistas eventually lost power in 1990, they looked back on their period in government and asked what crucial errors they had committed. Of the numerous think-tank autopsies that the FSLN commissioned in the wake of their 1990 electoral defeat, one conclusion by CIPRES (Center for Rural Promotion, Research, and Development) stood out above the others: “by tactics or purposeful disregard of the facts, the FSLN never recognized, not even
partially, the existence of a civil war.™ Indisputably, there had been a terrible armed conflict: the war between the government’s armed forces and U.S.-backed Contras claimed some 30,000 lives between 1981 and 1989. Whether or not that conflict constituted a civil war, however, was the central question of the period, one which eventually permeated the Latin American responses to the Revolution and Washington’s attempts to undermine it. Inside Nicaragua, the FSLN focused almost exclusively on U.S. intervention, and therefore underappreciated the local roots of discontent – and in particular, the political consequences of its agrarian reform. The development of a full-scale war, which owed to the complex interplay of local and international factors, fully and irreversibly constrained the Sandinistas’ ability to implement their agenda of economic and social transformation.

The notion of a civil war in post-Somoza Nicaragua was mortally contradictory to the Sandinistas’ revolutionary self-image. As David Armitage writes, to call a war “civil” is to “acknowledge the familiarity of the enemies of the members of the same community.” By contrast, the Sandinistas wanted to prove – to themselves, even – that they were fighting “others” manipulated by a foreign imperial power.™ Thus, government propagandists depicted Contra soldiers as genocidal ex-Guardsmen, mercenaries, and imperialist stooges but also, as Nicaraguan sociologist Irene Agudelo points out, “in the discourse [the Contras] metamorphosed into animals, vermin, beasts, and monsters.”™ Perhaps more importantly, the Sandinistas had come to power through some version of civil war, and their transformational project hinged on the belief that their armed insurrection against a dictatorship had been a different type of political

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violence. Armitage explains how 19th-century European thinkers tried to differentiate revolutions from civil wars:

The nascent category of revolution was designed, in part, to repress memories of civil war and replace them with something more constructive, more hopeful, and more forward-looking…That revolutionary hope could be sustained only by overlooking both the similarities between civil war and revolution and the overlap in the concepts used to understand them.  

The Sandinistas faced this same problem. Wishing to see their project as inherently revolutionary, they were unequipped to see beyond the external dimensions of war in their country. Sergio Ramírez describes the National Directorate’s myopic dismissal of local opposition to their government: “the people could not be against their revolution,” they believed, “because this was a popular revolution.”

In Nicaragua as in other “hotspots” such as Afghanistan, the Reagan administration increased the tenor of U.S. interventionism in the Third World, updating its toolkit to include the creation of proxy revolutionary armies. The effects of foreign intervention, however, did not exclusively structure Nicaraguan politics during the 1980s. As Odd Arne Westad notes in his history of the Cold War in the Third World, it was not just superpower interventions, but also local elites’ “pursuit of high-modernist ideologies,” which, taken together, put countries like Nicaragua into a state of “semi-permanent civil war.” During the 1980s, Sandinista commanders were extremely sensitive to the threat of U.S. aggression, but only after they lost power and the ideological fervor subsided did they realize, as Jaime Wheelock says in retrospect, that “even without foreign aggression, there were a series of policies, programs, and ways of projecting state power which at the political and social levels caused the population to repudiate

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408 Armitage, Civil Wars, Chapter Three.
409 Ramírez, previously cited interview with the author.
us." After taking power, like nationalist elites (of either capitalist or socialist persuasion) elsewhere in the Third World, the Sandinistas tried to transform their society overnight, and these attempts sometimes bore negative consequences.

Central among such efforts was land redistribution. Like virtually every modern social revolution before it, the promise to democratize land ownership was a pillar of the agenda dating back to the Sandinistas’ *Programa Mínimo* from two decades prior. This objective also had the blessing of the FSLN’s moderate allies in 1979, reflecting a widespread Latin American consensus that land reform was a necessary ingredient of economic development, and therefore it featured prominently on the Junta of National Reconstruction’s first decree in June 1979.

Predictably, the Sandinistas and their bourgeois partners came to disagree on the type and degree of land redistribution to carry out. However, the most consequential contradiction emerged at the popular level of the rural sector, where Wheelock – responsible for the project as Minister of Agrarian Reform – noted that support for the FSLN had been “minimal” during the insurrection. Indeed, as a “social segment,” contended military strategist Joaquín Cuadra, the “peasants did not participate.” Tellingly, Cuadra was the son of a wealthy financier. Not only did the FSLN largely fail in the 1960s and 70s to cultivate a serious peasant following like that of their Cuban models, but Sandinista cadres, especially those in the high command who survived

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411 Wheelock, previously cited interview with the author. Emphasis added.
412 *“Programa Mínimo del Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional,”* Sergio Ramirez Papers, Princeton University Firestone Library, Box 57, Folder 7. “The Sandinista government shall immediately begin a program of agrarian reform, intended to eliminate the *latifundios,* and based on the land expropriated from the Somoza family and its accomplices.”
413 *“Primera Proclama de la JGRN”,* June 18, 1979. Archivo IHNCA, JGRN D15G1-0007. The Junta’s decree stipulated that the State would confiscate idle lands, as well as the Somoza estate, and then hand these over to undefined “new owners.” One consequence of the Cuban Revolution had been the widespread acknowledgment, including among anti-Communist elites, that land reform was a necessary ingredient in the improvement of agricultural productivity and therefore economic development. This conclusion was pushed by the government of the United States, which after 1959 came to believe that inequality and stagnant development were playing into the hands of the local communist movements. Thus, the Kennedy Administration’s Alliance for Progress funded and advised land redistribution projects across the region, including a minor one in Somoza’s Nicaragua. See Thomas Wright, *Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution,* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000).
414 Wheelock, previously cited interview with the author.
415 Cuadra, previously cited interview with the author.
until 1979, mostly came from middle-class urban families. A minority had been born into the urban proletariat, but none came from rural peasant backgrounds.

The 1981 Agrarian Reform Law – crafted by young urban revolutionaries who knew little of the countryside – immediately provoked local rebellions against the government and created fertile conditions for U.S. paramilitary operations. The legislation included a host of measures such as price controls, accessible credit for farmers, and subsidies for key agricultural inputs. The focus, however, was in breaking up the country’s latifundios, starting with the Somoza estate, which alone represented a whopping 20% of the country’s agricultural land, much of it idle. The Ministry of Agrarian Reform’s belief, backed up by substantial research, was that large farms did not equitably distribute gains from growth and were not optimally productive.

However, instead of breaking up the large properties and distributing land titles to individual farmers, the Sandinistas followed the socialist land tenure scheme of other revolutions and turned the confiscated agricultural mega-estates into cooperative production units owned by the state. As two analysts of the reform note, this decision was rooted in the ideological belief “that small and medium peasants could not play a role,” and in the dubious policy logic that smallholding private farmers were both less productive and less easily coerced into planting export crops such as coffee instead of other types of produce. In practice, the state-owned agricultural sector quickly reported declining productivity. The social upside of this policy was that it benefitted landless peasants who, working on the collectivized farms as members of the Rural Workers Association, received access to fixed salaries and new social benefits.

The downside was highlighted by another FSLN think-tank, the Center for International Studies led by historian and Sandinista diplomat Alejandro Bendaña, which in 1991 interviewed dozens of peasants-turned-Contra commanders. The interviews suggested that Sandinista policies

produced the same problems as other collectivist agrarian reforms: for the smallholding “middle peasantry” who were often expropriated and asked to join collective farms, “the benefits of the Revolution were not evident; on the contrary, they felt more closely identified with the complaints and preoccupations of the large landowners and producers, with whom they maintained close and long-lasting relations.”\textsuperscript{417} One of the Contra’s top military leaders, Comandante Luis “Johnson” Fley, had originally fought in the Sandinista guerrilla column that liberated Jinotega from the Somoza regime. Born to wealthy peasants in the coffee-planting mountainous region of Nicaragua’s North, Fley worked in the revolutionary government’s coffee monopoly company and applauded the first redistributionist reforms. But by 1981, Fley had become disillusioned with the confiscation of small peasant-owned properties and was locked up – in the same provincial jail where he had been held by Somoza’s National Guard in 1979 – for attending an Alfonso Robelo rally.\textsuperscript{418} Rural inhabitants like Fley did not just take up arms; more importantly, as Bendaña notes, middle peasants like him became the “strategic link” between the rural elite and the poorer peasants who eventually filled the ranks of the Contra army.\textsuperscript{419}

I ideological biases unique to the Cold War prevented Sandinista commanders from seeing this link. Angelica Fauné, a Cuban sociologist who helped with the agrarian reform, later described this bias:

Marxist orthodoxy, inspired by Marx, Lenin, and Preobrazhensky [a Bolshevik economist who favored rapid industrialization], imposed an industrialist thesis, which maintained

\textsuperscript{417} \textit{Una Tragedia Campesina: Testimonios de la resistencia}, ed. Alejandro Bendaña Rodríguez, (Managua: Editora de Arte y Centro de Estudios Internacionales, 1991), 16-17. Another analyst of Sandinista agrarian reform explains the dilemma of the middle peasant: “What did the Revolution offer to these people? It ordered that the peasantry produce cooperatively on collectivized property. The government imposed the CAS, the Sandinistas Agricultural Cooperatives. These peasants did not accept. Imagine if people that had spent 40 years living as peasants, fighting to be individual peasant owners of their own land, would accept overnight to working on a co-op.” Maria Angelica Fauné, “En la Nicaragua campesina se han ido acumulando engaños y enojos,” \textit{Envío}, No. 386, May 2014.


\textsuperscript{419} Bendaña, \textit{Una Tragedia Campesina}, 17.
that proletarianization was the peasantry’s future and that the process of economic development would lead to the disappearance of the peasantry as a productive class.\footnote{Maria Angelica Fauné, “En la Nicaragua campesina se han ido acumulando engaños y enojos,”\textit{Envío}, No. 386, May 2014. Fauné further describes the Revolution’s marked bias in favor of urban workers and against the peasantry: “Jaime Wheelock’s book\textit{Imperialism and Dictatorship}, published in 1975, was very influential back then and suffered from that bias. It presented an image of the peasantry of the interior [as opposed to the proletarianized rural workers of the Pacific Coast’s industrial cotton-export farms] as ‘backwards,’ autarchic, and stagnant...” }

Sandinista commanders did not realize until after the Revolution that they had, in effect, expropriated the peasantry. Many shared the experience of Henry Ruiz, who was struck by his conversation with Commander Israel “Franklin” Galeano, a talented peasant fighter who became Chief of Staff of the Honduras-based, U.S.-financed Contra. When Modesto asked Franklin why a peasant would choose to fight against a revolution which promised to liberate the countryside, the latter matter-of-factly responded, “Idea\textit{y}, weren’t you going to expropriate me?”\footnote{Ruiz, previously cited interview with the author.}

Though founded by remnants of Somoza’s National Guard, “in percentage terms, it was the peasantry which filled the ranks of the Contra,” asserts Hugo Torres, then the Sandinista Army’s Director of Intelligence (one foreign analyst puts the figure at as high as 95%).\footnote{Timothy Brown,\textit{The Real Contra War: Highlander Peasant Resistance in Nicaragua.} (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 2001), xvii, says that 95% of the FDN’s combatants (which comprised about 80% of the Contra) were “highlander indio peasants,” though his definition of “indio” is overly capacious. See also Lynn Horton,\textit{Peasants in Arms: War and Peace in the Mountains of Nicaragua, 1979-1994.} (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1998).} The precursor to the major Contra forces was the Guatemala-based September 15\textsuperscript{th} Legion, founded by National Guard Coronels Enrique “3-80” Bérmudez and Ricardo “Chino” Lau. In return for Argentine and Honduran support, the Legion assisted these countries’ military objectives.\footnote{In an example of how the transnationalism of the Left seen in previous chapters also applied to the Right during the Cold War, Ricardo Lau was implicated in the 1980 assassination of Archbishop Romero in El Salvador. His September 15\textsuperscript{th} Legion, moreover, was originally recruited by the Argentine military to hunt down that country’s communist exiles in Central America.}

Seeking to unite this band with other anti-Sandinista insurgents financed by the Argentines, the Reagan Administration helped create a new umbrella organization with a softer-sounding name: the\textit{Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense} (FDN). Founded in early 1982, the FDN immediately got to work with the bridge bombings cited at the beginning of this chapter. The United States
(replacing the Argentinian military) provided weapons and financing, and Somocistas like Bermúdez and Lau ran the newly-organized army, but recruitment of ground troops fell to talented peasant commanders who crossed the border to Honduras in 1981-82 after mounting their own armed rebellions inside the Nicaraguan countryside. Most notable for the FDN were Commanders Encarnación “Tigrillo” Valdivia and Pedro Joaquín “Dimas” González, former sharecropping peasants who, like Fley, fought alongside the FSLN in 1979 only to later take up arms against it. Journalist Sam Dillon’s inside account of the FDN points to a tacit agreement reached between Tigrillo and Dimas and the ex-Guardsmen: the peasant leaders would receive weapons to arm disaffected rural inhabitants who wanted to kick Sandinista officials off their land, and in return they would incorporate these fighters into the formal FDN structure and swear loyalty to its CIA-anointed leaders.424 Within a year, the Contra had some 10,000 fighters and eventually as many as 17,000 by the peak of the war.425

The peasant dislocations caused by revolutionary policies were not only economic, but also identity-based. When asked why he took up arms against his former colleagues in the Sandinista armed forces, Tigrillo answered that he was tired of his compañeros trying to convince him of God’s inexistence.426 Though Catholicism’s liberation theology current helped generate support for the FSLN during the insurrection, most Sandinista leaders were secular, Marxist-oriented, and saw the Church as having played a reactionary role in the country’s national development. The Sandinistas’ perceived atheism, which was frowned upon in the traditionally religious communities of the countryside, was compounded by the revolutionary

424 Sam Dillon, Commandos, 66-67. Bermúdez and Tigrillo met in late 1981, and within months the latter’s troops incorporated under the former’s nucleus of ex-National Guard officers in order to receive training and U.S. weapons.  
425 David Close, “Responding to Low-Intensity Conflict: Counterinsurgency in Sandinista Nicaragua,” New Political Science, 1(2), 1990: 12. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute estimates that in 1987, there were anywhere between 12,000 and 17,000 troops in the various Contra armies.  
426 After the 1979 insurrection, and before taking up arms against the government, Tigrillo incorporated into the Sandinista Army. He recalled in a later interview that “the compañeros who would come back from [training in] Cuba would harass me everyday so that I would stop believing in God.” Interview in El Nuevo Diario, August 12, 2006.
government’s poor relations with the Vatican. Those relations hit rock bottom in 1984, when locals heckled and booed Pope John Paul II during a visit to Managua, because he refused to condemn U.S. support for the Contras and instead publicly chastised Ernesto Cardenal for breaking his priestly vows and taking public office as Minister of Culture. The dismissal of traditional conservative voices of authority, combined with a perceived bias towards the urban working class, forms part of a wider social background for the Contra’s emergence which goes beyond the material impact of the Revolution’s economic policies. Putting it succinctly, Irene Agudelo characterizes the Contra as “the armed branch of a sector which did not feel included in the nation-building discourse of the Sandinista Revolution. The peasant identity was not considered by the official discourse.”

Nowhere was the discursive narrowness of the Sandinista project more pronounced than amongst the country’s ethnic and racial minorities. Mostly neglected by the Somoza regime and previous governments in Managua, Nicaragua’s Caribbean coast had hitherto enjoyed a de facto, if impoverished, autonomy. These regions had originally been colonized by the British Empire, and therefore its Protestant, English-speaking populations differed culturally from their mestizo, Catholic, and Spanish-speaking countrymen on the Pacific side of the Nicaragua’s central mountain chains. Because of this cultural, geographic, and economic distance, Ernesto Cardenal notes, the Caribbean’s indigenous and Afro-descendant populations felt that “the Revolution was a revolution of españoles. That revolution was foreign to them and they felt that it was imposed.” Indeed, because these communities were alien to them, FSLN cadres treated their traditional forms of organization and cultural differences as obstacles to their centralizing and

427 Irene Agudelo, Contramemorias, 14.
428 In his memoir, Cardenal continues: “The slogans and flags that the revolutionaries liked so much, they found repugnant. It wasn’t until later that the revolutionaries understood how to get their message across to them – with song and dance. The Sandinistas committed many mistakes on the Coast due to cultural misunderstanding. The main cause was that at the time of the revolutionary triumph, anthropologists didn’t go to the Caribbean – young soldiers went instead. What’s worse: they came with racist prejudices.” La Revolución Perdida, 569.
modernizing project. Consequently, their attempts to “integrate” minorities quickly backfired.\textsuperscript{429} For example, the North Atlantic’s Miskito Indians chafed under the otherwise successful literacy crusades of 1980, because they interpreted the imposition of the Spanish language as an attempt to erase their ethnic identity and replace it with a mestizo, socialist nationalism. Several months before the FDN was constituted, the Sandinista Army was having skirmishes with armed Miskito insurgents operating from both sides of the Coco River which runs along the Honduras-Nicaragua border.\textsuperscript{430} The reason for this indigenous rebellion, and for the flight of thousands of Miskito to Honduras, was “the antagonism created by the Sandinista government policy which denies the ethnic identity of our people,” according to leader Brooklyn Rivera.\textsuperscript{431}

Eventually, the FSLN came to terms with MISURASATA, the pan-ethnic army of Miskito, Sumo, and Rama Indians which fought alongside the Contra armies and eventually received direct CIA assistance. Sandinista strategists acknowledged how their racial prejudices led them to haphazardly integrate these communities. They also they learned that many Indians’ claims against the government had been inspired by the aspirations that the Revolution itself had unleashed; as Rivera explained, “Immediately after the revolution the Indian leadership had great faith in the Sandinista government and in the process of the revolution. We tried to walk as a people with the current of the Revolution and not against it.”\textsuperscript{432} The Sandinistas had come to power promising national liberation, and these indigenous groups responded by demanding autonomy for the Caribbean coast regions and laying historical claim to lands which comprised

\textsuperscript{429} Ramírez wrote in his memoir: “We expected to integrate them overnight into the revolution, its values, modern life, well-being. It was an ideological paternalism, different from Somoza’s, which had never created well-intentioned programs, but we knew nothing of their culture or their languages, to the point of communicating with them via interpreters, and we had no knowledge of their religious beliefs or their forms of social organization. Likewise, we knew very little about the black population, also situated on the Caribbean coast.” \textit{Adios Muchachos}, 163.


\textsuperscript{432} Ibid.
nearly one third of the national territory. Viewing these demands with suspicion, the Sandinistas repressed them, a decision which proved costly. Not only did the plight of the Miskitos open another military front, it also exposed the Nicaraguan government to a propaganda war which the U.S. government duly capitalized upon. By 1985, years of indigenous insurrection, combined with pressure from the international community, pushed the Sandinistas to make peace with MISURASATA and eventually pass a landmark constitutional amendment that recognized Nicaragua’s ethnic pluralism and granted autonomy to the country’s two Atlantic provinces.\textsuperscript{433}

FSLN National Director Luis Carrion’s talks with Rivera, brokered by Latin American and European governments eager to close at least one front of the Nicaraguan war, had persuaded the FSLN of the error of its ways.\textsuperscript{434} The legal provisions for ethnic pluralism and Caribbean coast autonomy were a real innovation as far as Latin American revolutionary governments were concerned, one not at all envisioned beforehand by Sandinista ideologues; rather, it was produced by the domestic and international contradictions unleashed by their attempt to modernize Nicaragua.\textsuperscript{435}

The Nicaraguan government did not treat most of its adversaries with such flexibility. Viewing internal insurgents as little more than an arm of the U.S. foreign policy apparatus, the Sandinistas refused to hold direct talks with the Contra. Gioconda Belli recalls the slogan being, “we will not speak with the dogs, when we can instead speak with their masters.”\textsuperscript{436} By 1982, all

\textsuperscript{433} Peter Wade describes the passing of the “Law on Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast” in \textit{Race and Ethnicity in Latin America}, (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 105. For an in-depth analysis, see Marvin Ortega’s study, \textit{Nicaraguan Repatriation to Mosquitia}, (Georgetown University: Center for Immigration Policy and Refugee Assistance, 1991).

\textsuperscript{434} Mexican Embassy in Nicaragua to Tlatelolco, D.F., “Negociaciones Gobierno Nicaragüenselider Miskito Brooklyn Rivera,” Managua, April 9, 1985, AG SRE III-3962-1.

\textsuperscript{435} This moment would have international consequences down the line, as well. Political scientist Deborah Yashar explains the belated emergence of ethnic political debates and mobilization in Latin America in \textit{Contesting Citizenship in Latin America: The Rise of Indigenous Movements and the Postliberal Challenge}, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005). To explain why this phenomenon led to the emergence of indigenous movements in some countries but not others, Yashar points to the importance of transnational networks in providing the mechanisms, capacity, and resources necessary for sustained legal organizing. The Miskito case provides an example of how the emergence of such transnational links was bound up in Cold War international politics.

\textsuperscript{436} Gioconda Belli, previously cited interview with the author.
dissidents were labelled “counterrevolutionaries,” a naming which further polarized Nicaraguan society. Many opponents, in fact, had participated in the 1979 insurrection and revolutionary government. For example, the main Contra faction on the southern Costa Rica border – the Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática (ARDE) – was headed by 1979 stalwarts like Edén Pastora and the Panamanian internationalist Hugo Spadafora. Though Pastora privately received financial and military support from the U.S. via CIA Latin America chief Dewey Clarridge, at least publicly his movement claimed distance from the Somocista-led FDN and claimed a “commitment to redeem our true and original Nicaraguan Revolution” and its 1979 principles.437 Such claims, to the Sandinistas, were meaningless. As Westad notes, Third World revolutionaries were convinced of the need to radically transform their societies overnight. Looking back on the injustices and inequalities of the ancien regime left “little room for equivalence between revolution and its opponents.”438

In sum, revolutionary policies, the collapse of political alliances, and the pursuit of an ideologically-driven nation-building project all contributed to the development of the war after 1982. The Revolution’s economic policies had further weakened support from the upper and middle classes, who increasingly fled the country and supported the Contra from exile. As the government spent ever-increasing sums of money – up to 62% of the state’s income at one point – countering the military threat, and as agricultural policies devastated the productivity of the economy, declining real wages, shortages and other economic distortions such as inflation

437 Edén Pastora, “Proclamation to the People of Nicaragua,” April 15, 1983, Central American Crisis Reader, 263. Eventually, Pastora eventually abandoned ARDE, having broken with long time partner Alfonso Robelo, alleging too much CIA influence, and helped found another Contra force, the Bloque Opositor Sur (BOS). The BOS attempted to style itself as a social-democratic alternative to the FDN, but also ended up receiving U.S. funds and forming part of the U.S.-created Contra umbrella group, the Resistencia Nacional (RN). Ironically, even the FDN claimed to stand “for the nationalistic and patriotic principles of the historic figure, Augusto César Sandino. “FDN Statement of Principles,” February 1983, Ibid., 261.

438 Westad, The Global Cold War, 398.
became the norm, particularly in the already-affected rural sector.\textsuperscript{439} Another major factor driving popular discontent was the April 1983 implementation of a “patriotic” compulsory military service – the \textit{Servicio Militar Patriotico} (SMP). Army strategists later argued that the SMP was necessary for maintaining the massive superiority in numbers – a ratio of at least seven Sandinista troops for every insurgent – which blocked the Contra from holding territories, but conscription undermined the government’s popular appeal.\textsuperscript{440}

Nevertheless, though Sandinista decisions and local dynamics contributed to the conditions for a civil war, Nicaragua was still the subject of an intense superpower intervention. Beginning in late 1981, the U.S. government financed every aspect of Contra operations. According to FDN chief Enrique Bermúdez, his troops executed the March 1982 bridge bombings at the behest of Pentagon strategists.\textsuperscript{441} Bermúdez, who had more experience committing human rights abuses than leading troops into field combat, survived numerous attempts on his leadership because he enjoyed the backing of CIA officials who selected top Contra commanders based on their loyalty to the operation, rather than their credentials or effectiveness.\textsuperscript{442} U.S. intelligence officials treated the Contra’s civil leadership with particular contempt. When Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, a son of the late journalist, petitioned to have

\textsuperscript{439} The loss of agricultural productivity as a result of the agrarian reform and peasant dislocation hurt supply, leading to inflated prices for key goods. Chapter 4 discusses the chaotic state of the Nicaraguan economy, as a result of the war and a Sandinista economic model which contained some market elements, and some centrally-planned aspects, but never matured into a coherent mixed-economy. For a brief overview of their policies and their effects, see the previously cited De Franco and Velásquez article in \textit{Democratic Transitions in Central America}.

\textsuperscript{440} Humberto Ortega argues the SMP was necessary “in order to have a 7-1 advantage against Contra guerrillas” and credited the decision with immediately reducing casualties by 70 percent,” \textit{La Odisea por Nicaragua}, 137. However, the SMP may also have had an ideological basis. The earliest FSLN “Programa Mínimo” listed a compulsory patriotic military service as one of the policies that its revolutionary government would implement upon taking power.

\textsuperscript{441} Gutman, \textit{Banana Diplomacy}, 104.

\textsuperscript{442} Donald Castillo Rivas, a member of the Contra’s \textit{Bloque Opositor Sur}, writes: “Support from the CIA and other North American agencies was given to a group of Nicaraguans based on previously established relationships and on the understanding that these would be loyal and obedient employees that could be trusted. In order to consolidate these relationships, Contra leaders had to be submissive and dependent; on the contrary, the empire could replace them,” \textit{Gringos, Contras, y Sandinistas: testimonio de la guerra civil en Nicaragua}. (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo editors, 1994), 186.
Bermúdez ousted and replaced by one of the commanders with peasant, non-Somocista backgrounds, the CIA station chief in Tegucigalpa lashed out with personal insults.\textsuperscript{443} Having found that “the Americans liked to make all the crucial decisions,” another civilian leader, Edgar Chamorro, abandoned the Contra in 1984. In a scathing “confession” he wrote for \textit{The New Republic}, he differentiated the Contra leadership from its rank-and-file:

\begin{quote}
The idealistic young people who have actually fought against the Sandinista army have real grievances. Their land has been confiscated or they have been persecuted for their religious views or they have resisted the Sandinista draft. But they are being used as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy by the CIA and the Reagan administration.\textsuperscript{444}
\end{quote}

As Chamorro suggests, the armed conflict in Nicaragua came about as a result of the interplay between local grievances and foreign plots. Remarkably, U.S. policymakers seemed as oblivious to the former factor as the Nicaraguans. One U.S. foreign service officer who later analyzed the peasant origins of the Contra, noted that while the Reagan administration publicly referred to the FDN as “freedom fighters” and the “moral equivalent” of the American founding fathers, these actually shared the Left’s darker vision of the FSLN’s internal opponents as little more than thuggish, Somocista mercenaries. He cites the testimony of CIA officer Dewey Clarridge, who alleged that Ronald Reagan referred to the Contra as the “CIA’s vandals.”\textsuperscript{445} Like the Sandinistas, the United States government conceived of armed conflict in Nicaragua as the result of its intervention there.\textsuperscript{446} The FSLN’s own analysis recognized this irony in 1991:

\begin{quote}
…there is no evidence that the Central Intelligence Agency had thought to develop a parallel social and military force in the Nicaraguan countryside. In fact, the Contra army seems to have grown beyond the expectations of the North Americans – not because of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{443} Dillon, \textit{Commandos}, 224. CIA agent John Mallet told Chamorro that he “admired his idealism” but Bermúdez would stay. When the civilian contra leader kept pressing the issue, Mallet called him “stupid” and an “imbecile” in front of the rest of the Contra directorate.


\textsuperscript{445} Brown, \textit{The Real Contra War}, 5.

\textsuperscript{446} “In public, President Ronald Reagan called the Contras Freedom Fighters, but in private, even Reagan and his insiders apparently shared the darker vision of the Contras. Even though the CIA spent about $250 million for covert military aid to the Contras and worked with them daily for almost a decade, it now seems evident that they never really understood who the Contras were.” \textit{Ibid.}
sophisticated recruitment techniques, but primarily because of the impact on the peasantry of the policies, limitations, and errors of Sandinismo.\textsuperscript{447}

Naturally, without North American funding, discontented Nicaraguans would not have had access to weapons, and their localized rebellions would not have approached the dimensions they acquired. The feedback between U.S. involvement and Nicaraguans’ own actions reveals the false binary of civil war and intervention. In retrospect, Wheelock explains the ways in which the war was understood during the 1980s: “There is the ‘pure aggression by the U.S.’ thesis, and ‘civil war’ thesis. I don’t think it’s one or the other.”\textsuperscript{448}

A narrow focus on the foreign aggression thesis informed the FSLN’s decisionmaking during this period, with mixed results. The National Directorate’s inattention to the local roots of conflict foreshadowed its surprise at the FSLN’s electoral defeat in 1990. During the war, moreover, the singular preoccupation with U.S. meddling proved costly; as political scientist Kai Thaler notes in a recent analysis, the Sandinistas “devoted excessive resources to external defense, while failing to adequately address an ongoing, multiple-front insurgency that had both domestic roots and foreign-sponsored elements.”\textsuperscript{449} In particular, the Sandinista Popular Army spent considerable resources acquiring foreign weaponry – such as Soviet tanks – which would be useful in the hypothetical case of a U.S. ground invasion, but were useless in a counterinsurgency war against homegrown guerrillas in mountainous terrain.\textsuperscript{450} In 1984, the Nicaraguan sought Soviet MiG-21 supersonic jet fighters in order to establish air supremacy over its Central American neighbors and heighten the costs of a potential U.S. attack. Moscow, for

\textsuperscript{447} Bendaña, \textit{Una Tragedia Campesina}, 13.
\textsuperscript{448} Wheelock, interview with the author.
\textsuperscript{450} Ibid., 16. As a matter of fact, the only time the FSLN deployed the tanks was in 1989, when the U.S. government directly intervened in Panama to overthrow the regime of Manuel Noriega. Fearing a direct intervention against their own country, the Sandinistas surrounded the U.S. embassy in Managua with troops backed by tanks. “After Noriega: Nicaragua; Sandinistas Are Fearful They Will Be a Target,” \textit{New York Times}, December 27, 1989.
fear of needlessly provoking Washington, ultimately balked at sending the planes. The enormous Punta Huete airfield the FSLN constructed was left to rot, and the dozens of pilots they sent to Bulgaria for specialized training were left with no jet fighters to fly (Ironically, the combat helicopters the USSR sent instead of the MiGs proved critical to the Sandinista war effort as its army increasingly adopted counterinsurgency tactics). The National Directorate’s emphasis on external threats owes primarily to two factors: an *a priori* fear of a direct U.S. invasion, and Washington’s deliberate attempts to stoke these fears by making such an intervention appear imminent. For example, when the Reagan administration militarily overthrew the left-wing government of Grenada in 1983, the Sandinista government – and its Cuban advisors – sincerely believed that Nicaragua was the “next stop,” and tried to send conciliatory signals to the U.S. government.

In other ways, particularly in the diplomatic sphere, a focus on unilateral U.S. aggression was beneficial. Indeed, many of the most overt cases of aggression backfired on Washington. For instance, when CIA operatives mined the important Pacific port of Corinto, it hoped to damage the Sandinista military (it had a marginal effect) and shipping lines (they were unaffected). Instead, this overt intervention gave fodder for anti-intervention Democrats to pass a second Boland amendment in 1984 curtailing Contra aid and served as the legal basis for the U.S. government’s embarrassing defeat against Nicaragua at the International Court of Justice in

452 Bendaña, previously cited interview with the author. The Grenada intervention in October 1983 had a number of short-term effects on the Sandinistas. For one, they forced the FMLN command in Managua into hiding in order to eliminate the Salvadors as a potential pretext for an invasion, in the same way that the Cuban presence had been used to justify the overthrow of the New Jewel government in Grenada. Second, as Bendaña notes, the FSLN burnt large portions of its internal archives or sent them to Havana. Additionally, in a sincere display of its fear of a direct invasion, the Nicaraguan Ministry of Culture took steps to relocate key literary and cultural artifacts to friendly countries; see a November 1983 report from the Mexican Ambassador in Managua, reporting on the Ministry of Culture’s request to place such items at the Mexican diplomatic mission, “EMBAMEX Nicaragua para RELMEX,” Managua, November 9, 1983, AG SRE III-3644-1.
1986, a highpoint in Sandinista attempts to isolate Washington on its Central America policy.\textsuperscript{453} The Reagan administration’s 1985 embargo on trade with Nicaragua helped compound the economic devastation wrought by the civil war, but was politically ineffective; in the words of COSEP President and hardline opposition leader Enrique Bolaños, it “didn’t do anything to Nicaragua…politically it was a blessing for the Sandinistas” because it rallied their base and prompted outcry from countries around the world.\textsuperscript{454} The Reagan administration’s policies were unpopular in global public opinion; as one historian of U.S. solidarity networks has written, “in a paradox of history, instead of destroying the Sandinista Revolution, Reagan’s Contra policy helped boost its political-ideological allure as a tiny ‘David’ that defied a global goliath.”\textsuperscript{455} For this reason, then-Contra leader Arturo J. Cruz lamented that U.S. involvement “gave the Sandinistas the pretext to cry to the world that they were the victims of Yankee imperialism…this was their preferred scenario.” Because of the ties to Washington, Cruz notes, “from the outset the Contra’s struggle lacked international legitimacy.”\textsuperscript{456} Meanwhile, US intervention continued to complicate its traditional alliances: the French government offered to sweep the Nicaraguan coast for additional mines in 1984 and that same year secretly brokered talks between the Nicaraguan and Costa Rican governments to defuse tensions.\textsuperscript{457}


\textsuperscript{454} Quoted in Gutman, \textit{Banana Diplomacy}, 287.


\textsuperscript{456} Interview by Contra political analyst Donald Castillo Rivas in \textit{Gringos, Contras, y Sandinistas: Testimonio de la guerra civil en Nicaragua}, (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo editors, 1994), 164.

\textsuperscript{457} These secret talks were recounted in internal Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry memoranda and transcripts: “Información Especial: Sobre reunión de las comisiones nicaragüenses-costarricenses, con presencia de Francia, el compañero José León Talavera,” July 20, 1984, Archivo Bendaña Box 4; “Confidencial: Reuniones con Cancillería Francesa,” July 18, 1984, Paris; “Transcripción de segunda reunión,” July 19, 1984; “Transcripción de tercera reunión,” July 19, 1984. José León Talavera notes that, aside from being beneficial for reducing tensions with Nicaragua, “France played an important role in mentoring Costa Rica, because it allows Costa Rica to absorb some American pressure.” Talavera, previously cited interview with the author.
Perhaps most importantly – as the next section shows – Latin American governments also tended to conceive of conflict in Nicaragua as a foreign intervention, the effects and symbolism of which it feared and loathed in equal measure. In Nicaragua, the war was all-consuming. After 1982, as army chief Humberto Ortega has written, the “main objective of the Revolution was to defeat the U.S. war of aggression while avoiding an invasion by its regular troops.”

Ramírez notes that this decision, to pour all resources into achieving a military victory over the foreign-backed insurgents, saved the revolutionary government but killed the revolutionary process: “everything became subordinated to military priorities, and that destroyed any possibility of change.”

Meanwhile, the Contra was also confident in a military victory; as early as 1983, Honduran military leader Gustavo Alvarez boasted that his troops would be in Managua by Christmas. Contrary to both sides’ hopes, however, a deadly stalemate emerged: the Contra found itself unable to hold any urban centers it captured, and the FSLN failed to annihilate an ever-expanding rebel army. Nonetheless, although the revolutionary process inside Nicaragua had stagnated by 1982-83, the revolutionizing debates unleashed by the Sandinistas on the international scene only intensified as the war raged on.

**CONTADORA: REJECTING REAGANISM**

In fact, parallel to the Nicaraguan civil war there was a broader international war developing around the Sandinista Revolution. Just as the Reagan administration made Nicaragua

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459 Wheelock, previously cited interview with the author: “Our reaction was to always seek, as the central objective, a military defeat of the enemy. And we disposed the entire country to that purpose.” On the cost, Ramírez says: “Everything became subordinated to military priorities, and that destroyed any possibility of change. That’s what produced the inflation and the shortages, and that’s what produced our political weakness; to have to continue, moreover, with the obligatory military service completed is what destroyed the credibility of the Revolution,” previously cited interview with the author.
460 Alvarez, quoted in Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 153, said this to Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy.
the place where it would begin “rolling back” a supposedly Soviet-sponsored communism, newly-democratizing countries in South America increasingly saw Central America as the site where it would push back against U.S. unilateralism and the threat it posed to their real interests and dreams of regional autonomy. The Nicaraguan government exploited this cleavage expertly in pursuit of international legitimacy and a stronger position domestically.

As with the war inside Nicaragua, the first flashpoint in that international struggle was the March 1982 Contra attacks. In response to those, Venezuelan President Luís Herrera Campín and Mexican President José López Portillo sent a letter to Reagan asking him “to cease the support, organization and deployment of ex-Somocista guardsmen.” Further rebuking U.S. militarization of the Nicaraguan issue, they also sent letters to the Nicaraguan Junta and Honduran President Roberto Suazo Córdova proposing bilateral peace talks. Herrera Campín had a less sanguine view of the Sandinista Revolution than López Portillo, who gave the gushing speeches in Managua cited in the previous chapter; shortly after the proposal, the Venezuelan President publicly reminded Nicaragua’s leaders that they were “morally committed with Latin America, which gave its support to their struggle, to carry out the pluralist project which they proclaimed when they took power.” Still, the two governments shared the same motive for defusing U.S.-fueled tensions in Central America: as the letters mentioned, the countries were “linked by geography to the Central American area and felt its problems as if they were their

462 “Cartas de los presidentes Luis Herrera Campins de Venezuela y José López Portillo de México al coordinador de la Junta de Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional de Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega; al president de Honduras, Roberto Suazo Córdova,” found in Ibid.
463 Quoted in a Mexican embassy in Managua report, “Comentario sobre las declaraciones del Presidente de Venezuela Relativas a la Política Interna de Nicaragua,” Managua, September 24, 1982, AG-SRE-III-3490-1. Mexican diplomats in Managua frowned upon what they viewed as an undue interference in Nicaragua’s internal affairs, believing that these comments echoed the perspective of the Sandinistas’ internal opponents. In their view, Campins had been emboldened to criticize the FSLN because of his letter earlier in the month, which was soft on the Nicaraguan government.
own.” The Sandinistas praised the Mexican-Venezuelan peace proposal as “timely and realistic”: by making no mention of Nicaragua’s internal affairs, it subtly legitimized its government; by demanding the end of the Reagan administration’s support for the Contra, it was an implicit rebuke of the United States.464

Reagan waited a month before offering an icy response to the joint Mexican-Venezuelan proposal: the solution to Central America’s problems, he believed, was “to achieve democratic pluralism within each nation.”465 Echoing this view, the Honduran government rejected the offer to mediated talks, demanding that the Nicaraguan government first introduce democratic reforms.466 Earlier in the year, U.S. diplomats approached their Nicaraguan counterparts with an 8-point negotiating agenda centered around the issue of democratization, to which the Sandinistas responded with their own agenda of 13 points – none of which touched upon their country’s internal affairs.467 Seeking to isolate the FSLN government on this issue, and in direct response to the Mexican-Venezuelan proposal, the U.S. helped organize a “Forum for Peace and Democracy” in October. The conference in San José, to which all Central American governments but the Sandinistas’ were invited, was – in the words of the U.S. ambassador to Costa Rica – “organized to put Nicaragua in a box.”468 Most of Nicaragua’s Central American neighbors agreed with the “East-West thesis” and two of them – Costa Rica and, especially, Honduras – hosted Contra bases. These countries, along with Guatemala and El Salvador, had

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464 “Memorándum,” from EMBAMEX Managua to the Mexican Foreign Ministry, October 25, 1982. The comments were made at a meeting of the Managua diplomatic corps convened by D’Escoto to comment on the forthcoming San José conference [see below].
468 U.S. Ambassador Francis McNeil, quoted in Gutman, Banana Diplomacy, 114.
genuine concerns over FSLN arms buildup and support for revolutionary groups abroad. But the conference built on the explicit narrative that the inherent reason for escalating tensions was the Sandinistas’ ties to the Soviet bloc, their Marxist ideology, and supposed attempts at building a totalitarian state. The implicit narrative, given Nicaragua’s non-invitation, was that its government was not as legitimate as its Central American peers.

The prevailing political winds elsewhere in Latin America ran counter to these perspectives. In December, Gabriel García Márquez – a key player in the 1979 conspiracy, as we have observed – received the Nobel Prize for literature and devoted his winnings to the cause of peace in Central America. In his Nobel Lecture, Márquez linked the violence of Latin America’s late Cold War to the region’s colonial past and post-colonial growing pains. He excoriated U.S. backed-dictators across the region and lamented the thousands of lives being lost to right-wing forces in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. The solution to the violence, he argued, was for friendly Western societies to “end the solitude of Latin America” by supporting its countries’ pursuit of autonomy and construction of local models for development, and to eschew fears of Soviet meddling. “Latin America neither wants, nor has any reason,” he assured the world, “to be a pawn without a will of its own.” Why then, he asked, “is the originality so readily granted us in literature so mistrustfully denied us in our difficult attempts at social change?”

The spirit of Marquez’s 1982 speech, that Latin America required freedom to forge its destiny, gained force throughout the decade as more countries in the region transitioned to democracy. In his own country, which had a longer tradition of uninterrupted elections, newly-elected President Belisario Betancur – despite hailing from the Conservative party – distanced Colombia from the

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469 As a CIA report noted, the Nicaraguan military had acquired Soviet armor and artillery which, combined with vastly superior manpower, gave it a distinct edge over its neighbors in the event of interstate conflict. “Nicaraguan Military Buildup,” Central Intelligence Agency, March 22, 1982, DNSA, (ProQuest ID: 1679048980)

Reagan administration’s foreign policy and incorporated it into the Non-Aligned Movement. As Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina and others transitioned to democracy and allowed for more progressive actors to participate in politics, these countries picked up the thrust of Marquéz’s argument and acted on it in the international arena.

Those arguments played out primarily on the Nicaraguan conflict. Changing attitudes, and a direct rejection of the San José Forum, began to gain formal expression when the foreign ministers of Panama, Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela gathered in the Caribbean island of Contadora in January 1983 to discuss peace in Central America. In Cancun later that year, the Contadora countries’ presidents – Betancur, Herrera Campíns, Mexico’s newly-elected Miguel de la Madrid, and Panama’s Ricardo de la Espriella – publicly declared the importance of securing peace in Central America by reducing the arms race, eliminating the presence of foreign advisors, and in an obvious nod to U.S. policies, by prohibiting the use of a country’s territory by another in order to launch military operations.471 By September, the Contadora ministers had sent their Central American counterparts a 21-point “Document of Objectives” which formalized these goals into a full-fledged peace proposal. The document, in stark contrast to the Reagan administration’s pronouncements, discussed social and economic inequalities within each country but not their internal level of democracy.472 The Cancun Declaration noted that all security and legal measures should be accompanied “by a strong internal effort to strengthen democratic institutions and respect for human rights,” showing that Contadora was not oblivious to the importance of democracy in Nicaragua; indeed, Panamanian Foreign Minister Juán José Amado described its purpose as being to “get the Sandinistas to stick to their 1979 promises to the OAS.”473 This goal, however, was only worth pursuing if it served the greater purpose: to

473 Quoted in Gutman, Banana Diplomacy, 162.
mitigate the regional risks created by U.S. intervention and shield Latin America from the superpower conflict. As we observed in the previous chapter, many of the region’s diplomats disagreed with Washington’s conceptualization of Central America’s social upheavals; Oyden Ortega, Amado’s successor as Panama’s top diplomat, recalls that the Contadora initiative was based on the understanding that “the origin of the crisis lay in the great inequalities and economic problems the region faced, not in the affairs of East and West.”474 “The shadow of the East-West dispute” loomed over Central America, declared Herrera Campíns on the 1983 anniversary of Simón Bolívar’s birthday, an opportunity often taken by Latin American leaders to provide a progress report on the region’s bicentennial quest for independence.475 The fear that Latin America would be subsumed by a direct Cold War confrontation, and that an exercise in regional autonomy was required to prevent that outcome and to protect incipient democracies, was the reigning foreign policy concern of the 1980s.

These concerns explain why, in almost unprecedented fashion, the Contadora countries excluded the United States from the mediation of a major international dispute in the Americas. In the specific case of Nicaragua, the U.S. government was excluded from the problem-solving process because it was, to a great extent, the problem. As Mexican Foreign Minister Bernardo Sepúlveda notes, because Washington pursued policies which would inevitably lead to the toppling of the Sandinista government, and because those policies were flooding the region with weapons, its “interests were not reconcilable with Contadora’s political project.”476 That project was designed, moreover, to protect real Latin American interests which the crisis, aggravated by

474 Oyden Ortega, interview with the author, January 24, 2017, Panama City; Also see Bernardo Sepúlveda’s analysis “the conflicts developing in Central America have their origin in the deep economic and social problems plaguing that area’s countries during the last few decades. Opposed to this thesis, which is based on the broad historical experience of the nations of Latin America, some invoke – sometimes with suspicious vehemence – that these confrontations and processes of change are principally caused by factors related to the confrontation between East and West.” Foreword to Relación de Contadora, 8.
476 Bernardo Sepúlveda Amor, interview with the author, Mexico City, October 10, 2016.
U.S. intervention, threatened. Sepúlveda later characterized Mexico’s leadership of Contadora as a core national interest:

The Mexican security interest lay in the danger, not only of an explosion of greater violence in Central America, but in the possibility of a prolongation of its military and political conflicts. It is highly risky for Mexico – a pacifist country by excellence – that just beyond its southern border there would be an arms race that may, in times of economic troubles, force us to expand our own military capacity. A climate of wars and internal conflicts would not, on the other hand, help us with our much-needed economic reactivation. The migrant flows and the division between societies and neighboring states would affect, surely, the social peace which is indispensable for defeating those challenges which await us in the coming years.477

Latin American governments also felt that their autonomy was at stake. While the U.S. was trying to solve the Central American crisis unilaterally, according to its own interests,

Miguel de la Madrid said that “Contadora is a Latin American effort to solve a Latin American conflict. The region is capable of generating its own answers to the problems which it is affected by.”478 Understanding the regional effort as a way of keeping the conflict localized to the region, many of the United States’ usually staunch allies in Western Europe gave their firm backing to Contadora.479 For the Europeans, the multilateral peace initiative was essential for defusing East-West tensions, but there was something deeper at play for Latin American leaders. They understood that the U.S. government found the Sandinista government unacceptable a priori, and

477 See Sepúlveda’s Foreword to Relación de Contadora, 11. He expanded on this analysis in the previously cited interview with the author: “[Contadora] was designed primarily to protect and safeguard Mexico’s fundamental interests, which had to be sheltered in a mechanism which would impede what back then we judged to be highly probable: that the Central American wars would become transnationalized and have a particular impact on Mexico, Panama, Venezuela, and Colombia. Therefore, it must be understood that there was a real political necessity to protect those national interests via peace-building in Central America.”
478 Quoted in Sepúlveda’s Foreword to Relación de Contadora, 7.
479 A memorandum of the Mexican Embassy in Madrid, which participated in a discussion on Nicaragua with Spanish Prime Minister Felipe González, SI President Willy Brandt, and former Austrian PM Bruno Kreisky, underscored Europeans’ rejection of Reagan’s intervention in Central America. González noted the obvious evidence of CIA involvement in Nicaragua, and that such overt actions by the U.S. “lack justification and bring us further from peace.” Echoing Miguel de la Madrid, he supported Contadora because “it has sought to give regional solutions to regional conflicts…which is a way of avoiding that a local, zonal conflict becomes another scaffold in the escalating tensions between East and West…[Contadora] cannot be criticized from any position, and the Socialist International must support it.” “Memorándum para Información Superior: Entrevista Presidente González con señores Brandt y Kreisky,” Dirección General para Europa Occidental, Tlatelolco, April 9, 1984, AG-SRE III-3783-1.
felt that Washington, by attempting to topple the FSLN, was reserving for itself the long-held prerogative to decide what type of government could or could not exist in the hemisphere. This attitude was not just injurious to national pride; it represented a potential menace to any government in Latin America, especially to those countries who were transitioning away from U.S.-backed military dictatorships. Mexican negotiator Claude Heller put the deeper purpose of Contadora thusly: “The question comes down to the ability of the United States to coexist with Latin American experiments that are in contrast with the fundamental interests of the United States.”

Heller’s quote may well have been ripped from the FSLN’s own foreign policy strategy documents. In bilateral discussions with North American diplomats, such as Miguel D’Escoto and Daniel Ortega’s October 1983 meetings with Under Secretary of State Langhorne Motley, Sandinista leaders and diplomats invariably brought up the United States’ record of overthrowing legitimate governments in the region. Motley, who was born in Latin America to a Brazilian mother, acknowledged this history but told the Nicaraguan leaders that the Reagan administration “should not be forced to pay for past sins.” Still, Ortega insisted:

Why was there a revolution in Nicaragua? Not because of the USSR, nor Cuba, nor because of any other country, but because of bad North American policies, and because our people decided to defend their nation. We are the fruit of those bad policies. It’s similar to the situation that we see in El Salvador and Guatemala…You always respond to crises in Latin America in a short-term [coyuntural] fashion. First there was the Alliance for Progress, then the Rockefeller Commission, and now the Kissinger commission, but these are temporary responses. With respect to your concern for democracy, did you have it when there were five dictators in Central America?

The Sandinistas had a world-historical sense of their revolution’s importance which was sometimes exaggerated, but appropriate in identifying the debates that their project – and the

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480 Quoted in Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 226.
481 “Reunión entre el Comandante Daniel Ortega S. y Langhorne A. Motley,” October 13, 1983, Archivo Bendaña Box 3. Also present were U.S. Ambassador Anthony Quainton and, on the Nicaraguan side, Foreign Minister Miguel D’Escoto and Vice Foreign Minister Victor Hugo Tinoco.
U.S. reaction it provoked – had engendered in the region. They also understood the importance of this cleavage for the defense of their government. When former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger led a bipartisan commission to Nicaragua to analyze the government and make recommendations for U.S. policy, Ortega repeated the history lesson to him before saying: “We have no illusions about defeating a possible North American invasion. What we are pursuing is a long-term resistance, responding to the United States’ strategy in the region. That strategy is to push the region against Nicaragua. This logically forces Nicaragua, as well, to push the region in our favor.”482 The Sandinistas’ awareness of the regional anti-imperialist current was best exemplified when it condemned the British occupation of the Falkland Islands in 1982 despite the fact that the Argentine government was actively destabilizing the Nicaraguan government.

The Contadora process was well-suited for turning the region against Reagan. By codifying a disapproval of U.S. financing for proxy armies, its documents validated the Sandinista government’s complaints. By placing an emphasis on security issues – arms control, reduction of foreign advisors (including Cuban advisors in Nicaragua), and foreign interference – while giving democratization and internal politics secondary importance, the peace process tended to undermine U.S. policies. Hence, Nicaragua, with Cuban encouragement, was typically the first Central American country to sign its various draft treaties.483 Moreover, by not forcing the Sandinista government to make internal reforms or hold talks with its armed insurgents,

483 Sepúlveda emphasizes that he “met regularly with comandante Castro to assure that Cuban influence was a positive one on the Sandinista government’s decision-making. In that sense, Fidel Castro was an important instrument, in a way, for helping the peace process that Contadora embarked upon, because he exercised a healthy influence on the Sandinista government,” previously cited interview with the author. In fact, on certain occasions Sandinista diplomats reached out to their Cuban counterparts hoping to create an alternative peace process based in the Non-Aligned Movement, they were told not to undermine Contadora; see “Vice Minister Lázaro Mora to Cra. Madeine Terán,” April 20, 1984, Centro de Documentación MINREX, La Habana, Cuba, Nicaragua, Box 3. Castro, for his part, publicly heaped his praise on López Portillo’s 1982 peace proposals, describing them as a rejection of U.S. interference in the region; see Castro’s letter to López Portillo, February 22, 1982; these views also described in “Castro apoya el plan de paz para Centroamérica propuesto por López Portillo en Managua,” El País, February 24, 1982.
Contadora essentially affirmed the Sandinistas’ existentially important belief that there was an intervention in Nicaragua, rather than a civil war. Finally, the deemphasizing of democracy consistently swept the rug out from under the FSLN’s internal political opponents, such as COSEP President Enrique Bolaños, who insisted that Contadora could never work because “peace is achieved through democracy, not the other way around.” For all of these reasons, as Mexican diplomat Jorge Castañeda wrote in its wake, the multilateral Latin American peace initiative was “essentially pro-Sandinista.”

The FSLN looked kindly on Contadora, but not because it saw it as a viable option for peace. Sandinista strategists believed that, peace agreement or not, it had to militarily destroy the Contra. Only the U.S. had any influence over the latter, and therefore the FSLN needed to speak directly with Washington. Sandinista diplomats, therefore, saw Contadora as a valuable tool for gaining legitimacy and buying time for a bid to reduce U.S. support for the Contra while seeking its military defeat. Indeed, when U.S. ambassador Richard Stone asked Daniel Ortega directly, “do you think Contadora is actually useful?”, he replied: “Honestly, we just want to have an agreement with the U.S.”

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484 A Mexican Embassy analysis from 1983 shows how its diplomats conceived of the war as being a “counterrevolution” directed from D.C., Asunción (Paraguay), and Miami. “Informe: La Contrarrevolución en Nicaragua,” Mexican Embassy in Managua, August 2, 1983, AG SRE III-3643-1.
485 Quoted in Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 165.
486 Castañeda, “Don’t Corner Mexico,” *Foreign Policy*, 84.
487 According to Bendaña, the logic behind participation in Contadora was “to gain time. Remember that, from the perspective of the National Directorate, which was also looking at the military aspect, they were thinking: If the gringos are talking with us at Manzanillo, and if Contadora is on, then the aggression is being reduced, and the degree of intervention as well, and perhaps even there might be a loosening of the economic embargo.” Previously cited interview with the author. This perspective dovetails with the above-cited analysis of Humberto Ortega, who suggested that the key objective of the Revolution in this period was to reduce the risk of a direct U.S. intervention.
Unfortunately for the Nicaraguans, they contended with two faces of U.S. foreign policymaking. On occasion, they spoke with hawks who came to Managua simply to confirm their pre-existing biases. This was the case with the aforementioned 1983 Kissinger Commission, which reported that the Marxist-Leninist FSLN regime represented a threat to U.S. national security and recommended greater support for the Contra. The hardline view, as analysts of Reagan’s foreign policy have argued, predominated among the Pentagon, CIA, the NSC, and some factions of the State Department staff. Yet at other times, such as the 1983 discussions with Langhorne Motley, the Sandinistas encountered the wing of U.S. diplomacy which was pragmatic, and – though extremely critical of the Revolution – seemed genuinely interested in some sort of negotiated solution which still involved support for the Contra but stopped short of requiring the overthrow of the regime. This weakened wing was headed by Secretary of State George Schultz, who travelled to Managua in June 1984. Schultz displayed his pragmatist bona fides by agreeing to discuss the issue of democratization horizontally – that is, alongside security concerns – as opposed to placing it first in a vertical list of priorities. Having pleased Daniel

489 Shortly after the Manzanillo talks, advisor Paul Reichler – a D.C.-based lawyer who assisted the Nicaraguan government throughout the 1980s – noted “deep divisions within the Reagan administration over the future course of policy.” While hardliners continued “to occupy most of the strategic positions,” it was critical for Nicaragua to recognize that “there is a serious debate within the Administration over the future course of U.S. policy and that Nicaragua has a unique opportunity to exercise a significant influence on the outcome of this debate.” Schultz’s trip to Managua was not “a mere sham or subterfuge,” but rather a sincere pro-negotiation effort that should be capitalized upon. Reichler continued to propose steps to discredit the hardliners in the Reagan administration, including taking steps to toward democratization within Nicaragua as well as actions beyond its borders to publicize atrocities committed by U.S.-backed insurgents. Paul Reichler to Miguel D’Escoto, “Analysis of Present Situation in the United States,” July 16, 1984, Centro de Documentación MINREX, Havana, Cuba, Nicaragua, Box 5.

490 Kissinger’s visit was acrimonious, to say the least. According to Nicaraguan transcripts of the discussions, Kissinger and the rest of the commission were largely uninterested in hearing Sandinista attempts at explaining their social and economic policies. During a presentation by Daniel Ortega in the final meeting, a U.S. congressman on the commission was heard whispering into Kissinger’s ear, “let’s not get into a long discussion with this son of a bitch.” Shortly thereafter, Kissinger said, “there is no sense in debating history with you. We have learned much here during our visit – we have no further questions and, with your permission, will be boarding our plane now.” The Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry summed up the Kissinger report as such: “In summary, the Kissinger Commission has ratified and tried to legitimize the current policy of the present Administration, which is to push military solutions complemented by economic actions,” “Plan de trabajo para manejo del informe Kissinger”; October 1983, Managua, Archivo Bendaña Box 4. “Transcripción de la Reunión del Comandante Daniel Ortega con la Comisión Kissinger,” October 15, 1983, Ibid.

491 “Reunión entre el Comandante de la Revolución Daniel Ortega S. y el Secretario de Estado George Schultz,” June 3, 1984, Archivo Bendaña, Box 4. The meeting, which took place at the airport in Managua, also included
Ortega and D’Escoto, this breakthrough was the basis for a serious round of bilateral negotiations.

The two sides agreed on Manzanillo, Mexico as the location. Mexico did not mediate or observe the talks, as the Nicaraguans requested, but Miguel de la Madrid’s government was pleased to host a dialogue which might lead to reduced tensions. The talks, which started in July 1984, unfortunately went nowhere. The FSLN negotiating strategy instructed its representatives to avoid any discussion of the country’s internal affairs. In particular, Nicaragua’s diplomats refused any proposal which asked their government to hold direct talks with the Contra.492 For their part, US diplomats emphasized that exact issue, abandoning even the slight flexibility which Schultz had shown. Ultimately, the Manzanillo talks, which muddled along until the rest of 1984, were doomed to failure because both sides were still pursuing a military victory – or at least an improved position – inside Nicaragua.

The immediate reason the negotiations floundered, however, was the parallel multilateral process at Contadora. Whenever U.S. negotiators brought up the issue of democracy and talks with the Contra, the Nicaraguans could simply use the Contadora Document of Objectives and its various draft treaties – which made no mention of these issues – as a basis for refusal.493 In fact, the first draft treaty submitted by the Contadora Foreign Ministers to Central American countries in September 1984 made strict requirements of the Nicaraguan government: the Sandinistas were to expel all Soviet-bloc military advisors, cease foreign military purchases, reduce the size of their army, and stop supporting the FMLN. But Nicaragua shocked the world

D’Escoto, Tinoco, FSLN International Relations Director Julio López, and Nicaraguan Ambassador to the U.S. Antonio Jarquín. Accompanying Schultz were Ambassador-at-large Harry Schlaudeman, Motley, and then-ambassador to Nicaragua Harry Bergold.

492 See correspondence between D’Escoto and lawyer Paul Reichler: “Tactica para los asuntos de procedimientos,” “Consideraciones políticas sobre nuestra agenda de negociación,” and “Marco global y de principios,” July 26, 1984, found in Centro de Documentación MINREX, La Habana, Cuba, Nicaragua, Box 5.

493 Bendaña notes how, in a deliberate attempt to frustrate their U.S. interlocutors, Nicaraguan counterparts brought to Manzanillo the 1984 Contadora draft treaty and touted its anti-intervention emphasis. Previously cited interview with the author.
on September 21 by being the first country to sign. They did so for two main reasons. First, though the treaty included language about pluralism and democratic reforms, there was no verification measure whatsoever for progress in this realm. Second, the treaty would have required the U.S. to stop supporting the Contra, reduce military aid to Nicaragua’s neighbors, and close its bases in those countries. Signing this treaty, which included terms unacceptable to the U.S., permanently frustrated the bilateral talks at Manzanillo. Washington, which had quietly supported the multilateral process in the past, had no option but to publicly criticize it and force its Central American clients to push for new language in the treaty which dropped the major requirements for changes to U.S policy. The FSLN, as one observer noted, “gained a substantial propaganda edge” by being the only party to sign the peace agreement; their signature made it even more difficult for the Reagan administration to justify a military intervention which was unpopular at home and among U.S. allies.  

By signing Contadora, the Sandinistas also hoped to improve their image ahead of the November 1984 elections. A victory by the Sandinista Front’s candidates – Daniel Ortega ran for president with fellow Junta member Sergio Ramírez as his running mate – would legitimize the government internally. In its 23-point “fight plan,” the FSLN distinguished itself from the oligarchic Conservative and Liberal parties and promised to deepen the social transformations it claimed to have carried out since 1979. More importantly, the “first free elections in Nicaraguan history,” as they sold them, would boost the FSLN externally; they would show the world that Nicaragua need not discuss its internal affairs at international peace negotiations, for it was making progress toward democracy. For all of these reasons, the elections posed a serious

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495 “Plan de lucha del FSLN - 23 puntos para elecciones '84” Centro de Documentación MINREX, La Habana, Cuba, Nicaragua, Box 3.
496 The holding of elections, as well as an amnesty decree and the relaxing of press censorship, was specifically intended, “a positive change in U.S. policies.” Because of these actions, Sandinista advisors felt that “the Reagan
quandary for the *Coordinadora Democrática* (Democratic Coordinating Committee), the opposition alliance of business leaders and conservative parties. Their candidate was Arturo Cruz, a former Doce leader and Junta member who had broken with the FSLN government the previous year. Cruz believed that running in the elections would legitimize the opposition, making participation worthwhile even in the case of a likely defeat.

The Latin American and Western European forces behind Contadora were desperate to see the elections happen. The Socialist International – especially Carlos Andrés Pérez and Willy Brandt – worried that if the Sandinistas did not ensure conditions for a free and fair elections, the *Coordinadora* would have ample pretext to opt out. In September, Pérez, Brandt, Betancourt and former Norwegian Defense Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg flew Cruz out to an SI meeting in Rio de Janeiro for talks with FSLN Commander Bayardo Arce. Cruz said he would only participate in the elections, scheduled for November, if the government agreed to several changes. Pressed by the social-democratic stalwarts, Arce agreed to virtually all of the *Coordinadora*’s demands. The FSLN would guarantee full freedom of speech and press liberties during the campaign, provide opposition access to state media, ensure the Cruz campaign’s personal safety, and most importantly, it would postpone the elections until February 1985 in order to give the *Coordinadora* ample time to prepare for the contest. Arce asked for just two things in return: that Cruz would immediately register his candidacy, and that the Contra would call a cease-fire by the end of October.497 Much to the hosts’ pleasure, the deal was agreed and a toast was shared.

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497 This account is based on the Mexican Embassy in Bonn’s reporting of the talks in a letter and in an aide-memoire prepared by a member of Brandt’s SPD: “Memorándum de Conversación para el Embajador César Sepúlveda” and “Asunto: Entrevista entre Bayardo Arce del FSLN y el señor Will Brandt en Rio de Janeiro”, December 3, 1984, Mexican Embassy in Bonn, AG SRE III-3961-1. Also see “Memorándum para Información Superior: Sínteses del informe politico sobre Nicaragua, correspondiente a noviembre y diciembre de 1984, elaborado por la Embajada de México en Managua,” *Ibid*. A less-detailed, but mostly-accurate version was also reported publicly in the *New York Times*; “World Socialists Pressing Sandinistas on Election,” October 4, 1984 and “Brandt Visits Managua but Fails to Settle Vote Dispute,” October 15, 1984.
Cruz, needing to consult with the *Coordinadora* before finalizing the arrangement, only asked for 48 hours to get their permission.

The *Coordinadora*, to Cruz’s dismay, flat-out rejected the proposal, thereby torpedoing the elections. The opposition leaders back in Managua felt that the FSLN could not be trusted to honor an agreement. Furthermore, the civilian opposition did not want to ask the Contra for a cease-fire, because such an approach would break the distance it hoped to project between itself and the U.S.-backed military opposition. Happy to say that they had been prepared to make a deal, the Sandinistas announced that the elections would go ahead in November 1984, as planned. In fact, they had been bluffing all along – they knew well that if the *Coordinadora* had agreed, these civilian leaders had no authority over the Contra and therefore could never keep up the cease-fire end of their bargain. Cruz, who regrets a missed opportunity to demilitarize the political polarization in Nicaragua, maintains that he never received a call or instruction from the U.S. encouraging him to back out of the elections.\(^{498}\) Nonetheless, by prioritizing military goals in Nicaragua over political and diplomatic strategies, the United States indirectly created conditions wherein the internal opposition could not have mounted a peaceful, political challenge against the government.

As the Sandinista bluff suggested, the FSLN still did not see free democratic contests as a part of the revolutionary process. Ortega went on to be elected with a surprisingly low 65% of the vote. Trying to paper over the fact that he had run unopposed, the electoral authorities did not recognize the opposition’s withdrawal of various candidates for the legislature, which led to them receiving several seats in the newly-formed National Assembly. “The 1984 elections,” Sergio Ramírez wrote, were “part of the mechanism of war,” intended to undermine the government’s armed opponents.\(^{499}\) Victor Hugo Tinoco, the Sandinista diplomat who led the

\(^{498}\) Interview in Castillo Rivas, *Gringos, Contras, y Sandinistas*, 164.
\(^{499}\) Sergio Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos*, 149.
bilateral discussions at Manzanillo, discusses how these “managed elections” reflected FSLN views on democracy and the way they perceived US negotiators’ demands for internal democratic reforms:

I’m convinced that during this period, within Sandinismo we were not prepared to understand that type of demand. First, because during the struggle against Somoza we never developed a conceptual understanding of the type of society we wanted…there was only a debate over the method of struggle we would employ. So we had not defined a priori a concept of democracy, and we were not about to do that the height of a war. Throughout the 1980s, the issue of the war became the center of the Revolution, because military affairs were equal to the survival of the Revolution. Everything revolved around that. Everything else stayed in a sort of twilight zone. We didn’t have that debate [about democracy]. We couldn’t understand that.500

As Belli adds, the FSLN faced a steep political learning curve: “After 45 years of [Somoza’s] dictatorship, nobody here knew what democracy was.”501 Tinoco concedes that, even if Nicaragua had held truly free and plural elections, the Reagan administration likely still would have viewed the Sandinista regime as unacceptable. But Nicaraguan leaders’ evolving views and attitudes vis-à-vis democracy mattered as much as U.S. policymakers’ biases and prejudices.

The elections did not have the effect the Sandinistas had intended. As diplomat Alejandro Bendaña laments: “in 1984, we won internally, but lost abroad.” He notes that the elections were “an international strategy,” and in this sense Cruz’s exit was very damaging because elections only legitimize a political movement in foreign eyes if that movement actually beats somebody. When Ortega and Ramírez were sworn in to office in January 1985, fewer heads of state attended than at the first anniversary of the Revolution in 1980. Bendaña says the message was received loud and clear: “This was the classic diplomatic signal that they didn’t like how we won.”502 One

500 Victor Hugo Tinoco, previously cited interview with the author. On the 1984 elections, specifically, he adds that the model “was not a democratic one of open competition – they were managed,” he said, likening them to the type which prevail in the Ortega government of the 2010s, “where the authorities decide who participates and only grant guarantees to those who are willing to accept the terms grafted onto the democratic game by the powers-at-be, without posing a real or open opposition.”
501 Gioconda Belli, previously cited interview with the author.
502 Alejandro Bendaña, previously cited interview with the author.
glaring absence at the ceremony was Carlos Andrés Pérez, who wrote a letter to the President-elect reaffirming his support for the revolutionary process but declining the invitation to the inauguration because he felt “cheated, because sufficient guarantees were not given” to the opposition. He qualified his criticisms by noting that nothing excused violent U.S. policies, but the letter was suffused with the belief that the FSLN was insincere about democracy.

Pérez’s comments reflect how Latin American and European views of the Nicaraguan Revolution had morphed since Somoza’s overthrow. In private meetings held in the months after the elections, previously staunch allies such Olaf Palme and Felipe González – the Swedish and Spanish prime ministers, respectively – were cool in their treatment of the president-elect, citing their opposition to press censorship and the semi-permanent state of emergency in Nicaragua. Clearly, such actors – which tended to defend and legitimize the Sandinista government simply by affirming its right to exist – no longer supported Nicaragua out of the romantic revolutionary optimism which partly motivated their involvement during the 1979 insurrection and the Revolution’s first days of innocence. The main underlying motivation, however, remained unchanged. For a growing number of Latin American leaders, who enjoyed indispensable Western European support, Nicaragua had increasingly become a battleground in a larger struggle for defining the shape and fate of the region in the context of the Cold War.

The 1984 elections also shed light on the complex and sometimes contradictory dynamics of the Nicaraguan revolutionary process. As Pérez conceded in his letter, though the elections were a disappointment in terms of fulfilling the pluralistic promise of 1979, they were still a promising “first step.”

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503 Mexican Embassy in Sweden to Ttalelolo, October 23, 1985, reporting on meeting between Ortega and Palme, AG SRE III-3966-2; “Reunión Cde. Daniel Ortega – Felipe González,” March 1, 1985, Centro de Documentación MINREX, La Habana, Cuba, Nicaragua, Box 3.
with the façade elections of the Somoza era, the FSLN had created much cleaner and more robust conditions in 1984.\textsuperscript{505} Certainly, by inviting the opposition parties to participate and by allowing some degree of press criticism, the political system at mid-decade looked like a far cry from the party-state model envisioned in the “72 Hours Document” analyzed in the previous chapter. On the issue of political pluralism, the Revolution had settled into an awkward middle ground between its internal one-party vision and its external promises to the OAS from 1979. As the first two chapters argued, those commitments to pluralism were mostly tactical in nature; they emerged out of the involvement of international actors which encouraged Sandinista alliance-building and won leverage to shape its agenda in a pluralistic direction. But as the decade progressed, those tactical promises genuinely constrained Sandinista decision-making, especially as they had to appeal to Latin American countries’ deepening involvement via Contadora. In a dynamic which would recur later on in the decade, the promises of 1979 were slowly beginning to acquire a life of their own. The Sandinistas’ tactical thrusts turned into strategic maneuvers which were difficult to reverse, and the difficult reality of governance won out over the ideological vision of the Revolution’s power wielders.

**CONCLUSION**

In 1985, all sides of the conflict hardened their positions. Calling the November elections a Soviet-style farce, the Reagan administration dismissed the Sandinistas’ participation in Contadora and doubled down on the argument that Nicaragua was a threat to U.S. national

\textsuperscript{505} Quoted in Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, 241: “When Somoza gave elections, they were dirty and fraudulent compared to what the Sandinistas were offering. Arturo did not know how to distinguish between two dictatorships.”
security. The government in Managua, meanwhile, marveled at its own success in avoiding a direct intervention, and updated its efforts to destroy the Contra. Finally, Latin American countries – an ever-increasing number, in fact – continued to see U.S. intervention in Central America as a threat to be contained and moved to keep the Contadora process afloat. Over the preceding three years, both peace talks and Nicaraguan elections had done little to change these views, or to stop the bloodshed in Nicaragua. However, the fact that things stayed the same – in particular, that the Sandinista government was still standing despite U.S. efforts – would be hugely consequential in Latin America down the line. Moreover, hiding behind the domestic and international stalemates were subtle changes which would later play out at the Central American level towards the end of the decade.

The “Reagan Doctrine” emerged as the formal expression of U.S. anti-communist tactics in the Third World during the 1980s. The U.S. had been creating proxy revolutionaries to match and defeat left-wing movements in countries like Afghanistan and Nicaragua for several years, but now this policy was blessed with a proper title in 1985. For the second term of President Reagan, who was re-elected shortly after the Nicaraguan elections, the U.S. would counter the “steadily increasing risk to peace and stability posed by the Sandinistas” with “improved assistance to the Freedom Fighters” and opposing “any concessions which would permit the consolidation of the Marxist-Leninist regime.” Reagan administration strategists did not harbor “any illusions that Nicaragua would agree to terms which would protect the interests of [their] friends in Central America.” 506 The President himself, in the most blatant admission of his administration’s goals to date, publicly stated his desire to “remove” the Sandinista Government “in the sense of its present structure, in which it is a Communist, totalitarian state and…not a

government chosen by its own people.” The U.S. would stop seeking the FSLN’s overthrow if only the revolutionaries “would turn around and say ‘uncle’.”

At the same time, the U.S. slapped Nicaragua with an economic embargo, and a leaked CIA manual titled “Psychological Operations in Guerrilla War” showed the extent to which Langley was willing to push the legal limits and international norms of warfare in its training of anti-Sandinista troops.

Unfortunately for the Reagan administration, by this time it had begun pursuing illegal means for financing its intervention in Central America, a foreign policy goal which a slight majority of Americans rejected and Congress only hesitantly condoned. In other words, the U.S. had failed up until 1985 in achieving an all-out military victory, and now – with the Iran Contra scandal building over the horizon – its ability to wage war in Nicaragua was about to become significantly constrained.

President-elect Daniel Ortega responded to this interventionist escalation by travelling to Moscow. The much-publicized trip reflected the FSLN’s belief that the USSR – which had steadily increased military and economic aid since the beginning of the war in 1982 – would provide the game-winning support. But the Sandinistas wound up disappointed. First of all, the Kremlin responded coldly to Nicaraguan overtures. Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, who was facing the dual task of reforming his country’s economic and political systems while maintaining a costly intervention in Afghanistan, made it clear that the FSLN government could not rely on socialist bloc aid indefinitely and should look elsewhere. The Soviet Foreign Ministry, which had emitted a noticeably timid condemnation of Reagan’s embargo, announced that its aid to Nicaragua would “necessarily be limited,” and in an apparent attempt to address U.S. apprehensions of Ortega’s visit to the East, underscored that “it would be pleased to see that help

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to Nicaragua come from other countries” such as France, Spain, and Italy. Second, the trip upset key allies and undermined Contra aid opponents in the U.S. House of Representatives and Congress, which passed a major aid package to the anti-government insurgents almost immediately as a result. In a meeting with Sergio Ramírez later that summer, Carlos Andrés Pérez blasted Ortega’s trip, characterizing it as “stupidity” and “submission.” Had the Soviets shown signs of deepening their investment in the Sandinista government, these setbacks would have been an acceptable price to pay. But as the next Chapter describes, just when the Contra was about to lose much of its funding from the U.S., the Sandinistas were beginning to lose the superpower patronage they needed to revive their moribund economy and achieve an all-out military victory.

Meanwhile, Latin American countries desperately tried to revive Contadora. In the summer of 1985, an additional group of recently-democratized countries in South America – Uruguay, Peru, Brazil, and Argentina – came together form the Contadora Support Group. Later, in January 1986, the Contadora foreign ministers plus their counterparts from these additional countries met in Caraballeda, Venezuela and called for all Central American countries to sign the Contadora treaty and for bilateral talks to resume between Nicaragua and the U.S. Tellingly, the missive made no mention of the necessity for Nicaragua’s government to hold talks with the Contra, a fact which the FSLN took as a vindication of its position.

Indeed, in their 1985 meetings with South American heads of state, Sandinista leaders typically encountered perspectives which reaffirmed their own views. In a cordial conversation,

509 Embajada de México en la URSS a Tlatelolco, letter reporting on Daniel Ortega’s visit to Moscow, May 17, 1985, AG SRE III-3963-1.
511 “Reunión del Cro. Sergio Ramírez y Carlos Andrés Pérez con la presencia de Manuel Ulloa,” July 29, 1985, Sergio Ramírez Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Box 62, Folder 8b.
Mexico’s Miguel de la Madrid told Comandante “Modesto” that the North Americans were to blame for the collapse of bilateral talks and promised to send further petrol to Nicaragua despite his country’s worsening economic crisis.\(^{513}\) Latin Americans’ principal concern was still the threat of U.S. intervention, and this was particularly the case with transitional governments in countries recently ruled by Washington-backed anti-communist military dictatorships. The concern with democracy in Nicaragua was secondary, and only worth pursuing if it helped avert U.S. intervention; Argentinian president Raul Alfonsín told vice president-elect Sergio Ramírez that a North American invasion in Nicaragua would be a “holocaust” for the region and that a “Latin American alternative” was preferable, wherein the FSLN government would guarantee “political pluralism, a mixed economy, non-alignment” (read: the promises of 1979) in exchange for European and South American financial assistance. Alfonsín, who enthusiastically endorsed the FSLN’s steps toward democratization, agreed with Nicaragua’s refusal to not sign any further Contadora treaties until the U.S. ceased support for the Contra.\(^{514}\) Moreover, he told Ramírez that it was unnecessary for the Nicaraguan government to reduce its armed forces given Washington’s refusal to negotiate in good faith; Uruguayan Foreign Minister Enrique Iglesias and Colombian President Belisario Betancur echoed this strongly pro-Sandinista sentiment.\(^{515}\) Crucially, no Latin American leader asked that the FSLN hold direct talks with the Contra, which was precisely the demand made by the U.S., and increasingly European diplomats such as

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\(^{513}\) “Conversación sostenida por el Cdté. HRH con Miguel de la Madrid,” Embajada de Nicaragua en Cuba a la Dirección Nacional del Frente Sandinista, March 5, 1983, Centro de Documentación MINREX, La Habana, Cuba, Nicaragua, Box 3.

\(^{514}\) “Entrevista del Cro. Sergio Ramirez Mercado con el Presidente de Argentina Raul Alfonsín y el Canciller Dante Caputo,” July 28, 1985, Sergio Ramirez Papers, Box 62, Folder 8b. When Ramírez outlined the FSLN’s plans for a new democratic constitution, to which Alfonsín euphorically shouted, demonstrating his eagerness to see the best of the Sandinistas, that this was everything needed to satisfy foreign demands for democracy.

West German Foreign Minister Jurgen Mollerman. Wilson Ferreira, the historic leader of Uruguay’s National Party (which took power during the democratic transition), told Ortega that while the U.S. was pressuring individual countries to abandon support for Nicaragua, these pressures crashed against a wall of Latin American consensus on this issue.

One of those U.S. pressures was the Latin American debt crisis. The second prong of the so-called Reagan Offensive in the Third World, along with the creation and funding of proxy armies, was the ideological and organizational restructuring of the global economic system. Increasingly, developing-world countries found that loans by multilateral lending institutions to their governments – by the 1980s, needed to service debt – were made conditional on the adoption of spending cuts and a strict adherence to radical free market principles. Even socialist-leaning governments, such as the Nicaraguan one, would eventually have to pursue structural adjustment as a result. The conditionality of loans allowed the U.S. government, which was preponderant in Bretton Woods institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, to exert tremendous pressure on Latin American governments – which were particularly devastated by the Third World debt crises of the 1980s – on key international issues such as the Central American crisis. However, this pressure sometimes produced blowback, for it deepened among Latin American governments a certain mistrust, one that anti-U.S. leaders like Fidel Castro were keenly aware of. Additionally, the economic pressure led some Latin American leaders, such as Peruvian President Alan García, to hit back at U.S. foreign policy in other

516 “Entrevista Comandante Daniel Ortega – Mollerman (RFA),” March 1, 1985, Centro de Documentación MINREX, La Habana, Cuba, Nicaragua, Box 3.
517 See Westad, The Global Cold War, 357-63.
518 As Castro told East German communist leader Erich Honecker in mid-1984: “The US is currently experiencing a crisis of mistrust in Latin America as it never has before. The right-wing dictatorships in Chile, Brazil, and other countries are falling apart. The US's clout is disappearing. Latin American countries are deeply in debt. The $350 billion they owe cannot be repaid. The US's budget deficit policy is strangling Latin America, just as it is strangling its West European allies. In Brussels there are already increasing complaints that the policies of the US are more dangerous than those of the Soviet Union.” See “Record of a meeting on February 13, 1984 between Erich Honecker and Fidel Castro,” CWIHP, http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114532.
realms. García, elected in 1985, saw Contadora in this light. In a meeting with Ramírez shortly after his inauguration, the Peruvian leader adopted a belligerent tone and promised his support to the Sandinistas and the multilateral peace process so long as they deferred to his government’s regional leadership on the debt issue. Summing up the way the Latin American governments had come to see the Central American country over the period 1982-1985, García said his government was “willing to defend the thesis of continental sovereignty which has been put to the test in Nicaragua.”

Indeed, Latin American democracies drew the line of regional sovereignty in Nicaragua. That they did so was telling of the numerous changes which hid under the surface of the apparent military stalemate between the Sandinista army and the U.S.-backed Contra. Had it not been for Latin American opposition to unilateral U.S. intervention, the Reagan administration’s case for arming the Contras and ability to isolate and punish the Nicaraguan government would have been greatly improved. Thus, while Contadora failed to produce a peace agreement, it succeeded in putting a brake on Washington’s efforts to destabilize the Revolution. Contadora and its Support Group, by taking the nearly unprecedented step of excluding the U.S. from a major hemispheric conflict mediation, laid the blueprint for future Latin American multilateralism and South-South integration. Despite its immediate failures, the pursuit of Latin American solutions for Latin American problems led Central American governments to try the same thing, at the sub-regional level, later on in the decade. Based in part on the Latin American foundations laid in 1982-85, the Central Americans would find success in forging a South-South solution.

519 De Sergio Ramírez M. a Cmte. De la Rev. Daniel Ortega Saveedra, Presidente de la República, “Asunto: Misión a México y países sudamericanos,” July 15, 1985, Sergio Ramírez Papers, Box 62, Folder 8b. Ramírez, reporting on his meeting with García, added that the latter, “considers that support for Nicaraguan sovereignty should be given by Latin American countries without any type of restrictions or conditions” and echoing the other Latin Americans’ statements, “Nicaragua’s internal affairs (dialogue with the opposition, freedom of the press) are items which should not be the subject of any type of foreign interference.”
Most importantly, if the great question of the era was whether alternative political experiments – in this case, leftist governments derived from armed revolutions – should or could exist in spite of U.S. approval, then the continued survival of Managua’s revolutionary government was enormously significant. The revolutionary process may have stagnated by the middle of the decade, but the historical and political debates spawned by the 1979 insurrection were just as salient in 1985. As the end of the Cold War approached, the existence of the Sandinista Revolution would continue reflecting – and shaping, in turn – greater changes in Latin American politics and hemispheric relations.
Chapter Four

A Seat at the Table:
The Revolution and the Central American Peace Process, 1986-89
It had been four years since Gabriel García Márquez lamented Latin America’s solitude in his 1982 Nobel Lecture. Three years had passed since Latin American countries launched the Contadora process, yet civil wars raged on in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Foreign intervention remained the norm in 1986. Contadora was a consequential exercise in Latin American multilateralism and autonomy that constrained U.S. intervention and helped legitimize the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. But Central Americans, meant to benefit from these efforts, saw little to celebrate. In fact, as Luís Guillermo Solís points out, Central Americans had to some extent become Contadora’s “victims.” Solís – a Costa Rican diplomat who was later elected the country’s president – recalls how the multilateral peace process had devolved into “the tool used by Latin American countries to save face vis-à-vis the United States.”

For the same reason that it acquired the grand dimensions described in the previous chapter, the Latin American response to the Sandinista Revolution was less attuned to the brutal realities on the ground. More interested in shielding the region from unilateral U.S. force, it failed to provide workable solutions to the Central American conflicts. However, starting in 1986, changing conditions inside revolutionary Nicaragua, on the regional scene, and in the wider global context paved the way for a peaceful resolution to the Sandinista moment in Latin American history. Central Americans, tired of being the Cold War’s latest casualties, took matters into their own hands.

Fittingly, just as García Márquez’s 1982 speech signaled the regional reckoning prompted by the Nicaraguan Revolution, a second Nobel Prize acceptance speech marked the moment when that reckoning began reaching a conclusion. In November 1987, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sánchez addressed the world from the podium in Oslo:

Let Central Americans decide the future of Central America…Support the efforts for peace instead of the forces of war in our region. Send our people ploughshares instead of

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swords, pruning hooks instead of spears. If they, for their own purposes, cannot refrain from amassing the weapons of war, then, in the name of God, at least they should leave us in peace.⁵²¹

The Central American Peace Accords signed earlier that year in Esquipulas, Guatemala, for which Arias was receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, ended foreign-fueled civil wars on the isthmus. As a result of this peace agreement – or, more precisely, as part of the mechanism for its success – Central America’s countries decided to adopt liberal electoral regimes and joined Latin America’s Third Wave of democracy. Central American presidents, in exchange for non-intervention by neighbors and their superpower benefactors, agreed to negotiate with their countries’ respective armed insurgencies. The U.S. government, despite having based its intervention in Nicaragua on the pretext that the FSLN government was undemocratic, frowned upon a deal that legitimized the Sandinistas and gave them a chance at staying in power.

U.S. opposition to a negotiated settlement, specifically one based on free elections, exposes the counterintuitive ways in which liberal democracy spread to this part of the Global South in the late-Cold War. Marxist revolutionaries in Nicaragua unexpectedly found themselves at the heart of Central America’s democratic wave. At first, the FSLN’s socialist crusade inflamed the sub-region’s ideological struggles and engendered a resurgent superpower interventionism in the Americas. The United States government failed in its efforts to reverse the revolution but succeeded in helping turn Central America into one of the worst disaster areas of the entire Cold War. By the end of the decade, political elites throughout the isthmus, and across both sides of the ideological divide, recognized this fact. Unexpectedly, they turned to elections and political inclusion as tools for defusing the foreign interventions and ideological polarization that, inspired by the global struggle between socialism and capitalism, ravaged their countries.

Crucially, they arrived at this conclusion despite their illiberal impulses. The Sandinista Front’s upper echelon, we have seen, was uninterested in subordinating their social and economic goals to democratic elections. To the extent that they envisioned a party system, they imagined an East German-style scenario which left the FSLN in a hegemonic vanguard role where its policy decisions were submitted to debate by loyal satellite parties.\footnote{Vice Foreign Minister José León Talavera suggests that the FSLN envisioned a system like that of the German Democratic Republic, where satellite political parties operated but were subordinated to the hegemonic party, rather than the one-party system of revolutionary Cuba. Previously cited interview with the author.} Meanwhile, the military-dominated governments of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala were focused on avoiding a Nicaragua-style uprising in their own territories, even at the expense of circumscribing democratic spaces and fundamental human rights. By the late 1980s, however, both leftist and anti-communist rulers began seeing elections – even with the risk of losing power that they entailed – as the only way of waking Central America from its Cold War nightmare. As Arias’ desperate plea for non-intervention suggested, democratization and liberalism were not deep-rooted, romantic, and ideological aspirations: rather, they were practical, effective solutions to the challenges posed by that historical moment.

This chapter explores the changes inside revolutionary Nicaragua and in the international context which drove Central Americans to this conclusion. At the Central American level, two presidents were inaugurated in 1986 – Costa Rica’s Arias and Guatemala’s Vinicio Cerezo – who had strong reasons, rooted in their respective domestic politics, for defying U.S. policies and promoting a negotiated settlement which brought the Sandinista regime in from the cold. Meanwhile, superpower involvement was ebbing; the Soviet Union was eager to reduce its commitment to bankrolling the Nicaraguan government as it embarked on a risky process of internal transformation, and the Reagan administration found it increasingly difficult to fund an unpopular intervention which had not, in any event, produced the promised results (only a
barebones majority of Americans (54%) could even identify which side the U.S. government supported in Nicaragua; opposition to Contra support hovered between 60 and 70% between 1983 and 1985). The most important changes, however, took place within the Sandinista leadership. The FSLN had long opposed any international negotiations which would require them to hold talks with the Contra or make major democratic reforms. To put internal politics on the table would violate, they alleged, Nicaragua’s sovereignty. By 1986, however, the Sandinista Popular Army was struggling to keep up its bloody stalemate with the U.S.-backed Contra, the economy was in tatters, and popular support paled in comparison to the extraordinary consensus of the Revolution’s early halcyon days. The wearing down of the revolutionary project, caused by the interplay of domestic and external dynamics, forced FSLN leaders to reconsider their position.

Once signed, the Central American Peace Accords transformed the Nicaraguan revolutionary process from without. Within months of the August 1987 summit, the Sandinistas held direct talks with Contra military leaders where both sides agreed to a cease-fire and general amnesty. As a result of Esquipulas, the Sandinistas also eased press censorship, invited the civil opposition to a National Dialogue, and announced early elections with full international observation. Suddenly, the FSLN hewed closer to their 1979 promise of political pluralism than ever before; this reformism was accompanied by a move away from central planning in the

523 The wording of polling questions dramatically altered how U.S. citizens reported their views on their country’s policy in Central America. For one, only a slight majority (54%) of Americans even managed to identify the Contra as the group which enjoyed U.S. financing and support. Between 1983 and 1986, roughly half of Americans (between 49% and 56%) saw the government of Nicaragua as a threat to the United States, but a stronger majority in the same period (between 62% and 70%) felt that the “United States should not be involved in trying to overthrow the government of Nicaragua.” Notably, support for the use of force in Central America rose when the questioning happened to “strike an ideological chord by mentioning communism.” As polling analysts explained, “the results are also somewhat contradictory because anti-communism and anti-interventionism pull in different directions.” Thus, despite the previous statistic, roughly half of Americans agreed that the “the United States should take all steps,” including force, “to prevent the spread of communism in Central America.” See Richard Sobel, “Report: Public Opinion About United States Intervention in El Salvador and Nicaragua,” The Public Opinion Quarterly, Spring 1989, 53(1): 114-115. Nonetheless, ambiguities aside, Contra aid was never a clear political winner for politicians; public opinion never expressed more than slight majority in favor of intervention, regardless of the wording.
economic sphere and toward a greater reliance on non-alignment in international affairs. The modest democratic opening and peacebuilding in revolutionary Nicaragua showed that the Central American Peace Accords were working, thus dealing a fatal blow to Reagan’s attempts to secure congressional funding for Contra military aid. Therefore, Esquipulas brought the end of the most aggressive phase of North American intervention in Nicaragua. U.S. foreign policy, which had strongly implied that the revolutionary government in Managua was unacceptable a priori, now had to live with Sandinistas that were recognized by their internal opponents and, more importantly, their neighbors.

The legitimization of the Nicaraguan Revolution, in spite of U.S. policy, was the most transcendental element of the Central American Peace Accords. Previously, the rise of the Sandinistas set off a decade where Central America experienced, in the most intense form, the two main phenomena which characterized the Cold War in the Global South: intractable civil wars and foreign interventions motivated by the global struggle between capitalism and communism. It is futile to ask what would have happened had Nicaragua’s revolutionary government been toppled. What is clear, however, is that the fact of the Sandinistas’ persistence in power by mid-decade held enormous ramifications for the region. In particular, Central Americans’ decision to legitimize the FSLN with a seat at the table exposed the major changes in Latin American politics that the Nicaraguan Revolution both reflected and propelled. Esquipulas – which rejected U.S. intervention in Central America, not least because it failed to dislodge the FSLN – was the culmination of a significant revision in U.S.-Latin American relations which took place throughout the decade. Washington became the problem, and the previously ostracized Left became part of the solution. Normalization and negotiation with the Sandinistas – and as a consequence, with their respective leftist insurgencies – was an indispensable part of Central Americans’ realization that politically inclusive systems were necessary in order to end
the wars and interventions which ravaged their countries. In the process, the Sandinistas sacrificed some of their socialist convictions but also aligned their project with another, democratic revolution sweeping the region.

COLD WAR ROOTS OF PEACE

Why democratize? Relatively few political forces in 1980s Central America saw liberal democracy as a goal *per se*. The Reagan administration was narrowly interested in defeating communism in the Caribbean Basin; democratization was at best a secondary consideration (as in Nicaragua, where democracy promotion articulated anti-communist aims) and, at worst (as in the case of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala) an unwelcome distraction.\textsuperscript{524} For their part, Central America’s countries had some historical experience with oligarchic republicanism, but none other than Costa Rica had a significant, uninterrupted history of free elections. Within most of the region’s countries, armed leftist movements and anti-communist military governments saw electoral systems as incompatible with their pursuit of winner-takes-all victories in a battle of ideologies and worldviews. Yet remarkably, at a time of unparalleled ideological polarization and foreign-fueled conflict, Central America took steps to join Latin America’s Third Wave of democracy.\textsuperscript{525} Though ostensibly contradictory to liberalization, the salience of ideological struggle and foreign interventions – the intensity of which was unique to the Cold War in the Global South – provided the impetus for democratization. Starting in 1986, three main factors combined to set the stage for regional leaders to give democracy a chance: new forces in Central


American politics with domestic incentives to oppose U.S. intervention, a window of opportunity provided by a waning superpower conflict, and, most importantly, the exhaustion of the Nicaraguan revolutionary process.

Political changes in Guatemala, Central America’s largest country and colonial power center under the Spanish empire, reverberated across the isthmus. Dating back to a U.S.-backed coup in 1954 against democratically-elected leftist Jacobo Arbenz, the country alternated between façade electoral regimes and outright military dictatorships. In response, various Marxist-led guerrilla groups proliferated in rural areas. In 1982, under the pretext of definitively crushing these leftist insurgencies, a coup led by General Efraín Rios Montt dissolved the legislature and other basic republican institutions. A Rios Montt-led junta promised to pacify the countryside through a policy of “beans and bullets,” where intensified military campaigns would be accompanied by rural development programs. In practice, this approach more often resembled a scorched earth policy which, in an effort to undermine guerrillas’ social base of support, committed genocidal violence against indigenous Maya communities. Though successful in routing already-fraught armed leftist groups, these costly counterinsurgency efforts divided and fatigued the military and worsened an economic downturn which since 1980 had upset the high command’s relationship with the country’s powerful business elite. Making matters worse, Guatemala’s diplomatic isolation deepened in this period. In 1983, indigenous activist Rigoberta Menchú, who subsequently won the Nobel Prize for her work, published a widely-read autobiography which vividly portrayed the horrors of everyday life in Cold War Guatemala.526 Local elites’ disapproval of the status quo, combined with mounting international pressure, set the stage for a timid democratic opening.527 The same year that *I, Rigoberta Menchú* hit

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526 Rigoberta Menchú, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia,* (Havana: Casa de las Americas, 1983).
527 This account based on Guatemalan sociologist Edelberto Torres Rivas’ analysis in *Revoluciones sin Cambios Revolucionarios,* (Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2011), 426-470.
bookstores, a new group of military officers overthrew Ríos Montt and – after decreeing a
blanket amnesty for all army members – revealed plans for a constituent assembly to draft a new
constitution and hold elections.528

To an extent, the Nicaraguan Revolution contributed to Guatemala’s republican
makeover. During the 1980s, the U.S. government – whose security agencies maintained an
intimate relationship with Guatemalan generals – differentiated “authoritarian” anti-communist
governments from “totalitarian” left-wing regimes. The former, argued top Reagan-era diplomat
Jeane Kirkpatrick, were far more likely to give way to democratic transitions than the latter,
which she viewed as irredeemable.529 If the Reagan administration could encourage a modicum
of civilian government in Guatemala, the thinking went, it might prove Kirkpatrick’s logic and
further corner Nicaragua’s Sandinista government. Guatemalan leaders slowly complied because
they were eager to normalize relations, thereby facilitating aid programs and international
financing which had been complicated by the regime’s well-publicized human rights violations.

Guatemala’s political liberalization quickly bred changes in the country’s foreign policy.
In the 1985 elections, Christian Democrat Vinicio Cerezo won a thumping 68% of the popular
vote after promising to wind down the Guatemalan civil war, even if it meant holding talks with
the URNG (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca – Guatemala National
Revolutionary Unity) – the loose amalgamation of the country’s Marxist guerrilla groups.

528 Hector Alejandro Gramajo Morales, a top army staffer under Ríos Montt and Defense Minister (1987-1990)
under subsequent civilian governments, narrates this transition from the military’s perspective in “Political
Transition in Guatemala, 1980-1990: A Perspective From Inside Guatemala’s Army,” in Democratic Transitions in
Central America, eds. Jorge I. Domínguez and Marc Lindenberg, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997),
111-138.
529 In an influential essay, political scientist Jeane Kirkpatrick – Reagan’s ambassador to the United Nations – drew
a conceptual difference between anti-communist “authoritarian regimes” and Marxist-Leninist “totalitarian”
regimes. U.S. support for the former, she argued, could be justified not only on realist grounds, but based on her
observation that such regimes were more likely to foster liberal-democratic transitions than leftist governments.
Thus, in Central America – which Kirkpatrick called “the most important place in the world” – the military-
dominated governments of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador were treated, as we have seen, as “democratic”
regimes despite their abuses. See “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” Commentary, November 1979 issue.
Shortly before his January 1986 inauguration, Cerezo surprised military leaders – who promised to lurk ominously behind any civilian government – by declaring Guatemala’s “active neutrality” in the Nicaraguan conflict. A direct U.S. invasion of Nicaragua, he told journalists, would mean the “Lebanization of Central America; we provide the bodies, and others provide the bombs. That’s not good for any country.”

For the president-elect, active neutrality and leadership in regional peace initiatives were sources of international prestige, which in turn gave his administration much-needed breathing space with respect to the still-dominant military (he would go on to survive numerous coup attempts). Once in office, he invited Central American foreign ministers to Guatemala City to publicly reaffirm their support for the Contadora process.

Meanwhile, Costa Rica also held fateful elections. Since 1982, President Luís Alberto Monge had turned the country, like Honduras, into a forward operating base for the CIA and Contra. Though the Sandinistas were hugely unpopular in Costa Rica by 1986, this policy – which Monge implemented in exchange for the Reagan administration’s help in boosting the country’s stagnant economy – was even more unpopular. Oscar Arias, a young political scientist and legislator from Monge’s own Liberationist party, predicted that Costa Rica’s involvement in Nicaragua would be the deciding issue of the country’s 1986 elections.

Whereas his opponent in the presidential race implied that Costa Rica should continue collaborating with U.S. policies, Arias made peacebuilding in Central America a central plank of his victorious campaign. Shortly after taking office in May 1986, Costa Rican police raided

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532 At Arias’ inauguration, U.S. Vice President George H.W. Bush received a standing ovation whereas the Nicaraguan ambassador, Claudia Chamorro Barrios, was loudly heckled and booed; see “El polémico desayuno de George Bush,” El País, May 10, 1986. In pursuing a peacebuilding foreign policy in Central America, Arias had to take note of the Costa Rican population’s extreme distrust of the Nicaraguan government; Arias referenced the Chamorro incident to Daniel Ortega, telling the Nicaraguan President in 1987 that given the Sandinistas’ unpopularity in Costa Rica, it would be unwise to hold any early peace talks in his country; Interview with the author, San José, February 24, 2017.
533 “My campaign flag was peace in Central America, to struggle for a negotiated solution to the Central American conflicts.” Ibid.
several Contra camps near the Nicaraguan border. Outraged, the CIA station chief in Costa Rica
cabled Washington: the next time Arias set foot in the U.S., he urged, “boy needs to be
straightened out by heavy weights.” But the Costa Rican president, whose popular mandate was built on the promise to end CIA meddling in Costa Rica, remained unfazed.

The Cerezo and Arias elections generated momentum for a new, Central American
diplomatic initiative to bring peace to the region. The same month Arias was sworn in, Cerezo invited all Central American presidents to a summit in Esquipulas, a popular destination for Catholic pilgrims in Guatemala near the confluence of the Salvadoran and Honduran borders. Arias, Cerezo, Ortega, along with El Salvador’s Napoleon Duarte and Honduras’ José Azcona gave the now-customary declarations in support of the ailing Contadora process. Fundamentally, Esquipulas I – as it came to be known – was a meeting about meetings: the five presidents agreed to institutionalize regular summits and discussed Cerezo’s embryonic proposal for a Central American Parliament (PARLACEN). They did not discuss ways to end armed conflicts in their countries. Nonetheless, this 1986 meeting marked a dramatic departure from the diplomatic status quo ante. For the very first time, Sandinista President Daniel Ortega met directly, as an equal, with his counterparts from Nicaragua’s neighboring countries. Thus, Alain Rouquié – a political scientist and France’s ambassador to El Salvador at the time – rightly described Esquipulas I as the “anti-Democratic Forum [1982]” (discussed in the previous chapter) “and a 180-degree reversal with respect to the policies inspired by the United States.” Having previously collaborated with belligerent U.S. polices based on the isolation of the Sandinista

534 Joint Hearings Before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, Testimony of Richard V. Secord, 100(1), May 5, 1987, 435.
government, Central American countries now evinced a political will to “reintegrate” Nicaragua. Sandinista leaders certainly viewed Esquipulas in this positive light. Vice President Sergio Ramírez, after meeting with his own counterparts, privately gushed to Ortega that the meetings were “positive in every sense; Nicaragua was included unconditionally, as a country with a regime as democratic and freely-elected as the rest.” The Contadora and Support Group countries, which had turned Nicaragua’s legitimization into a central aspect of their peace process, met in Panama a month later and gave Esquipulas I their support.

The U.S. government observed the Sandinistas’ rehabilitation with trepidation. The same month, the Pentagon presented Congress with an analysis – citing North American experiences in Korea, Cuba, and Vietnam – arguing that it was impossible to “contain the communist government in Nicaragua” via a “Contadora type” political agreement, because the Sandinistas were sure to violate any commitments they made. Persuaded, the opposition-controlled House of Representatives approved Reagan’s request to send further military aid to the Contra. According to Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry memoranda from this period, the FSLN considered its primary foreign policy objective to be the cessation of congressional support for such aid packages.

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536 Alain Rouquié, Guerras y paz en América Central, 284.
537 “Memorandum from Vice President Sergio Ramírez to President Daniel Ortega S.,” (Asunto: Reunión de Vice Presidentes en Guatemala), May 3, 1986, Sergio Ramírez Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Box 62, Folder 13.
538 The Contadora Group members expressed their pleasure with the Esquipulas Declaration with their own declaration from Panama; “Declaration of Panama,” June 1986, DNSA collection: Nicaragua, ProQuest document ID: 1679101145.
540 For a brief summary of congressional debates on Contra funding in the second half of the 1980s, see “House, By 8 Votes, Defeats Rebel Aid; A Loss For Reagan,” The New York Times, February 4, 1988. In June 1986 “the House handed the Administration a sizable victory by agreeing to a $100 million military and logistical aid package for the contras. The 1986 vote was 221 to 209, with 51 Democrats voting in support of the President and 11 Republicans voting against.”
541 A Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry memo from 1985 listed the cessation of Contra aid as the country’s main foreign policy objective; See “Algunos elementos que deben ser considerados sobre las recientes medidas económicas adoptadas por la administración Reagan contra Nicaragua.” Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Managua, April 29, 1985, Archivo Bendaña, Box 1. Nicaraguan diplomats at this time worked closely with U.S.-based legal advisors to
Despite this setback, ex-President Jimmy Carter told FSLN leaders that under the Democratic leadership of Speaker of the House Jim Wright, Congress could be convinced to change course. (Additionally, the Democrats won a majority in the Senate in November 1986 elections, thereby controlling both chambers of Congress). Soon enough, a prime opportunity almost literally fell into the Sandinistas’ hands. In October 1986, a U.S. Marine pilot trained to fly supplies to Contra rebels inside Nicaragua was captured after EPS troops shot his plane out of the sky. After discussing the issue with anti-Contra aid congressmen including Iowa’s Tom Harkin and Connecticut’s Chris Dodd, FSLN leaders carefully choreographed Eugene Hasenfus’ humanitarian release, just days before Christmas, in order to maximize the gesture’s impact on U.S. public opinion.\footnote{542}

The Hasenfus scandal, which publicly exposed the extent of direct CIA activity in Nicaragua, came at an extremely inopportune moment for the Reagan administration. In November 1986 a Lebanese newspaper – citing leaks from Iran’s Revolutionary Guard – revealed that U.S. officials had sold weapons to Tehran’s Islamic Republic, in violation of an embargo, as part of a deal to free American hostages held by Iranian surrogates in Lebanon. Moreover, the report alleged that the CIA and NSC used some of the Iranian payments to fund the Nicaraguan Contra, in violation of a congressional amendment designed to limit the disbursement of U.S. funds with the aim of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government.\footnote{543} Congress promptly set about investigating the “Iran-Contra” scandal, and found that NSC staffer

\footnote{\textsuperscript{542} \textsuperscript{1}“Reunión con Senador Tom Harkin,” undated, 1986, Sergio Ramírez Papers, Box 62, Folder 13. \textsuperscript{543} Between 1982 and 1984 U.S. Congress passed a series of legislative amendments, named after Massachusetts representative Edward Boland, which prevented the U.S. government from providing assistance to Nicaraguan insurgents \textit{with the explicit purpose of overthrowing the government} in Managua. This caveat left the door open for the Reagan administration to continue financing the Contra by simply refusing to acknowledge that their purpose was to topple the Sandinistas; their war was meant, according to administration rhetoric, to pressure the FSLN into making democratic reforms.}
Oliver North and other senior officials had secured *quid pro quo* agreements with a remarkable range of foreign governments – from communist China to the Gulf state of Bahrain – where the U.S. offered diplomatic favors in exchange for military and financial assistance to the Contra. Threatened with impeachment, President Ronald Reagan survived the scandal by denying knowledge of these illegal actions. Several senior officials – including Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, CIA Central America chief Alan Fiers, and the aforementioned Oliver North – were either indicted or convicted of serious crimes (though all were eventually pardoned by Reagan’s successor, George H.W. Bush). Aside from shaking U.S. politics to the core, the Iran-Contra scandal became a “hex” for Nicaragua’s anti-Sandinista insurgents, as one of their analysts noted, because it bedeviled White House efforts to win congressional approval to fund their war. In the second half of the 1980s, when the Contra was approaching maximum troop size, it lacked certainty of continued superpower backing. Furthermore, a direct U.S. intervention to help finish their fight now seemed only a “utopian” possibility.

Facing troubles of their own, the Sandinistas had little cause to celebrate. In early 1987, an FSLN delegation toured the socialist bloc in search of new economic aid. The trip bore little fruit. Vice President Ramírez, head of the mission, briefed Daniel Ortega upon his return:

> I have perceived that, like with my previous visit to the USSR and other socialist countries, the framework for economic aid to Nicaragua is increasingly restricted; we cannot expect the volumes of foreign cooperation necessary to respond to the severe

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545 Donald Castillo, a member of Eden Pastora and Alfonso Robelo’s ARDE faction of the Contra, writes: “In November 1986 the Iran-Contra scandal broke out and the anti-Sandinista resistance project enters a phase of irreversible cancellation. The Contra army, which was now relying on its last package of military aid, became the only option for a military victory...At this moment there was an irreconcilable antagonism in U.S. politics with regard to policy with respect to Nicaragua, the likes of which had rarely been seen in the political history of the North Americans. In this situation, to think that there could be a military intervention was simply utopian.” *Gringos, Contras, y Sandinistas: testimonios de la guerra civil en Nicaragua*, (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo editors, 1994), 149.
economic emergency that Nicaragua is undergoing; nor can we expect that such aid would fundamentally solve our trade deficit and shortage of foreign exchange.\textsuperscript{546}

Wherever they went, the Sandinistas received bad news. Muammar Gaddafi, contending with an economic crisis in Libya caused by the collapse of oil prices earlier in the decade, balked at the possibility of replacing the Soviet Union as Nicaragua’s main source of petroleum.\textsuperscript{547} Old friends in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had few resources to spare.\textsuperscript{548} Baghdad’s Baathist government refused to help Nicaragua because the Sandinistas, out of a mixture of cash-strapped desperation and diplomatic naïveté, tried petitioning the Islamic Republic of Iran – Iraq’s sworn enemy and military adversary – for assistance at the same time.\textsuperscript{549} Yugoslavia’s collective presidency was too busy restructuring that country’s ailing economy to be of much help. The Yugoslav government, tellingly, was hesitant to support Nicaragua so long as it appeared that the Soviet Union was downscaling its own commitment there.\textsuperscript{550} Indeed, when FSLN National Director Henry ‘Modesto’ Ruíz announced Nicaragua’s oil shortage in March of that year, the Soviet government responded by quietly signaling in diplomatic channels that it would still be halving its oil shipments to Nicaragua. The previous chapter noted how Soviet policy began moving in this direction by 1985; indeed, Soviet military and economic aid to the Sandinista Revolution peaked definitively in 1986.\textsuperscript{551} Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid agreed to make up for some of the lost crude, and his foreign policy team put a positive spin on the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[548] “Reunión con Líderes palestinos,” undated, 1987, \textit{Ibid.}
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Sandinistas’ declining superpower patronage: reduced dependency on the USSR would weaken the Reagan administration’s pretext for aggression and give the FSLN an opportunity “to consolidate its revolutionary project in an autonomous and independent fashion.”

Sandinista leaders took a less sanguine view. Up until 1983, revolutionary Nicaragua experienced economic growth at roughly the same rate as other Central American countries. By 1986, however, gross domestic product (GDP) had shrunk for three consecutive years and real wages had become only 40% of the level they had reached before the insurrection against Somoza. Furthermore, 1986 also witnessed the first signs of an inflationary spiral which would eventually rank as the worst ever recorded in the history of the Americas. In pursuing economic growth and the redistribution of its gains, the revolutionary government had faced enormously adverse circumstances. In particular, U.S. intervention and local insurgencies created the need for unsustainable patterns of defense spending – roughly half the national budget at its peak. However, as economist Hans Peter Lankes has written, external constraints do not account for all of Nicaragua’s economic troubles; specifically, the effects of reduced trade as a result of the 1985 U.S. embargo do not explain the onset of hyperinflation, especially given that Nicaragua received more foreign aid relative to GDP than any country in Latin America between 1979 and 1987. Lankes instead points to a structural failure of economic policy. Sandinista theorists envisioned a mixed economy based on both state-led policies and a “realistic” role for market forces. In practice, Lankes argues, the government actually settled on a nebulous framework that was neither market-based nor centrally planned. Rather than producing the best of both worlds, this approach saddled Sandinista planners with contradictory restraints, as they

553 By 1988, the average real wage was only 20% of what it had been ten years earlier. See Silvio de Franco and José Luis Velázquez, “Democratic Transitions in Nicaragua,” in Democratic Transitions in Central America, 98-99.
“had to provide immediately visible and lasting benefits to a core group of workers, civil servants and the armed forces by manipulating the wage and price system [the centrally planned aspect], and it simultaneously had to ensure sufficient incentives to keep the private sector from closing down [the market-based aspect].” The situation amounted to “planning without control,” as evidenced by a booming black market in 1983 which emerged in response to price ceilings on basic goods such as foodstuffs.  

554 Economist Alejandro Martínez Cuenca, the Sandinistas’ Minister of Foreign Commerce, coincides with Lankes’ blaming of a neither-here-nor-there policy framework. In his memoir, Sandinista Economics in Practice, Martínez Cuenca wrote: “We failed to give sufficient importance to the wearing down of the economy – not only a product of the war. The conceptual differences around centralism versus a market economy took too long to be cleared up inside of Sandinismo.”  

The military picture was mixed. On the one hand, the EPS had achieved its immediate objective of preventing insurgents from taking – and more importantly, holding – any urban centers from which Contra political leaders could declare a provisional government.  

555 They owed their success, in part, to the support of at least 150 Cuban advisors led by Arnaldo Ochoa, one of Castro’s most decorated lieutenants in the Cuban Revolution.  

556 Soviet armaments – often channeled through satellites like East Germany and Bulgaria – also proved essential.  

557 According to CIA analysts, Soviet support was “vital in limiting the insurgent threat.” Aside from weapons, Soviet helicopters, transport aircraft, and thousands of vehicles helped the Sandinista army reach the far corners of the Nicaraguan interior where road networks remained undeveloped. See CIA, “Communist Military Assistance to Nicaragua: Trends and Implications,” previously cited. The CIA report suggested that any Cuban support (along with that which came from Algeria), other than training, was of Soviet origin. With regards to third-party socialist support for the Sandinista military, the East-German example is particularly notable; see Klaus Storkmann, “East German Military Aid to the Sandinista Government of Nicaragua, 1979-1990,” Journal of Cold War Studies 16(2), Spring 2014: 56-76. Storkman shows the complexities of the German-Soviet relationship with regards to socialist aid for the Sandinistas. On the one hand, the German Democratic Republic, which sought to enhance its standing
Additionally, the looming peace with Afro-indigenous leaders (described in the previous chapter) started neutralizing the Atlantic theater of the war at the same time that Arias’ policies were closing the southern flank along the Costa Rican border. On the other hand, the Sandinista Army had come nowhere close to annihilating a Contra army whose ranks were still growing in the 1986-88 period. Small, favorable changes to the balance of forces did not affect the broader stalemate which had emerged relatively early in the war.

The Sandinista military, Army Chief of Staff Joaquín Cuadra worried, “was not going to last much longer.” “Society,” he noted, “was exhausted,” and the government was so desperate to find recruits that it resorted to conscripting “the crippled and blind.”\(^559\) The onset of war in 1982, we have observed, effectively stalled any attempt to implement meaningful items from the revolutionary agenda. By 1987, Sandinista leaders faced the total desgaste, or wearing-down, of the revolutionary process.\(^560\) FSLN National Director Jaime Wheelock summed up, in three points, the reasons why the revolutionary leadership arrived at this conclusion: “First, the Nicaraguan economy was unable to resist such an intensive military campaign in the long run. Second, the reserve of conscripts for the military was drying up. Third, by 1987 we received the indication that the Soviet Union was not going to be able to continue supporting us because it lacked foreign exchange and faced obstacles in sending us aid.”\(^561\)

It was in this context of revolutionary desgaste, and of the impossibility of an outright military victory for the Nicaraguan government, that Arias invited the presidents of El Salvador, within the Eastern Bloc, typically consulted with the Soviet Ministry of Defense – and not with other Warsaw Pact members – before approving its substantial training, weapons, and aid programs for Nicaragua. On the other hand, traces of an independent foreign policy became visible when the Soviet Union started winding down its aid programs after 1986, and GDR leader Erick Honecker decided to increase military assistance to the Sandinistas.\(^559\) Joaquín Cuadra Lacayo, previously cited interview with the author.

\(^560\) See, for instance, Humberto Ortega, *La Odisea por Nicaragua*, 152. Ramirez, in his memoir, writes: “In the circumstances of exhaustion we had arrived at, and with warnings we received from the Soviet camp regarding the future of economic aid, the 1990 elections became the key piece for speeding up a negotiated end to the war.” *Adiós Muchachos*, 272.

\(^561\) Jaime Wheelock Román, previously cited interview with the author.
Guatemala, and Honduras to a February 1987 event in San José ostentatiously titled “A Time for Peace.” The Costa Rican leader presented his guests with the “Arias Plan” for bringing peace to Central America. To some observers, this document was little different from previous Latin American proposals. Indeed, it lifted Contadora’s security aspects: suspension of military aid from foreign powers, non-use of countries as bases from which to launch attack on other countries, and regional arms reduction with international monitoring. But Arias’ team prefaced the security elements with equally strong provisions regarding each country’s internal political arrangements: immediate cease-fire with insurgent groups, amnesties, national dialogue, restoration of civil liberties, and free elections.\textsuperscript{562} Like Contadora, the Arias Plan was unambiguous in requiring an end to U.S. aid for anti-government forces in Nicaragua. But the new plan departed from Contadora’s assumptions in fundamental ways. Luís Guillermo Solís, who helped draft the plan while working for the Arias administration’s Foreign Ministry, explained that Contadora “largely bought the Sandinista argument” that non-intervention should come before democratization, while the U.S.-backed Contra and opposition argued precisely the opposite. By contrast, the Central American initiative “satisfied the apparently conflicting demands for security and democracy” by making the implementation of agreements in both realms simultaneous.\textsuperscript{563} Nicaragua’s Vice Foreign Minister and key negotiator, Victor Hugo Tinoco, offered a pithy explanation of the mechanisms: “Essentially, the Esquipulas Accords were a barter: end of armed conflict in exchange for free elections everywhere in Central America.”\textsuperscript{564} For the peace plan’s unveiling, Arias notably chose not to invite the Sandinista government that Tinoco represented. But Cerezo pushed to fully reintegrate Nicaragua’s Daniel

\textsuperscript{562} Propuesta de paz de San José (Plan Arias),” found in La Paz en Centroamérica: expediente de documentos fundamentales, 317-320.
\textsuperscript{564} See Tinoco’s analysis of 1980s U.S.-Nicaraguan relations in “La decision de Ortega de convertir en farsa las elecciones augura conflictos, gane Clinton o gane Trump,” Envío, no. 413, August 2016.
Ortega; in a joint statement in May 1987, the Guatemalan and Nicaraguan presidents reaffirmed that peacebuilding in Central America required “respect to the norms of conviviality among states.”

The Reagan administration watched with growing concern. Arias’ proposal would require the Sandinistas to make tough commitments to democratize Nicaragua, exactly as the administration had demanded. Indeed, President Reagan had, as recently as 1986, promised to support “any negotiated settlement or Contadora treaty that will bring real democracy to Nicaragua.” However, as Thomas Carothers points out in his insider account of U.S. democracy promotion in Latin America in this period,

…“Real democracy” was of course the catch. The administration did not believe that Sandinista rule could ever be democratic and by “real democracy” meant non-Sandinista rule. The administration thus could not stomach the prospect of any negotiated settlement unless it clearly pointed to an end to Sandinista rule. And the Sandinistas were not about to sign any such agreement. For all intents and purposes, therefore, the administration was not interested in a negotiated solution.

The Democrats controlling Congress, still upset over Iran-Contra, smiled on the Arias Plan. Faced with a growing international and domestic consensus in favor of this initiative, the Reagan administration did little to block it. Instead, in a cunning effort, it sought to replace the Arias Plan. Reagan coaxed Speaker Jim Wright into teaming up for an alternative, “Reagan-Wright Plan,” which they revealed just days before Central American presidents were scheduled to meet again at Esquipulas on August 6th to debate Arias’ proposal. Unlike Arias’ Plan, the Reagan-Wright Plan focused exclusively on Nicaragua, but surprisingly included several Contadora-inspired concessions. According to the proposal, the U.S. had no right to “influence or determine

566 Carothers, In the Name of Democracy, 98.
the identity of the political leaders…nor the social and economic system” in Nicaragua and should cancel sanctions and Contra aid as soon as the Sandinistas agreed to a cease-fire, national reconciliation, and democratization.568 Hours before the draft plan was presented, however, Reagan handed Wright a memo which interpreted “national reconciliation” as meaning President Daniel Ortega’s immediate resignation. The memo also stated that the U.S. reserved the right to military action if it deemed the Nicaraguan government to have made inadequate progress on democratization. The Democratic Speaker furiously alleged (and administration sources later confirmed this view) that the entire plan had been a ruse designed by the White House to win bipartisan support for a peace plan which the Sandinistas would obviously refuse, thereby corralling Congress into approving further Contra military aid.569

On the global scene, U.S. attempts to supplant the Arias Plan backfired. As Arias recalls, when he discussed the peace proposal with European politicians, he found that “the sympathy still lay with Sandinismo. [The Europeans] worried that my peace plan could be something pushed by the United States, and that I could merely be an instrument of U.S. foreign policy. But this faded very quickly because the main enemy of my plan was, in fact, the United States.”570 Central America’s revolutionary upheavals, we have observed, complicated Washington’s traditional Cold War alliances with Western European democracies. Given Europe’s general opposition to U.S. intervention in Nicaragua, Reagan’s opposition to the Arias Plan played to the Costa Rican’s advantage.

568 “Propuesta de Paz Reagan-Wright,” found in La Paz en Centroamérica: expediente de documentos fundamentales, 334.
570 Arias, previously cited interview with the author. Rouquié coincides with this assessment, adding that the Reagan-Wright plan likely produced “the opposite of the desired effect, because it motivated – for reasons of pride, dignity before Central American public opinion – the five presidents to go ahead with their own deliberations rather than accepting such visible pressures from abroad.” Rouquié, 286.
To Central American presidents, the Reagan administration’s maneuvers confirmed their suspicion: toeing the U.S. line would mean the continuation of war in their countries. On August 6, they gathered in Esquipulas, Guatemala and listened to Vinicio Cerezo’s opening remarks. “To those who would like to see us continue at war,” the host declared, “we say that we are tired of suffering and dying and that we want to build in order to live better.”

Despite this growing consensus, international pundits had low expectations for Esquipulas II. After all, throughout 1986-87, Ortega said it was unacceptable to make demands upon Nicaragua’s internal affairs; his hardline colleagues in the National Directorate were more negative still. The presidents of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras contended with pressure from their respective armed forces, who saw democratization as a threat to their interests and national reconciliation as a form of surrender to the communist menace. Finally, the U.S. government, upon which these presidents depended for economic aid – and in the case of El Salvador’s Duarte, for survival – opposed the deal.

As dusk fell over Esquipulas, Arias, fully aware of these countervailing pressures, set the rules for the presidents’ all-night debate. First, his peace proposal was the only option on the table; his deal could be modified, but the Reagan-Wright Plan would be ignored altogether. There would be no breaks, no telephone calls, and room service sandwiches would be ordered to eliminate any pretext to leave the room.

Arias told his counterparts of a trick he learned from reading a biography of U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt: when FDR’s cabinet failed to agree on a policy debate, he locked them in a room until they reached an agreement. (The deal would surely fail, he feared, if Ortega got a call from his brother Humberto or Tomás Borge, or if

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571 “Palabras pronunciadas por el presidente de Guatemala, Vinicio Cerezo, al inaugurar la cumbre de Esquipulas II,” August 6, 1987, found in La Paz en Centroamérica: expediente de documentos fundamentales, 340.
572 Guido Fernandez, Arias’ ambassador to the U.S. and one of the president’s closest confidants, recounts these details of the Esquipulas II meeting in El Desafío de la Paz en Centroamérica, (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1989).
Azcona or Duarte consulted with their generals).\footnote{Arias, previously cited interview with the author.} By 3:00 AM, the presidents had reached a verbal agreement, and after breakfast, they revealed the signing of the “Procedure for the Establishment of a Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America.”\footnote{“Procedure for the Establishment of a Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America (Esquipulas II),” August 7, 1987, United Nations Peacemaker, Peace Agreements Database, \url{https://peacemaker.un.org/centralamerica-esquipulasII87}.} The road ahead was a long one, but each government made a pledge to make peace with their respective internal opponents, suspend military aid from extra-regional powers, and democratize their political systems.

The global reaction to the Esquipulas II deal, a largely unmodified version of the Arias Plan, was resoundingly positive. Within days, the USSR and Cuba – where Ortega travelled immediately after the summit to discuss the deal with Fidel Castro – gave Esquipulas their enthusiastic backing.\footnote{Ortega was accompanied by Foreign Minister Miguel d’Escoto and Julio López Campos, head of the FSLN’s Department of International Relations. Fidel Castro’s delegation included Jorge Risquet and Manuel “Barbarroja” Piñeiro; Castro’s camp “expressed Cuba’s full support for [Nicaragua’s] policy of pursuing peace in the region as well as the agreements adopted by the five Central American presidents in Guatemala City.” Report, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, México, D.F., August 1988, AG-SRE III-4283-1.} On August 22, the Contadora and Support Group foreign ministers met in Caracas and agreed to conform, alongside the UN and OAS Secretary Generals, a Verification Commission to supervise the progress of Esquipulas’ Executive Commission, made up of the five Central American foreign ministers.\footnote{“Comunicado Conjunto y Acta de Instalación de la Primera Reunión de la Comisión Ejecutiva,” San Salvador, El Salvador, August 20, 1987, \textit{La Paz en Centroamérica}, 364-366; “Acta de instalación de la Comisión Internacional de Verificación (CIVS),” Caracas, Venezuela, August 22, 1987, \textit{Ibid.}, 366-67.}

Stunningly, the gendarmes of U.S. policy in Central America had openly defied their benefactor. Azcona and Duarte – who travelled to Washington just as Ortega flew to Havana – had assured the Reagan administration they would not sign the agreement. Yet they, like Cerezo, had excellent reasons for doing so. For the Guatemalan government, which had never been seriously threatened by the country’s guerrilla groups, the risk posed by the possible survival of the Sandinista Revolution was relatively minor. In fact, ahead of Esquipulas II, the Marxist...
URNG announced a unilateral cease-fire in order to signal its support for a political settlement in Guatemala and elsewhere in the region.\(^{577}\) The potential benefits of participating in Esquipulas – stabilization south of the border combined with praise from the international community – outweighed the risks. “The essence of the Arias plan,” explained Nicaraguan Vice Foreign Minister Alejandro Bendaña, “was there was something for everyone in it.”\(^{578}\)

Honduras’ Azcona was perhaps the most surprising signatory. The Honduran government had allowed the United States and Contra to turn its southern border into a strategic rearguard. U.S. aid to Honduras, mostly to its armed forces, multiplied roughly five-fold after 1980 as a function of the country’s newfound strategic importance. In accepting this aid, however, the country’s leaders arguably drank from a poisoned chalice. First, U.S. money undermined Honduras’ democratic institutions: the traditionally powerful military ran the Contra policy with little oversight from civilian leaders. Second, Contra money exacerbated graft and corruption in Honduran politics. Both of these factors gave rise to a small but vocal anti-war presence in domestic politics by 1987.

As Honduran analyst Victor Meza noted, the military did not even believe the Contra project would be successful. Once the virulently anti-communist General Alvarez was deposed in 1984, military leaders fought for continued U.S. aid but did not expect – nor even desire, necessarily – a Contra military victory over the Sandinista government.\(^{579}\) One reason was that, for a professional military, the presence of an irregular army like the Contra was odious and potentially dangerous. Joaquín Cuadra put it bluntly: “The Contra force was larger than the Honduran army. If the Contras turned around and marched on Tegucigalpa, they would kick their

Rouquié echoes this view, wondering if “Perhaps [the Honduran government] did not mind receiving [Esquipulas’] help in getting rid of these pesky armed refugees which endangered its security.” Finally, the armed forces’ main fear was all-out war with Nicaragua; Contra presence could ignite such a conflict at any moment. For all these reasons, as CIA analysts acknowledged at the time, “leaders in Tegucigalpa have long considered their support for the Nicaraguan insurgents a potentially grave liability.”

Still, President José Azcona faced a tough choice. As Robert Pastor notes, Azcona “was squeezed between his military and the United States. U.S. aid kept the military from overthrowing him – as in Guatemala, U.S. officials demanded a veneer of civilian control – but also prevented him from being an autonomous president.” Indeed, this observation neatly captures the wider reasoning which explained the unlikely Honduran signature: U.S. support was generous but also exacerbated the conditions which threatened his government in the first place. Moreover, collaboration with the United States came at the cost of national dignity, a source of increasing domestic political pressure for Azcona in the mid-1980s, Meza notes. If anything, as the El País editorial board noted at the time, U.S. attempts to tank the Arias Plan backfired on this affective front. In the specific case of Honduras, the Reagan administration’s machinations allowed the Central American presidents to, as Leogrande puts it, “shame [Azcona] into signing” by painting “him as a puppet of the United States.”

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580 Joaquín Cuadra, previously cited interview with the author.
581 Rouquié, Guerra y Paz en Centroamérica, 285.
583 Pastor, Not Condemned to Repetition, 218.
584 “Al mismo tiempo, el plan de Estados Unidos puede haber producido un efecto contrario al deseado y haber estimulado por razones de orgullo y de dignidad ante la opinión pública centroamericana a los cinco presidentes a seguir adelante con sus propias deliberaciones y a no aceptar tan visibles presiones del exterior”; “Esquipulas 2 vive,” El País, August 10, 1987.
585 “Leogrande, Our Own Backyard, 516.
For Duarte, the reasoning was similar, but his dilemma greater. Unlike the Honduran and Guatemalan governments, his was very much at risk of being militarily overthrown by the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). He told Arias that if he stopped receiving military aid from the United States, as Esquipulas II demanded, his government would fall. This legitimate concern was ultimately overridden, however, by the fact that the agreement forced all insurgent groups in the region – not only the Contra, but also El Salvador’s leftist guerrillas – to recognize the legitimacy of existing Central American governments. In other words, Duarte signed because the agreement de-legitimized the FMLN’s efforts to topple his regime. Indeed, though the FMLN publicly called Esquipulas “a political victory for the Sandinista Revolution” (because it recognized the Nicaraguan Revolution’s legitimacy) the Salvadoran guerrillas felt attacked by the agreement’s demand that irregular forces cease hostilities and reach agreements with their respective national governments. While the Nicaraguan Contra should certainly assume those responsibilities, they argued, the FMLN’s struggle was a different story. “The way in which the Arias Plan categorizes the armed struggle and Salvadoran guerrilla movement is unacceptable,” they wrote earlier in the year, claiming that “the liberationist character of our struggle is undeniable given the United States’ unprecedented military, economic, and political intervention in [El Salvador].”586 Tellingly, Contra analysts reacted to Esquipulas in a similarly negative way. “The Esquipulas document’s main flaw,” wrote Donald Castillo Rivas, “was its discriminatory treatment toward insurgent groups.”587 On the civilian side, Nicaragua’s Coordinadora Democrática got much of the democratizing provisions it had sought from Esquipulas II, but was notably denied its request to be invited to the summit.588 Though

587 Donald Castillo Rivas, Gringos, Contras, y Sandinistas, 263.
588 “Demandas de la Coordinadora Democrática Nicaragüense ante la próxima reunión de presidentes de Centroamérica en Guatemala, Julio de 1987,” found in La Paz en Centroamérica, 323.
Esquipulas forced national governments to make dramatic concessions, they were rewarded by being legitimized over their internal opponents.

The key question is the Sandinista signature. To discuss Nicaragua’s internal affairs at international peace negotiations, FSLN diplomats repeated throughout the 1980s, would amount to a violation of the country’s hard-fought sovereignty. Moreover, as Victor Hugo Tinoco notes, the basic Esquipulas formula – democracy in exchange for peace and non-intervention – was not different from the one offered, if disingenuously, by U.S. envoy Thomas Enders in 1980. Back then, the Sandinistas were unprepared to accept such terms. Seven years later, under very different circumstances, the revolutionaries suddenly reversed course: the deal tied the end of foreign interference to their commitment to national reconciliation with armed and civilian opponents and fully free elections which might risk the Revolution itself. Moreover, they quietly accepted the argument that democratization should come before peace – or at least, at roughly the same time. Indeed, presaging future hemispheric documents such as the Inter-American Democratic Charter, Esquipulas II implied that democracy and human rights were borderless values that enjoyed primacy over questions of national sovereignty. Nicaragua’s guerrillas, at the considerable price of their earlier convictions, had willingly joined and indeed boosted this wider Latin American shift in political values.

In return, the Sandinistas resolved an existential quandary. In July 1979, the armed Left took power for the first and only time in Latin America since the Cuban Revolution twenty years prior. That feat – itself born from a collective security agreement against unilateral U.S. power – made inter-American affairs during the 1980s revolve around the question of regime legitimacy.

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589 Tinoco, previously cited interview with the author: “In fact, the solutions to the conflict were more or less the same ones proposed from the beginning. When you look at Thomas Enders’ proposals and the ones we made at the nine negotiation sessions at Manzanillo, México, you see that in the 1987 Esquipulas accords to end the war, the solution was already there – what was missing were the conditions to accept that solution. Exhaustion with the war, after years of military conflict and bloodshed, helped create the conditions to find a solution.”
and the United States’ exclusive right to arbitrate that question. In August 1987, the FSLN took a serious risk: the United States would, for the time being, continue supporting Contra military activities which actually intensified in the months after the agreement was signed. However, as Rouquié explains, “far from declaring the government in Managua illegitimate, [Esquipulas] recognizes it and denies legitimacy to the Contra along with the other irregular and insurgent forces operating in the region.”590 This outcome was a far cry from the Reagan administration’s vision of “freedom fighters” opposing a “totalitarian” government in the name of democracy. Despite U.S. efforts to isolate them at all costs, the armed Left had won a seat at the table which would determine the shape of post-Cold War Central America. The armed Left’s presence at these discussions was a testament to its indispensable role in bringing about liberal electoral regimes in Central America.

Therefore, Nicaragua’s decision to sign Esquipulas was a reflection of the Revolution’s weakness, but also a consequence of its unlikely resilience and hard-fought legitimization. The Central American Peace Accords were the only hope of saving a Revolution which was losing its superpower patronage and failing in its socioeconomic policies.591 The military balance of forces was unlikely to improve; if there was ever a time to discuss a political settlement with the Contra, this was it.592 But in any event, the bellicose status quo was unsustainable; “If we had continued that way,” Wheelock argues, “maybe we would have lost the war. Perhaps we would have left power under far worse conditions.”593 Nonetheless, the United States’ failure to topple the Sandinistas, which owed to internal Nicaraguan dynamics as well as Latin American

590 Rouquié, Guerra y Paz en Centroamérica, 285.
591 Additionally, as Wheelock points out, democratization on peaceful terms gave the FSLN the chance to win back power at a later date if it lost power.
592 Joaquin Cuadra, previously cited interview with the author: “When do you sit down to negotiate? You have to time it well so that it’s when you’re strong, not when you’re weak. So the negotiations [Contadora, Manzanillo] were prolonged because we were not militarily ready to sit down…Because, at the end of the day, what you are splitting up at the negotiating table is your balance of forces. The rest is bullshit.”
593 Wheelock, previously cited interview with the author.
responses, forced anti-communist Central American elites to bring them in from the cold. As the Esquipulas agreement showed, Managua’s inclusion went hand-in-hand with another transformation: Central Americans saw democracy as the answer and the U.S. as the problem. As the next section demonstrates, this was a two-way street. In the same way that the Sandinistas transformed Central America, the commitments acquired at Esquipulas fed back into their domestic politics and accelerated a transformation of the Nicaraguan revolutionary process in its later stages.

THE REVOLUTION AFTER ESQUIPULAS

Esquipulas II sought to end Central America’s civil wars by having its countries mutually agree, as Contadora had proposed, to reject all foreign interventions in the isthmus. The hardliners which prevailed in the Reagan administration’s policy deliberations found this development unsettling; Secretary of State George Schultz, a moderate by comparison to his colleagues, complained that “the rightwing [sic] ideologues did not want a negotiated settlement that would end contra aid.” In the agreement’s immediate aftermath, these hardliners argued that the Central American Peace Accords would fail because the Sandinistas would not keep their side of the bargain, which committed the Nicaraguan government to make fundamental democratic reforms. It was therefore necessary, the argument went, for the Contra’s military struggle to continue. Indeed, in the years after they signed the agreement in the summer of 1987,

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594 As the next and final chapter explains, progress in Nicaragua meant that military governments in Guatemala and El Salvador also had to take steps toward democratization. In an almost paradoxical way, then, revolutionary Nicaragua became the engine of a democratic transition in Central America born from the rejection of US intervention and ideologically-fueled civil wars.

595 Quoted in Leogrande, Our Own Backyard, 571.
many FSLN leaders cringed at the “bourgeois” reformism that Esquipulas forced them to embark upon. Liberalization, they feared, could dilute their project’s revolutionary purity. Worse still, it created the dangerous possibility that the Revolution could lose power altogether in free elections. Nonetheless, Nicaragua’s leaders had accepted the Esquipulas barter because it was their only way out of a bad situation. Therefore, between 1987 and 1989 the FSLN liberalized the political system as Esquipulas required while also reconfiguring the country’s economic policies and foreign relations to improve their chances at retaining power via the ballot box and win international support for ending U.S. intervention. As a result, then, Esquipulas modified the Nicaraguan revolutionary process, leading it to hew closer to the 1979 promise of political pluralism, a mixed economy, and non-alignment than ever before.

Within days of Esquipulas II, Sandinista Nicaragua witnessed a modest democratic opening. The government created a National Reconciliation Commission headed by the Catholic Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, a prominent critic.596 The Commission – which also included independent human rights organizations – paved the way for a National Dialogue between the ruling FSLN and opposition parties, including those in the Coordinadora Democrática which had boycotted the 1984 elections. The government rejected many of the opposition’s demands for electoral reforms and brushed aside calls to separate party and state – the fact of there being a “Sandinista Popular Army,” rather than an apolitical Nicaraguan Armed Forces, was a recurring complaint. Nonetheless, the symbolically significant National Reconciliation process bore tangible results by October in the form of a partial amnesty.597

596 The Sandinistas’ relationship with the Church was poor enough that Daniel Ortega dubbed Obando the “Chaplain of Somocismo.” In a twist, Ortega and Obando become close allies after the former’s return to power via elections in 2006. See, “Obando: del ‘viborazo’ a prócer de la paz,” Confidencial, March 5, 2016.
More importantly, the FSLN allowed the vehemently anti-Sandinista daily *La Prensa* – which they had forcibly shuttered a year earlier – to recommence publishing.598 Throughout the decade, press censorship in Nicaragua provided U.S. policymakers with an easy justification for aggression. It also strained the Revolution’s appeal with leftist sympathizers abroad such as Salman Rushdie, who visited the country in 1986. In his memoir of the trip, *Jaguar Smile*, the British Indian novelist praised the Revolution’s social policies and spoke kindly of its leaders, with whom he spent much time. But the government’s treatment of *La Prensa*, whose anti-Sandinista and pro-Reagan editorial line he disagreed with, rubbed him the wrong way. “The issue of press freedom,” he wrote, “was the one on which I absolutely parted company with the Sandinistas.” Unimpressed with the Sandinistas’ propaganda apparatus, he added that FSLN daily *Barricada* was “the worst paper [he’d] seen in a long while.”599 Therefore, *La Prensa*’s re-opening was a major marker of liberalization, even though its owner, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, remained suspicious of the government’s intentions. In a hand-written missive to Oscar Arias a few months after her paper re-opened, she complained that “the Sandinistas have not wanted, nor do they want, to take advantage of the opportunity you have offered them.”600

Though critics were as yet unsatisfied, the revolutionary government was visibly departing from its most authoritarian practices. Before addressing the UN General Assembly on

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598 The Nicaraguan government had ordered the indefinite closure of *La Prensa* on June 26, 1986. In her memoir, owner Violeta Barrios de Chamorro recounts the day the newspaper was shuttered by armed soldiers. She comments that this day motivated her, a former member of the Revolution’s first Junta, to re-enter politics: “The old dictator of Nicaragua, Anastasio Somoza García, had done the same, forcing my father-in-law into exile forty years earlier. That was the beginning, since then, *La Prensa* had to endure more shutdowns, bombings, threats to our directors, press censorship, imprisonment, and defamation – and, of course, the greatest loss of all, the life of my husband, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal. With the Sandinistas, we had thought that all that would change. But the oppressive hand of tyranny had come back to silence *La Prensa*. It was a day of mourning for all of us. After everyone had left, I ordered the blue-and-white flag of our revolution [sic] lowered to half staff. I sat in my office thinking, This is not the government we dreamed of. It is not what Pedro died for. The Sandinistas had better not think that I will let it end like this.” Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, *Dreams of the Heart*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 241-43.


October 8, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega told reporters that if the U.S. stopped financing the Contra, the FSLN would accept a hypothetical electoral defeat: “If the people choose a different political party and form of government,” he promised, “then there will be a different political party and form of government.” These assurances were nothing like his brother Humberto’s earlier claim, in the summer of 1980, that elections should only exist to “confirm” the power of the Revolution. In the next two years, statements of openness and liberalizing policy steps in Nicaragua enabled Arias to press more vociferously for the end of U.S. aid for the Contra. In turn, as the Central American presidents built consensus and made progress on this front, Sandinista leaders won political breathing space to make even deeper alterations to their political system and revolutionary agenda.

This dynamic deepened in October when Oscar Arias won the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in Esquipulas. Whereas Daniel Ortega expressed his “deep satisfaction” with the Nobel Committee’s selection, the U.S. government’s response was more mixed. In a speech before the Organization of American States, U.S. President Ronald Reagan paid lip service to Arias’ peacebuilding efforts, calling Esquipulas II “a step in the right direction,” but said the agreement was flawed because it “does not address U.S. security concerns in the region.” Others were more blunt. In Congress, Republican Representative Newt Gingrich called the award “saddening.” Robert Kagan, a staffer at the State Department’s Inter-American Affairs section, said he “reacted with disgust, unbridled disgust.” Another State Department official scoffed that Arias “won the prize for de-funding the contras and taking an anti-American stance. It was largely a prize for defying the United States.”

moderates’ promotion of negotiated settlements on the public relations front, while in practice pursuing the hardliners’ policy of seeking the Sandinista regime’s toppling. “Publicly, the Reagan administration refers to Arias in a cordial, friendly fashion,” explained NSC staffer José Sorzano, “but actually, privately, they have a low opinion of him that borders on despising him.”603 The White House distrusted Arias because, shortly after taking office, the young president closed down a Contra airstrip on Costa Rican territory and, honoring a key element of his proposed peace plan, promised to expel its leadership from the country altogether.

Mostly, U.S. officials were frustrated because Esquipulas’ international success threw a wrench in their efforts to steer Contra aid legislation through Congress. Commenting on the possibility that Congress might approve further Contra funding in the wake of the Central American Peace Accords, House Democratic Whip Tony Coelho said, “This kills it; it’s dead.”604 The Reagan administration did not surrender. But as Robert Pastor explains, after 1987 “Congress refused because the majority correctly believed that the Central American peace plan would fail if such aid were provided.”605 Indeed, for Arias, “the most important thing was to end Contra aid.”606 By the time the Costa Rican won the Nobel Prize, Speaker Jim Wright had been convinced that the White House was uninterested in supporting any plan which legitimized the Sandinistas and gave them a path to remaining in power. Bruised by the White House’s disingenuous invitation to build a bipartisan peace plan, Wright instead went to the Nicaraguans directly. At the UN General Assembly meetings in New York in October, he discussed with Daniel Ortega the steps Nicaragua might take to ensure Congress supported Esquipulas and

603 Ibid.
605 Pastor, Not Condemned to Repetition, 217.
606 Arias, previously cited interview with the author.
balked at further Contra aid. Personally insulted, Reagan jeered at the Democratic leader for abandoning the “Reagan-Wright Plan” in favor of the “Wright-Ortega Plan.”

In January 1988, the five Central American Presidents met again, this time in a suburb of San José, the Costa Rican capital. They devoted Esquipulas III, as it came to be known, almost exclusively to the Nicaraguan component of the Peace Accords. Strictly speaking, the Central American Peace Accords demanded that democratization, national reconciliation, and non-intervention be implemented simultaneously in each country. In practice, however, conditions varied greatly from one country to another, and the fact of Nicaragua’s centrality to the agreement meant that the Sandinistas had to move first. Faced with the real possibility – if perhaps not the immediate threat – of a military defeat, the FSLN was uniquely eager to satisfy whatever elements of Esquipulas were necessary in order to end U.S. and Central American support for the Contra. At the same time, Central American countries were also interested in moving swiftly on the Nicaraguan issue. If the Contra continued enjoying support and the war in Nicaragua continued, the Sandinista government would have reason to intensify its support for rebels in neighboring countries, redouble its requests for Cuban and Soviet involvement, and further distort the regional balance of military power by expanding the Sandinista Popular Army. Nicaragua, moreover, would no doubt renege on its democratizing commitments. In turn, if Nicaragua violated the democratic and security aspects of the Peace Accords – something which hardliners in the Central American militaries quietly hoped for – the Guatemalan and Salvadoran

607 Leogrande, Our Own Backyard, 522.
608 Elections, the agreement stated, would be held “simultaneously in all the countries of Central America in the first six months of 1988 [no such elections took place],” and in general asked all “Central American States accept in good faith the obligation to comply simultaneously with what has been agreed within the established time-limits.”
609 Victor Hugo Tinoco, interview with the author: “If you read the Esquipulas Accords, it says that these processes would unfold simultaneously. That notwithstanding, Nicaragua proceeded much more quickly because we were in a rush to end the war. He who is most worn down is most easily convinced that without a democratic process, an open electoral process, there will not be peace. And therefore, Nicaragua decides to forget simultaneity, and decides to forge ahead on its own path.”
governments would be free to abandon their own promises to liberalize their countries and hold

talks with leftist insurgents.

In this way, the Nicaraguan Revolution – which itself set off the chain reaction which led
to Esquipulas – more directly became intertwined with the mechanisms of Central America’s
transition to democracy. Northern Central American countries would demilitarize and
democratize if Nicaragua democratized, and vice-versa. For this dynamic to reach its logical
conclusion, however, the Sandinistas had to prove able to morph their revolutionary project in
accordance to changing realities at home and abroad.

Such morphing was evident at Esquipulas III, where Ortega reiterated his promise to step
down if the FSLN lost the national elections envisioned by the 1987 agreement. He also
announced an expanded amnesty, the release of additional political prisoners, and the lifting of
the country’s long-running state of emergency. 610 Most importantly, following a suggestion
made by Jim Wright, Ortega declared that his government would hold cease-fire talks with the
Contra regardless of whether the U.S. stopped disbursing aid to the insurgents. 611 In recognition
of Nicaragua’s concessions, Arias made an ultimatum to Contra leaders based in Costa Rica:
resign from your political posts, or leave the country. As Mexican analyst Jorge Castañeda noted
at the time, these gestures were designed to cajole U.S. Congress into ending “President
Reagan’s support of the Contras once and for all.” Indeed, the summit’s resolution explicitly
called this change to U.S. policy an “indispensable requirement” for the plan’s success. 612 Later

610 “Declaración Formulada por el Presidente de la Republica de Nicaragua al concluir la reunión de Presidentes
612 Jorge G. Castañeda, “As Long As Rebels Stay Afloat, Hope for Peace is Sunk,” The Los Angeles Times, January
in January, Ortega toured Western Europe in search of diplomatic backing for this principle ahead of a looming vote in Congress over the matter.\textsuperscript{613}

Having apparently received the messages coming from Costa Rica, the U.S. House of Representatives narrowly rejected Contra aid in February 1988. National Security Advisor Colin Powell had travelled to San José to convince Duarte and Azcona to abandon the agreement and threatened the termination of U.S. aid programs if they did not reverse course. According to Arias, Powell’s visit was the last time that Duarte’s and Azcona’s will was tested. He told the Honduran and Salvadoran presidents that Powell was right to raise the possibility that their Nicaraguan counterpart would fail to honor his side of the deal. Arias also acknowledged the difficulties that Duarte and Azcona might face if they lost their generous U.S. financial backing. “But if we do not comply,” he assured them, “the war will continue and that is a luxury that nobody can afford.”\textsuperscript{614} The United States government, having failed in its efforts to mortally destabilize the revolutionary government in Managua, now found it difficult to erase the aspect of the Esquipulas Accords most telling of that failure: the Sandinistas had won a seat at the table which would determine the fate of Central America in the post-Cold War.

The right to be at the table, of course, had been won by military force. In 1979, the Sandinista Front’s political power was a reflection of its total victory over Somoza’s National Guard. Once consolidated in power, their political possibilities were determined by their security forces’ ability to keep U.S.-backed insurgents from seizing a major foothold. Later, the frustrated 1984 elections demonstrated that war, revolution, and diplomacy went hand-in-hand.\textsuperscript{615}


\textsuperscript{614} Arias, previously cited interview with the author.

\textsuperscript{615} Contra strategists also behaved according to this logic. As analysis by the U.S. Congressional Research Service noted, Contra military activity picked up in the wake of the August 1987 Esquipulas summit. In December 1987, ahead of direct talks with the government, they also carried out their most ambitious maneuvers in taking the mining towns of Bonanza and Siuna. However, Sandinista reinforcements retook these small urban centers within 24 hours, once again preventing the Contra from holding a major slice of national territory. “The Military Situation in
Following this logic, shortly after announcing concessions at Esquipulas III, the government ordered the Sandinista Popular Army to carry out its largest-ever operation in order to improve negotiators’ position ahead of promised talks with Contra leaders. For two weeks in early March, Operation Danto 88 – named after a fallen FSLN commander from the insurrectionary period – saw 3,000 soldiers mobilized for combat along the Honduran border. Ostensibly, Sandinista forces sought to destroy Contra camps on both sides of the Coco River which forms the border with Honduras; indeed, a significant portion of the rebels’ supplies, CIA operators worried, were housed at one single site in the river town of Bocay. In reality, as Army Chief of Staff Joaquín Cuadra later put it, Danto 88 was a “military action planned for a political purpose.” It was to be “the final battle in the war” before peace talks, he added, “and the final battle had to be ours.”

By penetrating Honduran territory, the Sandinistas hoped to increase their leverage. Notably, the Honduran military made little effort to prevent Sandinista columns from entering national territory on various occasions between 1986-88. The Reagan administration deployed 3,000 U.S. marines to Honduras in response to this “border invasion,” though the Azcona government coyly refused to acknowledge the incident as such.

On March 21, as Operation Danto 88 came to a close, the Sandinistas and Contras finally met face-to-face at Sapoá, a small fishing village on the coast of Lake Nicaragua near the Costa Rican border. Daniel Ortega and Cardinal Miguel Obando, who had been tasked with organizing the talks, exchanged feisty letters in the run-up to the encounter; if the promised cease-fire could not be arranged, both sides were eager to blame the other for the failure.

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619 From early 1988, Daniel Ortega and Cardinal Miguel Obando exchanged oftentimes acrimonious letters in which they struggled to find an appropriate moment for the direct Sandinista-Contra talks that the former had promised; Letter from Daniel Ortega Saavedra to Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, Managua, February 23, 1988, Archivo Bendaña Box 2; Letter from Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo to Daniel Ortega Saavedra, February 25,
armies – deprived of their respective superpower patronage – had strong reasons for making the concessions necessary for a cease-fire.

For the Sandinistas, merely acknowledging the Contra was a significant concession. Government propaganda had promised that when it came to U.S.-backed insurgents, the FSLN would only “speak with its rifles.” To hold direct talks was a major about-face; as Bendaña explains, “whereas before we had been saying we don’t talk to the monkeys but [rather] to the zookeepers, now we were going to have to talk to the monkeys.” Additionally, by inviting OAS Secretary General João Clemente Baena Soares, the government accepted the principle of international mediation of internal disputes. Most importantly, the talks signaled a deeper recognition that Nicaragua’s armed conflict was more like a civil war, with local dimensions and causes, than the Sandinistas had previously cared to admit. Indeed, in notable contrast to the 1972 Paris Peace Accords which brought an end to the first phase of the Vietnamese revolutionary wars, there were no negotiators or mediators from the U.S. government at Sapoá. Rather, Nicaraguans ended this war on their own terms. The Sapoá agreement saw the FSLN finally recognize the Nicaraguan Resistance as legitimate belligerents, a fact which some Contra strategists saw as one of their greatest achievements. In signing the March 23 Sapoá Accords, however, the Contra – like the Central American countries the previous year – recognized the

1988, Ibid., Letter from Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo to Daniel Ortega Saavedra, March 2, 1988, Ibid; On March 7, the two parties agreed on Sapoá on March 23 as the time and place for cease-fire talks, which OAS Secretary General Soares would attend: Dirección de Información de Prensa de la Presidencia de la República, “Comunicado de Prensa,” Nicaraguan Embassy in Mexico, AG-SRE III-4283-1. On March 22, both sides announcing a preliminary agreement in which they affirmed their commitment to moderate their positions and pursue a cease-fire; “Nota de Prensa,” Nicaraguan Embassy in Mexico, March 22, 1988, Ibid. The full agreement was announced on March 23. In mid- and late April, high-level delegations from the government and Contra met in Managua negotiated a longer-term cease-fire; “Acuerdo entre el gobierno constitucional de la República de Nicaragua y la Resistencia Nicaragüense sobre el cese de fuego definitivo,” April 18, 1988, Nicaraguan Embassy in Mexico, AG-SRE III-4283-1.

620 Interview with Alejandro Bendaña by James S. Sutterlin, 7.
621 Donald Castillo writes: “One of the Resistance’s greatest victories, however, was the fact that the proper government of Nicaragua recognized us as a belligerent force and at the same time we achieved, for the first time, the tacit recognition of the Organization of American States, through its Secretary General Joao Clemente Baena Soares… something which we had fruitlessly sought over the course of over six years of war.” Gringos, Contras, y Sandinistas, 231.
Sandinista government as a legitimate regime that enjoyed a constitutional mandate to govern through the rest of Daniel Ortega’s term until 1990.622

Beyond the symbolic politics, the Sapoá Accords involved a concrete quid pro quo designed to wind down the war. The government invited Contra leaders to join the National Dialogue as legitimate political actors, began drafting a general amnesty law, and promised the safe return of dissident exiles.623 For Bendaña, both parties’ acceptance of an amnesty signaled a mutual acknowledgment that “there were no angels on either side” of the war.624 For their part, the Contra agreed to a cease-fire scenario where its troops would relocate to mutually-agreed “enclaves” from which the Sandinista Popular Army would keep a safe distance. Sapoá did not end the war altogether. As Bendaña suggests, rather than a full-fledged peace agreement, Sapoá was “a sort of temporary cease-fire that kept renewing itself. The real peace agreement [as Esquipulas envisioned] was the election.”625 Indeed, during the summer of 1988, tensions persisted. In July, security forces arrested dozens of protestors, including a few high-profile opposition politicians, at a massive rally in the Pacific town of Nandaime. The same month, the government temporarily suspended La Prensa and other critical news outlets, and expelled U.S. ambassador Richard Melton. All of these parties, the Sandinistas argued, were guilty of instigating the violence at Nandaime.626 Thus, despite Sapoá, the threat of war, intervention, and authoritarian regression still loomed high.

622 “Acuerdo de Sapoá,” March 23, 1988, United Nations Peacemaker, Peace Agreements Database, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/NI_880323_Acuerdo%20de%20Sapo.png; As analysts from the Mexican Foreign Ministry noted, “The mere fact that the March 23 Sapoá meeting took place was a victory for the Nicaraguan government, because in it the counterrevolutionary leadership accepted the current regime as the counterpart with which it should negotiate, and therefore recognized it as a consolidated and legitimated power.” “Informe: Panorama Political Actual/Negociaciones Para la Paz,” Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, México, D.F., September 1988, AG-SRE III-4283-1.
624 Bendaña, previously cited interview with the author.
625 Interview with Alejandro Bendaña by James S. Sutterlin, 15.
Nonetheless, like previous steps toward demilitarization and democratization, the Sapoá Accords reinforced the international appetite for a negotiated settlement in Central America. For one, the Contadora and Support Group countries praised the Sapoá settlement and agreed to participate in its International Verification Commission.627 Meanwhile, the cease-fire drove a final nail in the coffin of U.S. aid to the Contra. In a sign that congressional support for Esquipulas strengthened after Sapoá, U.S. lawmakers approved a Contra aid package in late March which consisted exclusively of humanitarian assistance, medicine, and financial assistance for cease-fire monitoring.628 When the Reagan administration made another last-ditch attempt for lethal aid in August, the Democrat-controlled legislature once again declined.629 That summer, Secretary of State George Schultz travelled to Central America but failed to persuade governments to denounce Nicaragua’s alleged noncompliance with Esquipulas.630

Changing winds in Central America had frustrated U.S. policy goals in Central America. As the second Reagan term entered its twilight in mid-1988, a pessimistic CIA analysis attested to this fact:

…developments in recent months have considerably enhanced [the FSLN’s] chances of consolidating Marxist-Leninist rule. Their improved prospects result not only from the recent denial of continued US [sic] military assistance to the antigovernment insurgents, but also from their success in skillfully pursuing more flexible policies in dealing with their domestic opposition, the leaders of the other Central American nations, and international pressures and opinions.631

627 A joint statement by the Contadora countries, joined by several Western European democracies, declared their enthusiastic support for the cease-fire; Mexican Mission at the European Community to Mexican Foreign Ministry, Brussels, March 30, 1988, AG SRE 111-4282-1. In the following months, the Nicaraguan government would make persistent appeals to Contadora to help ensure their neighbors’ good-faith implementation of the various peace agreements; Letter from Daniel Ortega to the Presidents of Canada, Spain, West Germany and Contadora and Support Group countries, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, August 22, 1988, AG-SRE III-4283-1.


Thus, when Reagan’s Republican successor George H.W. Bush took office in January 1989, the incoming president did not continue the policy of all-out aggression. Instead, he aligned his administration with Congress on Central America policy, and appointed Bernard Aronson – a Democrat – to replace the hawkish Elliot Abrams as Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemispheric Affairs. Though Bush and Aronson broke with the previous administration by formally supporting Esquipulas, the U.S. government retained its skepticism of Sandinista intentions and openly criticized the possibility of the FSLN remaining in power via elections. U.S. foreign policy critics like sociologist William I. Robinson – also an advisor to the Sandinista Foreign Ministry in the 1980s – are right to point out that the demilitarization of U.S. policy in Central America formed part of a “more general shift in U.S. foreign policy, from supporting dictatorships and promoting authoritarianism in the post-World War Two era to promoting” a self-interested and selective notion of democracy. Nonetheless, in the Nicaraguan case, the White House apparently would have continued the older policy had circumstances permitted. Rather than a grand paradigm shift, the change towards democracy promotion in Nicaragua was an immediate consequence of the United States’ failure to direct events in Central America as it had intended.

In February 1989, a long-time player in revolutionary Nicaragua – Carlos Andrés Pérez – was sworn in for a second term as President of Venezuela. The erstwhile Sandinista co-conspirator took the occasion to echo calls made by ex-U.S. President Jimmy Carter for Ortega to make deeper democratic reforms. Other fellow travelers, such as the Spanish Socialist Party, still spoke of Nicaragua’s revolutionaries in a sympathetic register, but warned that their “support is not unrestricted; rather, it will be maintained if and when the Sandinistas continue

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632 In his interview with Jean Krasno of the United Nations, OAS Secretary General Baena Soares also cites the arrival of Eugene Einaldi as U.S. Ambassador before the OAS as marking a change in a U.S. policy which finally began favoring a negotiated solution.

giving signs of a real democratic opening.” As in 1979 and 1984, the Socialist International saw democratization in Nicaragua as the key to shielding that part of the world from the vicissitudes of the Cold War, because elections could help defuse local conflicts and remove the pretext for U.S. intervention in Central America.

Later that month, a fourth Central American summit, at the beach resort town of Costa del Sol (also known as Tesoro Beach) in El Salvador, saw key pieces fall into place for the actual implementation of the Esquipulas Accords. Nicaragua, all parties agreed, would hold elections no later than February 1990 – several months earlier than the date stipulated by the constitution. According to historian Michel Gobat, Nicaragua’s fairest contests to date were the 1928 and 1932 elections. However, in another example of the country’s complex, dependent relationship with the regional hegemon, both of those elections were supervised by occupying U.S. marines who were also overseeing the training and territorial expansion of Somoza’s National Guard. By contrast, the 1990 elections would be administered by Nicaragua’s own Supreme Electoral Council, which as part of the Costa del Sol accords adopted new regulations to ensure “political parties to organize and to be politically active in the broadest sense.” At all stages of the electoral process, international observers from the OAS, UN, and Carter Center (a non-governmental organization founded by ex-U.S. President Jimmy Carter devoted to democracy promotion) would verify its authenticity and fairness. This unprecedented level of monitoring was a sign of an expanding mandate for the OAS – which had deployed only token observation

634 The Spanish Socialist Party’s Director for International Relations, César Mogo, told the Mexican ambassador in Madrid that his government supported the FSLN but cautioned that “that support is not unrestricted; rather, it will be maintained if and when the Sandinistas continue giving signs of a real democratic opening.” “Memorandum para Información Superior,” Asunto: Posición del PSOE ante el Gobierno de Nicaragua, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Dirección General para Europa Occidental, México, D.F., AG-SRE III-4283-1.


missions in the past – and other multilateral organizations to pursue democracy in the region.\footnote{Baena Soares interview with Jean Krasno, 15. “Acuerdo entre el Gobierno de la República de Nicaragua y el Secretario General de la Organización de los Estados Americanos relativo a Privilegios e Inmunidades de los Observadores del Proceso Electoral Nicaragüense,” July 6, 1989, Washington D.C., AG-SRE III-4388-1.}

In exchange for Nicaragua’s decision to hold early elections, the Central American presidents agreed to draft a joint plan, supported by the UN, to finally demobilize Contra forces and peacefully repatriate those in Honduras back to Nicaragua.\footnote{To that end, the Nicaraguan government released yet another round of prisoners classified as political prisoners by the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights; EMBAMEX Managua to Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Asunto: Indulto a ex-guardias somocistas, AG III-4388-1.}

For the Sandinistas, the danger of being ousted by votes slowly replaced the threat of a military defeat. The party leadership had begrudgingly approved a democratizing settlement in order to stave off civil war and intervention; however, they also reasoned that they would fare well enough in free elections that they would stay in power as a result.\footnote{Vice Foreign Minister José León Talavera recalls that the FSLN believed that the elections were not ideal, but were an inevitability and a cost to be assumed. This pessimism, however, was tempered by “an overenthusiasm that everything was guaranteed. It was an error of political calculus, believing that the people would not manifest their opposition to the war or to the government.” Previously cited interview with the author. In his memoir, Ramírez recalls that some in the Sandinista leadership thought that the country’s troubles would dissipate with the war’s conclusion: “…we saw elections as the best way of achieving stability which would allow us, finally, to reconstruct the country. Signs of inconformity, resistance to conscription, the economic calamities – we thought these were all temporary situations which the end of the war would remedy”; Adios Muchachos, 272.}

In fact, U.S. officials disliked the electoral-based peace agreement because they too believed the FSLN would win in a free contest.\footnote{U.S. officials were found this outcome so probable that Assistant Secretary Aronson began negotiating post-transition normalization with Nicaraguan Vice Foreign Minister Tinoco well ahead of the elections; Leogrande, Our Own Backyard, 562; Tinoco, previously cited interview with the author.}

Indeed, polls in October 1989 pointed to a resounding FSLN victory. Just four months before the elections in February 1990, incumbent ticket Daniel Ortega and Sergio Ramírez enjoyed twice the support of candidates from the opposition Unidad Nacional Opositora (UNO), with the FSLN leading 36.5% to 18.1% in one survey. An unusual 41.8% of voters remained undecided, but Sandinista strategists assumed that the government’s favorable approval ratings (50.7% said the FSLN had “brought improvement to the country”) would translate into a
handsome share of that undecided vote. According to the same poll, 44.2% of Nicaraguans said that the opposition lacked credibility. Ortega would go up against former Junta colleague Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, who was only nominated by a divided opposition after a bitter internal struggle in August 1989. By contrast, at a massive FSLN convention in September, Ortega saw his platform of continued revolutionary gains confirmed by rapturous unanimity.

Therefore, though Chamorro enjoyed the sympathy of former FSLN allies abroad such as Carlos Andrés Pérez, with whom she met publicly while that convention took place, the Sandinistas had good reason to believe that their democratizing gamble had paid off.

Better yet, the Sandinistas’ opponents were upholding their sides of the bargain. At yet another Esquipulas summit in August 1989, Honduras and Nicaragua reached a bilateral agreement which saw the former disband remaining Contra camps in its territory.

Additionally, the National Dialogue produced a promise from the opposition UNO to demand all Contra demobilization by December. When Ortega made one last trip across the Atlantic in the summer of 1989, European countries promised to send aid after the peaceful celebration of the 1990 elections (Oscar Arias was still raising concerns about fair conditions), the outcome of which they swore to respect.
The Sandinistas’ main concern was that the Bush administration would not follow suit. Though Reagan’s successor formally supported Esquipulas, he refused to end support for the Contra (in violation of the agreement) and sent money through alternative channels such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Honduras should not fulfill the promise to dismantle Contra camps, the administration argued, because the U.S.-backed insurgents were the only guarantee that the Nicaraguan government would hold real elections in good faith.647

Helping matters was a tacit agreement between Washington and Moscow developed over the course of 1989. When Bush and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev held a summit in Malta in December of that year, their respective camps had already come up with a simple deal regarding Central America: the USSR would promise to stop sending weapons which Nicaragua could then provide to Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador; in exchange, the Bush administration would promise to recognize a Sandinista government if the FSLN won the elections in February.648 Some Bush administration officials later depicted this agreement as a rare case of superpower collaboration which “ended” the Cold War in Central America.649 If anything, something approaching the reverse occurred. Bernard Aronson later explained that the Bush administration saw the Central American crisis as an opportunity to pursue its policy goals with respect to the Soviet Union:

648 William Leogrande narrates this “Washington-Moscow Concordat” in Our Own Backyard, 558-59. See also Bernard Aronson’s first-hand account in his interview with the United Nations Oral History Project. Pastor comments on the Malta summit in Not Condemned to Repetition, 235: “In his memoirs, President Bush describes in some detail his conversations with Gorbachev on Central America. He wrote that he was convinced that Nicaragua was receiving Soviet arms and transferring them to the Salvadoran guerrillas. Gorbachev assured him that the Soviet Union was not responsible, and Bush believed him.”
649 Indeed, the same officials that took credit wrote: “Bush and Baker decided to test their theory by making Central America a key measure of the Soviets' supposed "new thinking" in foreign policy. In an early strategy memo to Baker, the newly named Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Bernard Aronson, wrote that Moscow must see "tangible signs that they will pay a high price in bilateral relations if they obstruct our Central American diplomacy, but also tangible benefits from cooperation.”; “Anger, Bluff – and Cooperation,” Time, June 4, 1990.
My first official trip as Assistant Secretary of State after I was confirmed, within days of my confirmation, was to Moscow to negotiate with the Soviets. And they very much supported our policy. What we said to them was that this was going to be the first test of Gorbachev’s new thinking in foreign policy and it would make a difference to this new administration if they cooperated in support of Esquipulas. We felt that was a position they could take without any loss of face in that it embraced [sic] because it very much supported their own regional aspirations.650

Having seen its intervention frustrated by the Sandinistas decision to “ politicize” their war via the Esquipulas agreement, the U.S. government turned its declining involvement in Central America into a factor in its normalization with the USSR.651 In any event, the Soviet Union had drastically reduced its material support for the Sandinistas already; as Robert Pastor notes, the conclusion of the Malta meeting “ was that neither superpower had much direct influence on events in Nicaragua.”652 In producing peace in Central America – as in generating armed conflict – the superpowers were one piece of a complex, interlocking dynamic.

For what it was worth, the Washington-Moscow concordat did not allay all Sandinista concerns. As Vice Foreign Minister Bendaña explained, the terms of the agreement were suboptimal for the FSLN, because the USSR assumed a concrete commitment – to send no further armaments to Nicaragua – in exchange for an intangible, “ vague understanding that Washington would live with whatever government came out of the election.”653 Nonetheless, with Bush’s verbal promise in hand, the socialist countries were better positioned to push the Sandinistas down the dangerous path of democratization. “ The Cubans,” Bendaña noted, were probably among the most moderate in terms of trying to push and induce the Sandinistas to accept, to make the compromises that were necessary, particularly with the advent of Perestroika when things were going to be… quite different. There was solidarity, but within the context of solidarity there was always this push for caution, and

652 Pastor, Not Condemned to Repetition, 235.
653 Interview with Alejandro Bendaña by James S. Sutterlin, 7.
the idea that one of the confidence-building measures was that the Cuban military should leave, for example.654

“The Soviets,” he added, “were even pushier in this regard.” In March 1989, FSLN National Director Henry “Modesto” Ruíz – a notably Russophile Sandinista leader who had studied at the USSR’s Patrice Lumumba University – met with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze in Moscow. Soviet news agencies reported after the encounter that “both sides expressed the conviction that the mechanism of negotiations, created by the Guatemala agreement, was at the present time the most effective means of bringing about a political settlement.”655 In October, Shevardnadze visited Managua and reiterated the Soviet policy of cutting military assistance to Nicaragua. In a public appearance, he also enthusiastically endorsed the moderate posture that the revolutionary government assumed in the context of the Central American Peace accords. “We have been greatly impressed,” he said in a speech, “with your government’s programs for economic stabilization, this is a realistic program,” referring to market-based reforms undertaken to combat hyperinflation. “Stability in the region,” he warned, “required the maintenance of a balance of forces, under which each Central American country should not keep more troops than its defense requires.” Finally, the FSLN should, he insisted, respect the outcome of elections.656 (Meanwhile, Yuri Pavlov – the USSR’s Vice Foreign Minister for Latin American Affairs – told the Mexican ambassador in Moscow that it was official Soviet policy, as part of its rapprochement with the United States, to support elections in Nicaragua and to urge the Sandinistas to cease assisting the FMLN’s military activities in El

654 Ibid., 24.
Salvador). Victor Hugo Tinoco, another Nicaraguan Vice Foreign Minister, said the Sandinistas received Shevardnadze’s message loud and clear: “I can tell you that when Shevardnadze came, he was clear: You have to negotiate. You have to find a negotiated exit because we will not be continuing [our involvement].”

Shevardnadze’s advice highlights how much revolutionary Nicaragua had changed in two years. As Sergio Ramírez writes in his memoir, Esquipulas changed the revolutionary process from without. The original FSLN programs did not envision amnesties, full press liberties for radical opponents, or competitive elections to determine who governed the country. Unsurprisingly, then, these policies were only adopted after a tortured internal process. A document prepared by the Sandinista Assembly for the FSLN National Directorate, titled “The Results of Esquipulas II,” laid bare the deep internal divisions exposed by these reforms. The party’s top cadres recognized that the Contra lost its financing from the U.S. congress as a result of the agreement. But for them, the price was too high. “Current geopolitical and internal conditions,” they concluded, “do not allow for continued revolutionary conquests…the concessions we have made via Esquipulas II and the talks with the Contra have put us in a straitjacket.” They also told the National Directorate that “the opening of press liberties has caused grave damage to revolutionary institutional life.” Worse still, “popular sectors in Central America seem to be satisfied with the concepts of “bourgeois democratization” contained in Arias’ Plan.” Summarizing their concerns, they wrote:

Esquipulas II was useful for us insofar as it allowed us to convince Oscar Arias of our desire to participate in a negotiated solution to the Central American conflict, with the intention of winning time and political space among European and Latin American democracies. Nonetheless, the situation has turned itself on us. Esquipulas II has created conditions which are contradictory to the consolidation of the revolutionary process and

658 Tinoco, previously cited interview with the author.
has set back the Central American revolutionary process by decades...No U.S. President will allow us to consolidate our historical project, nor spread it through the area.  

It is possible that these views were widely held in the FSLN leadership. After all, the liberalization of the late 1980s was at odds with the vision depicted in the *Documento de las 72 horas*. But, as Yuri Pavlov told the Mexican ambassador, the Sandinistas had little choice but to accept democratization. As Lankes notes in his analysis of the government’s market-based economic reforms in the late revolutionary period, “a recurring theme in Nicaragua’s political economy of the 1980s is the tension between the FSLN’s Marxist-Leninist ideology and the pragmatic compromises it made as it confronted Nicaraguan realities.” Like political pluralism and rapprochement with non-socialist countries, moderate economic policies were partly the result of Esquipulas, which Alejandro Martínez explains “opened up a window to the possibility for peace and, with that, there were greater possibilities to manage the economic affairs of the country in a decisive way... only when the new conditions of peace were being opened up by Esquipulas did the theme of the economy begin to acquire relevance.” Therefore, in 1988, Sandinista economists undertook a massive currency devaluation named “Operation Bertha,” loosened exchange rate policies, cut government spending, deregulated the economy, lifted wage and price controls and in general attempted the “liberalization of the economy.” These measures, Martínez adds, were not imposed by the International Monetary Fund, nor were they

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661 Martínez, *Sandinista Economics in Practice*, 69: “[Esquipulas] opened up a window to the possibility for peace and, with that, there were greater possibilities to manage the economic affairs of the country in a decisive way. With the Esquipulas Accords as a background, it was possible to have a more meaningful influence over the deteriorating economic situation, which, in my opinion, was as big a threat as the counterrevolution...The people’s goal of peace helped the leaders of the revolution become convinced that the economic crisis and inflation, in particular, were eroding the social base...I reiterate, only when the new conditions of peace were being opened up by Esquipulas did the theme of the economy begin to acquire relevance and, thanks to the work of Ruiz, the government had the new currency prepared.”
inspired by a particular economic theory or doctrine. “We had no alternative,” he wrote, given the hyperinflation that the country was experiencing. This dose of realism in economic policy was needed to shore up the government ahead of real elections.

Indeed, the revolutionary project had deviated. The changes inspired by Esquipulas were part of a wider dynamic at play throughout the decade, where the FSLN was caught between Leninist dreams and the realities at the local and regional levels. As the former gave way to the latter in the late 1980s, some Sandinistas would start wondering what the revolutionary balance sheet looked like. Looking back, Sergio Ramírez reflected:

The intimate conscience of socialism was defeated by reality. And so the tactical promises of political pluralism ended up being honored out of a need for survival. It was necessity which led to loyalty to those principles, which are not the ones that the Revolution wanted…Social justice could be achieved at the expense of democracy, not democracy at the expense of social justice. In the end, there was no social justice, but there was democracy…  

CONCLUSION

A much-changed revolutionary Nicaragua, in turn, changed Central America. Regardless of the policies it implemented, the Sandinista government was unacceptable to the key makers of U.S. anti-communist foreign policy. In this Cold War context, the FSLN’s staying power was notable in and of itself. Rather than destroying it, the diplomatic and military battles leading up to the Central American Peace Accords ultimately legitimized the Nicaraguan Revolution. As a byproduct, regional elites came to view political inclusion – for all actors, including those on the opposite side of the era’s ideological divide – as the only way of ending armed conflicts exacerbated by superpower involvement. Unusually for the regional hegemon, the United States

\[663\] Sergio Ramírez, previously cited interview with the author.
was forced to accommodate, rather than direct, these changes. Indeed, it could be no other way; though not the only factor, North American intervention was a primary driver of the carnage which produced the need for a new political order in the region. Central Americans of all ideological persuasions had alternatively seen armed revolutions and superpower interventions as solutions in the global struggle between capitalism and communism. After a bloody decade, they now saw those phenomena as nightmares intrinsic to the global Cold War. The Sandinista Revolution, itself a reaction to a history of U.S. interventions and a consequence of global socialism, was the unlikely catalyst which forced this reckoning in Central America.

While U.S. actions succeeded in constraining the Sandinistas redistributive project, the most transcendental element of North American policy in Central America was its failure. The Reagan administration’s goal of isolating and attempting to topple the Nicaraguan government was not achieved. Indeed, perceived U.S. meddling in the region helped give rise to the Revolution in the first place. As Chapter 1 analyzed, the 1979 triumph came about as a result of a collective security effort by Latin American leaders to shield the region from a North American interventionism which intensified during the Cold War. Of course, the Revolution’s early radicalism invited an uptick in U.S. involvement, but the Reagan offensive may have also been a factor in the Sandinistas’ consolidation. Mexican Foreign Ministry analysts, reporting on the state of the Contra in 1988, concluded:

> The United States supported Nicaragua’s counterrevolutionaries in a bid to establish a “democratic” regime which is compatible – politically and ideologically – with the other Central American governments and with U.S. hegemony. The economic assistance they provided to the counterrevolution has not achieved the desired objectives; on the contrary, the government in Managua has channeled the aggression to which it is subject towards its external and internal consolidation. This much is shown by the electoral process, the creation of a Constitution, and the various resolutions of international organizations.

As political scientist Kenneth Roberts has written, the “Latin American response” to U.S. intervention, “as manifested by Contadora and the Arias Treaty – was to engage in a form of collective action that was unprecedented in the Americas for both its level of multilateral cooperation and for its sustained challenge to the ‘hegemonic presumption’ of the United States.” This South-South engagement, as the final chapter explores, was a precursor to both post-Cold War multilateralism as well as the declining importance of the U.S. government relative to extra-regional powers on the American scene.

The United States’ inability to determine outcomes in Central America highlights the complex and dynamic nature of its relationship with Latin America, one not captured by binary notions of resistance and domination. In October 1989, U.S. President Bush referred to his Nicaraguan counterpart, Daniel Ortega, as a “little man” and “an unwanted animal at a garden party” after the Sandinista leader gave incendiary remarks at a summit in San José. Students of hemispheric relations will recognize such anthropomorphizing as a common manifestation of U.S. leaders’ superiority complex vis-à-vis Latin Americans dating back to the late 18th century.

The story of the Sandinista Revolution showed, however, how the traditional script could be flipped. Indeed, the story of the 1979 Revolution was one where Panamanian leader Omar Torrijos could envision the United States as a domesticated “monkey,” which despite its dangerous impulses could be subtly controlled by playing with the chain around its neck. In excluding Washington from the Esquipulas process, Central American leaders identified the United States as a problem for the region. But they did not simply wish away the Northern Colossus. As Luís Guillermo Solís explains:

The United States was never absent, and it couldn’t be absent because the hegemonic power can’t be absent. I have sometimes compared the presence of the United States in Central America in these times to that of an enormous elephant in your living room. You can try to put a curtain over it, you can pretend it’s not there, you can walk by and not look at it – but you know that it’s there.\textsuperscript{667}

The international history of the Sandinista Revolution demonstrates the margins within which Latin Americans navigate the realities of U.S. power in the Americas. Grasping the nuances of the relationship reveals the true importance of the Central American Peace Accords.

In particular, the Nicaraguan Revolution’s relationship to the Central American Peace Process helps explain why democratization emerged as the result of the region’s nightmarish 1980s. Recall that the United States opposed this peace process. Indeed, Esquipulas identified U.S. intervention as a threat and sought to minimize its impact. Neither the FSLN nor their anti-communist adversaries sought democracy as an objective in and of itself. Rather, if democracy meant that all actors – including the previously marginalized radical left – could participate in politics without resorting to armed violence, and if such a settlement would stave off foreign intervention, then democratic systems should be created. As OAS chief Baena Soares put it, the region’s leaders “said that the best way to help Central America was to help the reconstruction of Central America, not the destruction of Central America.”\textsuperscript{668} Put differently, the construction of liberal democracies was a rational response to several years of armed conflict fueled by foreign interventions and ideological struggles. It follows, then, that democratization was a historically specific response. The rise and consolidation of the Sandinista Revolution was mediated by wider changes in Latin America toward democratic regimes. In turn, Central Americans’ decision to democratize also boosted this trend and as well as the adoption of a supranational,

\textsuperscript{667} Previously cited interview with the author.
\textsuperscript{668} Baena Soares interview with Jean Krasno, 7.
shared value of democracy in the hemisphere. As this dissertation’s conclusion argues, this norm-building should also be understood as historically specific, not as a permanent, irreversible characteristic of Latin American politics.

Of course, these democratizing changes in Latin America – of which the Sandinista Revolution was an offspring but also an unwilling agent – were not set in stone in 1989. In the final months of the year, the twin challenges of the Cold War reared their head in Central America. El Salvador witnessed a terrible resurgence of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary violence. After Esquipulas, the country had made some progress toward peace. Exiled leftist politicians had returned to El Salvador and formed an electoral alliance called the Convergencia. These FMLN-allied civilian leaders participated in the March 1989 presidential elections, where they fared poorly against Duarte’s Christian Democrats and even worse against the far-right ARENA (Nationalist Republican Alliance), which won a decisive victory. High voter turnout in the election, which included many leftists who had previously been excluded, further de-legitimized the FMLN’s armed struggle. President-elect Alfredo Cristiani, despite his party’s links to the most intransigent sectors of the country’s military and economic elite, promised to negotiate peace with the guerrillas. Talks, however, stalled because the government proved unwilling to offer the type of major concessions made by the Sandinistas vis-à-vis the Contra. Therefore, seeking to improve their negotiating position while making one last go at seizing power, the FMLN launched a major urban offensive in November 1989. While they

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669 Jorge Domínguez and Marc Lindenberg point to four factors for democratization in Central America: “the necessity of force to begin democratization, a severe state of war and hardship that eventually provokes rational choices toward change, international pressure to induce democratization, and a profound economic crisis – help explain democratizing outcomes in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Panama but also set them apart from the main examples of democratic transitions in South America, southern and Eastern Europe, and south and East Asia.” Democratic Transitions in Central America, 11.

670 The Convergencia included Rubén Zamora, who recounts the era’s politics in “Democratic Transition or Modernization? The Case of El Salvador since 1979,” in Democratic Transitions in Central America, 165.

once again failed to spark a popular insurrection, the guerrillas did manage to temporarily seize large sectors of San Salvador, the capital city. Their success in this regard provoked a wave of censorship and indiscriminate government repression which culminated in death squads’ murder of several Catholic priests and intellectuals who ran the Universidad Centroamericana, a prestigious Jesuit university. The FMLN offensive, and the chaotic response it produced, proved that U.S.-backed armed forces were not positioned to win a military victory. In this way, as U.S. Secretary of State James Baker put it, the revolutionary putsch served as a “catalyst for negotiations.”

The Sandinistas also provided impetus for talks. At the final Esquipulas meeting in San Isidro de Coronado in Costa Rica, FSLN leader Daniel Ortega backed the legitimacy of ARENA President Cristiani and publicly announced his government’s disapproval of the failed FMLN offensive (Nicaragua had, in fact, privately provided weapons and other support). Earlier in the decade, the Sandinistas supported their Salvadoran comrades out of both sympathy and a desire to regionalize military conflict in order to heighten the cost of a potential U.S. intervention. Throughout the Central American Peace Process, the Nicaraguan government used its role in El Salvador as a bargaining chip and in 1989, the Sandinista government threw the FMLN under the bus in exchange for a formal declaration by Central American countries accusing the Contra of undermining Nicaragua’s electoral process and demanding it cease all military activities. Victor Hugo Tinoco describes support for the FMLN thusly: “At the

672 Leogrande, Our Own Backyard, 572.
674 Indeed, at one of the Esquipulas summit, Daniel Ortega recognized FMLN support as such. As Ramirez recalls in his memoir, “In one of those closed-door meetings, Daniel admitted to President Duarte that there was arms trafficking to the FMLN from Nicaragua; and precisely because that support existed, he said, it should be considered a factor in the negotiations.” Adiós Muchachos, 273. Ramirez notes that, despite the posture his government took at San Isidro de Coronado, the FSLN assisted the FMLN with its 1989 offensive. Humberto Ortega explains how the Sandinistas navigated their desire to help the Salvadorans with their need to comply with Esquipulas: “The FMLN, from the beginning of the Revolution, received vital support from the Sandinistas...At Coronado, the FMLN pressured the Sandinistas in order to keep using our territory, and asked for further armaments because they were
beginning there was a more romantic and revolutionary motive…but by the end, support for the Salvadoran revolution was in some way a bargaining chip for finding a way out of the war in Nicaragua.”675 As a consequence, the Nicaragua’s Sandinistas willingly participated in the death of the armed revolutionary ideal. But as the next chapter demonstrates, this concession paved the way for the Left’s prominence in the post-Cold War electoral era.

While the specter of civil war flickered and faded in El Salvador, the long-feared U.S. invasion finally happened – in Panama. The country’s military strongman, Manuel Noriega, was a veteran CIA informant who collaborated with the Agency’s operations in Nicaragua; in particular, he was implicated in the Contras’ efforts to raise funds by smuggling crack cocaine to the United States.676 By the late 1980s, as Michael Grow shows, Noriega’s criminal ties and repressive behavior in Panama made him a public relations liability for President Bush, who previously served as CIA Director. Domestic political considerations motivated Operation Just Cause, which saw U.S. military forces invade Panama and quickly capture Noriega in December 1989. Noriega had been condemned by all Latin American countries – the Contadora group expelled Panama in 1988 – except Cuba and, ironically given Panama’s links to the Contra, Nicaragua. Still, the region unanimously opposed the intervention, which raised fears that Esquipulas would collapse as a result. The Mexican novelist Carlos Fuente wrote:

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allegedly 60 days away from achieving victory. But we knew they were wrong and that we should not risk our nation any further by taking such a desperate step. Therefore, we decided with President Daniel Ortega, at San Isidro de Coronado, to find the only way out for the FSLN: negotiations with President Alfredo Cristiani in order to neutralize the Salvadoran far right and Salvadoran military, which were trying to sabotage the negotiated solution to the conflict.” La Odisea por Nicaragua, 170.

675 Tinoco, previously cited interview with the author.

676 The Contra’s ties to international drug trafficking, with CIA support, are described by journalist Gary Webb in Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion, (London: Seven Stories Press, 1995). Webb also stumbled upon the lesser-known history of the FSLN’s own collaboration with international drug traffickers, including Colombia’s Pablo Escobar. As part of his investigation, Webb also explores Noriega’s role in supporting the Contra. According to a Digital National Security Archive of correspondence between Oliver North and Deputy National Security Adviser John Poindexter, “North tells Poindexter that Noriega can assist with sabotage against the Sandinistas and suggests paying Noriega a million dollars - from funds raised from the sale of U.S. arms to Iran - for the Panamanian leader's help in destroying Nicaraguan economic installations.” White House, “Message from Oliver North to John Poindexter,” Digital National Security Archive, “Pattern of Deception, Personal Corruption, Deals with Narco-Traffickers Bueso and Noriega Highlighted in Declassified Documents,” May 16, 2018.
What happened in Panama must be alarming for Nicaragua and its dual process toward peace and democracy. If the elections in February do not see a victory for Washington’s official candidate, will Bush feel authorized to intervene in order to restore democracy? The war has not yet ended in El Salvador. Internal conflicts in Guatemala are becoming more visible and explosive by the day. Will the United States once again be the one who determines the future course of those countries?677

The Nicaraguan government responded by surrounding the U.S. embassy in Managua with tanks. The Sandinistas had long warned that this day would come. The FSLN leadership feared that an invasion of Nicaragua might be imminent. Nevertheless, reason prevailed, as Humberto Ortega explained, because the Sandinistas interpreted the Panama invasion as a “mortal trap” designed to provoke the Nicaraguan government into suspending the February elections.678 Therefore, like the FMLN offensive, the U.S. invasion of Panama failed to derail Central American governments’ desire to see Esquipulas through.

What did it mean for Central America to become “one of the Cold War’s last killing fields”?679 Throughout the decade, Central American leaders wrestled with the relative weight of internal and external factors in producing violence on the isthmus. The threat of direct U.S. intervention, and the fact of indirect U.S. intervention, were impossible to ignore. But they also learned they had a certain margin of action to end the violence. For the Sandinistas specifically, reckoning with Central America’s Cold War meant reaching a painful conclusion. Their country’s conflict reflected the global Cold War, but was also simply a war between brothers; both dimensions were intertwined. Victor Hugo Tinoco, who negotiated the peace with the Contra and helped implement the Esquipulas accords, sums up the link:

Looking at that period in retrospect, we must acknowledge that it was a civil war because large sectors of the Nicaraguan population aligned themselves with the two axes of the global struggle between East and West…Today we must accept that, just as the Counterrevolution enjoyed U.S. support, the Nicaraguan government enjoyed the

678 Humberto Ortega, La Odisea por Nicaragua, 170.
economic and military support of socialist countries. I believe there would have been a war anyway, but it reached the dimensions it did because Nicaragua saw itself trapped in the confrontation between East and West and within that confrontation, we Nicaraguans were divided, with some supporting the Revolution others against the Revolution. Yes; it was a civil war. Though for it no less cruel and destructive… They [the Contra] weren’t mercenaries, they were Nicaraguans like us, trapped in a conflict between two powers. We were all trapped in that global confrontation. And it’s no coincidence that the dismantling of the ideological, East-West conflict toward the end of the 1980s facilitated the dismantling of the wars in Central America and Nicaragua.680

The dismantling of the wars in Central America still depended on the successful execution of the February 1990 elections. That contest would become a referendum on the successes and failures of the Revolution, but also on the wider changes it was driving in the region as a whole.

680 See Tinoco’s analysis of 1980s U.S.-Nicaraguan relations in “La decision de Ortega de convertir en farsa las elecciones augura conflictos, gane Clinton o gane Trump,” Envío, no. 413, August 2016.
Chapter Five

The Fall of the Revolution and Latin America at the End of the Cold War
February 21, 1990 marked the 56th anniversary of Augusto César Sandino’s assassination. This was the date that the Sandinista Front chose to celebrate the end of that year’s electoral campaign. In many ways, it was a fitting choice. For decades, the allusion to Nicaragua’s patriot hero was a source of strength for the country’s armed Left. Sandino’s nationalism and ambiguous economic ideology softened the FSLN’s Marxist edge. Moreover, his record of righteous opposition to foreign interference legitimized the latter-day Sandinistas’ anti-imperialist vocation. When presidential ticket Daniel Ortega and Sergio Ramírez addressed supporters at the Plaza de la Revolución which straddles Managua’s Lake Xolotlán, they doubled down on this legacy. Thousands cheered to the tune of El Gallo Ennavajado, the campaign song which likened Ortega to a fighting gamecock strapped with razorblades. The combative anthem filled another, surprising silence; against indications they gave previously, the Sandinista candidates did not promise to suspend their government’s unpopular military draft. Defiant branding and policy choices sent a clear message: revolutionary gains had been won at great expense, and future confrontation may be necessary to consolidate those achievements.

Evidently, the Sandinistas understood that the elections to be held a few days later would be a referendum on the Revolution. But the stakes were even higher: hanging in the balance was Central America’s democratic transition as well as the general direction of post-Cold War Latin American politics.

In the run-up, most observers expected the Sandinistas to win handily. In order to ensure a free and fair outcome, something practically never seen in Nicaragua, at least 2,500 international observers arrived – roughly 1 for every 600 persons who cast a vote. These monitors worried that if the FSLN tampered with the electoral process in any way, its eventual

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victory and mandate would lack legitimacy. Implicitly taking the incumbent’s victory for granted, Jimmy Carter shared his concerns with Daniel Ortega a month ahead of the elections:

There can be no doubt that, contrary to prior expectations, your government has evinced a constructive disposition by signing the political agreement with opposition forces in August, and by correcting some of the gravest errors such as allowing the return of Miskito Indian leaders and preventing violence at protests. I and other observers have tried to give you full credit for these achievements. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the international community, you are in danger of losing the good will and future support which is so necessary for the political, economic, and social reconstruction of your country.

The former U.S. president cited reports from the OAS mission that government agencies and supporters were intimidating electoral observers registered by the opposition UNO alliance. Echoing criticism from the Cardinal Miguel Obando, Carter lamented any FSLN efforts to dissuade opposition sympathizers from heading to the polls.682

In the end, the Carter Center and other monitors would certify the 1990 elections as having been free and fair. The Sandinista Front would have risked everything by rigging the elections and, in any event, felt little need to do so. The U.S. invasion of Panama in December, which raised the specter of further armed conflict in Nicaragua, momentarily depressed Ortega and Ramírez’s ratings. The dip was short-lived, however. Just days before the elections, a Washington Post/ABC poll gave the Sandinistas a 16-point lead over Violeta Barrios de Chamorro and her running-mate, Virgilio Godoy.683 When a Mexican journalist asked EPS intelligence chief Hugo Torres if he thought his party would win the elections, he burst into laughter and responded that the real question was not if, but by how much the Sandinistas would win.684 FSLN leaders worried that only a huge margin would ensure the international legitimacy

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683 Other polls gave the FSLN a much wider margin of victory. For example, a Univision poll in January pointed to an 18-point victory. Some national polls suggested margins of greater than 30 points. See “After the Poll Wars – Explaining the Upset,” Envío no. 104, March 1990.
684 Hugo Torres Jiménez, previously cited interview with the author.
necessary to permanently end Nicaragua’s civil war. Specifically, they hoped to maximize the odds that an electoral victory would produce normalization with the government of the United States, which had refused a commitment to lift sanctions in the event of a clean FSLN win. On the afternoon of election day – February 25, 1990 – Daniel Ortega, in a gesture of good will, formally invited U.S. President George H.W. Bush to attend his inauguration.685

As day turned to night, however, Ortega must have worried that the call had been premature. Comandante Henry ‘Modesto’ Ruíz thought it strange that at 8 PM, the celebrations had not yet begun. That was when he, along with the rest of the FSLN high command, was called to Army Chief Humberto Ortega’s office at the Loma de Tiscapa, the former bunker and residence of Nicaragua’s previous ruler, Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Both their internal pollsters and a representative from the Carter Center had informed Sergio Ramírez that they were losing in certain Sandinista strongholds. The national picture was correspondingly bleak. When Daniel Ortega received the nervous phone call from his running-mate, the first thing he said was, “You sound worried, Doctor.” To which Ramírez curtly replied, “It would be better if you came right away.”686

It would only take the National Directorate a few hours to officially recognize their defeat. At first, some Sandinistas struggled to accept the results. Minister of Culture Ernesto Cardenal recalled having a “dark night. The worst in my life, I think. Laying in my hammock, I struggled to understand God’s will.”687 Additionally, army officials worried that demobilizing Contra columns, emboldened by the FSLN’s electoral defeat and the desertions it would soon suffer, would make a run at seizing power. UNO’s margin of victory, however, left little room for equivocation; Violeta Chamorro had picked up virtually the entirety of the undecided vote,

686 Sergio Ramírez, Adiós Muchachos, 198.
687 Ernesto Cardenal, La Revolución Perdida, xx.
defeating the incumbent 55% to 41%. Ortega privately conceded defeat in the middle of the night and made the concession public by sunrise the next day. Voluntarily handing over power to a U.S.-backed candidate – from Nicaragua’s traditional political class – was never on the Revolution’s to-do list. But once again, external promises of liberalism won out over internally-held socialist goals. Reflecting on the elections in his memoir, Ramírez wrote: “Despite everything that the uses of power had taught us, electoral fraud was not among our lessons learned. It had not occurred to anyone to distort the results, nor to refuse to acknowledge them. The consensus was to accept defeat and to immediately begin preparing the transition in an orderly manner. The tactical game turned into a fair game.”

The Revolution was over. The most immediate consequence of Chamorro’s victory, as Alain Rouquié put it, was that it “liberated the isthmus from the specter of North American intervention.” George H.W. Bush, who enjoyed a good personal relationship with a candidate who he supported via the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), promised to ask Congress for reconstruction aid. Inside Nicaragua, the transfer of power was accompanied by full disarmament. A transition protocol saw Contra commanders bury their weapons in a symbolic gesture, while the Sandinista Popular Army – under the renewed leadership of Humberto Ortega – re-organized as a downsized Nicaraguan Armed Forces, the first truly non-partisan, non-praetorian military in the country’s history. While the Chamorro administration soon reduced the size of the state bureaucracy and

688 Sergio Ramírez, Adiós Muchachos, 199. Emphasis added.
689 Alain Rouquié, Guerras y paz en América Central, 311.
690 President Bush did not send senior administration officials to visit Chamorro’s campaign out of the fear that FSLN propagandists would use such a visit against the opposition. In a meeting at the Oval Office on November 8, 1989, Bush said: “We obviously want you to win, but we don’t want to smother you with a U.S. embrace. We want to give you whatever support you think would help. I don’t know whether it would help for us to visit or not. We could have government or sports figures visit, but this could be used against you.” Memorandum of Conversation, “Meeting with Nicaraguan Presidential Candidate Violeta Chamorro,” November 8, 1990, Washington D.C., George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, “Memcons and Telecons.”
reversed many revolutionary social policies, it also agreed to respect many land titles acquired by Nicaraguans as a result of the agrarian reform and other redistributive policies. These compromises created the foundation for a remarkably smooth transition after a decade of civil war. But they also destroyed the loose anti-Sandinista coalition that propelled Chamorro to power. Right-wing hardliners, including her own vice president, soon broke with her administration. They accused the President of “co-governing” with the Sandinista Front which, having lost formal power, promised to “rule from below” by mobilizing its followers against the structural adjustment policies of the 1990s.”

For the Revolution’s legacy, two aspects of Chamorro’s successful candidacy stand out. For one, she was a member of the original Junta of National Reconstruction. Rather than being defeated by an anti-Sandinista hardliner, they succumbed to a politician who had co-sponsored the Revolution’s 1979 platform and helped implement many of its items. Second, the FSLN’s all-male platform, backed by the all-male National Directorate, was defeated by a woman. The image of the bladed gamecock, and of Ortega dressed in olive green military garb, contrasted poorly with Violeta Chamorro’s branding as a white-clad, motherly figure of national reconciliation. Nicaraguan historian Margarita Vannini calls the fighting gamecock “a concentrated expression of machista violence.” The latent misogyny of the 1990 campaign accented the Sandinistas’ deficiencies in the realm of gender equality. The Nicaraguan Revolution stood out, in part, because it promised to create not just Che Guevara’s “new man,”

692 Antonio Lacayo Oyanguren, who served as Chamorro’s campaign manager and head of cabinet, narrates the political challenges of building the transition in La Difícil Transición Nicaraguense: En el gobierno con doña Violeta, (Managua: Fundación UNO, 2005).
694 Sergio Ramírez, Adiós Muchachos, 198: “The truth was that, in the end, almost all of the undecided voters cast their ballots against us, not based on value judgments about the candidates, but on the sole factor of which of the two would be capable of putting an end to the war: either Violeta dressed in white or Daniel in the image of a fighting gamecock.”
but the “new woman” as well. Indeed, a significant portion of insurrectionary combatants were women – three earned the rank of *Comandante Guerrillera*.\(^6^{96}\) Countless others filled cabinet positions and other key political roles. Sofia Montenegro, a Nicaraguan feminist and FSLN militant, summarized the implications of women’s leadership in the Sandinista Revolution: “I believe that in the case of Latin America, and particularly in our own case, the women’s movement must combine the struggle for gender emancipation with that of national liberation. Neither can be subordinated; rather, each must be included within the other. There is no contradiction between anti-imperialism and equality.”\(^6^{97}\)

But after Somoza’s overthrow, feminist Sandinistas found that their military exploits and sacrifice did not translate into the corresponding share of political power, and that socialism did not easily undo the country’s traditionally patriarchal culture. Gioconda Belli recalls that “[In the insurrection] participation by women was widely accepted. Once the revolution triumphed, as it happened in Algeria and in many other revolutions, they tried to marginalize women.”\(^6^{98}\) Her memoir, like that of *Comandante Guerrillera* Leticia Herrera, is replete with accounts of sexism and sexual harassment in the Sandinista upper echelon.\(^6^{99}\) Though the Revolution did expand

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\(^6^{97}\) Montenegro’s comments provide the opening epigraph for *Sandino’s Daughters*, journalist Margaret Randall’s book on the experiences of women leaders in the Revolution. In a second edition written after the electoral defeat, titled *Sandino’s Daughters Revisited*, Randall points to the Sandinistas’ failure to confront the women’s agenda as a major failure, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994). Despite the marginalization of the feminist agenda, political scientist Ilja Luciak argues that former guerrilla women played a crucial role in determining outcomes for democratic transitions in Central American countries in *After the Revolution: Gender and Democracy in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

\(^6^{98}\) Gioconda Belli, previously cited interview with the author. Curiously, Belli sees this *machismo* as having manifested itself in the realm of foreign policy: “I see *machismo* and arrogance in the way in which we confronted the United States – that defiant stance, which was also very attractive to the outside world. Of course, it was a such a small country, thumping its nose at the United States; I’m sure many people enjoyed that. Because we didn’t mince words. And the Nicaraguan people themselves enjoyed it but, at the same time, it was a very costly thrill.”

\(^6^{99}\) Leticia Herrera, Alberto González Casado, María Antonia Sabater Montserrat, Maria Pau Trayner Villanova, *Guerrillera, Mujer, y Comandante de la Revolución Sandinista: memorias de Leticia Herrera*, (Barcelona: Icaria, 2013).
women’s reproductive rights and legalized the unilateral right to divorce, its all-male leadership failed to see how its conventionally macho branding might contribute to its downfall.

The Revolution’s feminist shortcomings were just one element in a long debate over the reasons behind the FSLN’s defeat. Some scholars have emphasized the threat of continued intervention by the United States, with Thomas Wright suggesting that the Reagan administration had brought down the FSLN “just as surely as if the U.S. Marines had invaded or the CIA had orchestrated a coup.” Sandinista analysts certainly saw truth in this sort of statement, but painted a more nuanced picture of their party’s downfall. A rapid post-mortem by the FSLN-affiliated Instituto para el Desarrollo y la Democracia (IPADE), based on surveys of voters, insisted that no single variable could explain Chamorro’s victory. Instead, they pointed to a mix of external and internal factors. U.S. aggression after 1981, which enjoyed the support of Central American countries, “conspired against the unfolding of the revolutionary project.” At the same time, however, “the implementation of said project – of justifiably anti-capitalist vocation – generated social contradictions.” IPADE’s analysts listed a long series of errors: price controls which led to shortages and unpopular rationing, confrontation with Christian institutions, abuses committed by government officials and security forces against the peasantry in particular, ignorance of the reality and demands of Nicaragua’s indigenous groups, vertical and military discipline within the FSLN, and failure to communicate effectively with popular sectors not formally organized within the party structure.

In a public autopsy report published just a few months after the elections, the FSLN offered a clear-eyed analysis of what went wrong internally: “The model that we began to execute, of socialist orientation, clashed in practice with the program of reconstruction and national unity that allowed for the toppling of the Somocista dictatorship.” Despite this

remarkable self-criticism, the FSLN document would maintain that U.S. hostility was the “main factor of erosion and desgaste of our revolutionary project.”\textsuperscript{702} As the Epilogue explores, the relative weight of external and internal factors, and in general the debate on the reasons for the Sandinistas’ ultimate failure, would haunt the party and Nicaraguan policies writ large throughout its incipient democratic transition.

The Revolution left a bizarre balance sheet. Writing nearly a decade later, the defeated vice-presidential candidate Sergio Ramírez reflected on its legacy:

The revolution did not bring justice for the oppressed as had been hoped; nor did it manage to create wealth and development. Instead, its greatest benefit was democracy, sealed in 1990 with the acknowledgement of electoral defeat. As a paradox of history this is its most obvious legacy, although it was not its most passionate objective.\textsuperscript{703}

This concluding chapter argues that this paradox played out regionally. From the beginning of its sudden ascension, the Sandinista Revolution captured both the fears and hopes of Latin Americans in the Cold War era. The twists and turns of Nicaragua’s revolutionary process accompanied diplomatic battles and military conflicts which ultimately produced a post-Cold War landscape filled with civilian, democratic regimes. In the process, U.S. unilateralism suffered a setback as multilateralism and integration advanced, foreshadowing the demise of the unipolar world order supposedly being consolidated following the Soviet Union’s disintegration. In Central America specifically, the triumph of the armed Left in Nicaragua helped seal the fate of military-dominated authoritarian regimes in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras; as a result of the rise and fall of the Sandinista Revolution, those countries wound up transitioning to fully competitive plural systems for the first time in their histories. The Sandinistas were, therefore, an

\textsuperscript{702} Instituto para el Desarrollo y la Democracia, “Por qué perdió el FSLN las elecciones?” Managua, August 21, 1990. Emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{703} Ramírez, Adiós Muchachos, 4.
unlikely engine of Latin America’s democratic transition. The revolution they helped bring about at the regional level was the Sandinistas’ most important legacy.

A LATIN AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Sympathetic North American scholars cast the FSLN’s electoral loss as a tragic defeat for progressivism at hands of their country’s government. One influential U.S.-based Latin Americanist, in listing the Sandinistas’ defeat alongside the slow death of the Cuban Revolution and the rapid market liberalization of the region’s economies, bemoaned the unraveling of “many of our most important and inspirational historical narratives” and solemnly declared that it was “not an easy time for scholars who work on Latin America.” 704 This perspective, centered on the importance that the Revolution acquired for Western intellectuals, is incomplete for two reasons. First, the rise, consolidation, and even fall of the Revolution was actually the result of an unprecedented exercise in Latin American autonomy and a rare defiance of U.S. hegemony in the hemisphere. Second, the defeatist perspective obscures democratizing changes in Latin American politics consolidated by the Sandinista Revolution and its peaceful transfer of power.

Consider that the FSLN left power on terms unacceptable to 1980s U.S. foreign policy. As Alejandro Bendaña put it, “we lost the elections, but not the war. Although the revolution may have failed in other ways…its symbolism survived and the Sandinista Front remained as a political force.” 705 To be sure, Nicaraguans’ voting behavior in 1990 was conditioned by the military and economic consequences of U.S. intervention. According to IPADE, 100% of

705 Alejandro Bendaña, previously cited interview with the author.
Nicaraguans they surveyed cited UNO’s promise to end compulsory military service as the most attractive item on its agenda. As Ramírez explains, “in the end, almost all of the undecided voters cast their ballots against us, not based on value judgments about the candidates, but on the sole factor of which of the two would be capable of putting an end to the war: either Violeta dressed in white or Daniel in the image of a fighting gamecock.” In that context, Bendaña notes that it is actually remarkable that 41% of Nicaraguans believed so sincerely in the promise of the Revolution that they estimated the risk of further war and intervention to be worthwhile.

Chapter Three argued that one of the main problems posed by the Sandinista Revolution was that of the legitimacy of governments whose political system and ideology clashed with U.S. preferences; by leaving power via democratic elections, rather than being militarily removed, the FSLN won a surprising – if bittersweet – victory on that front.

The rise and fall of the Sandinistas also entailed a re-ordering of international relations in the hemisphere. Ramírez, recalling the scores of North Americans and Europeans who came to Nicaragua to staff schools, build hospitals, and cut coffee – a wave of solidarity comparable only to the one engendered by the Spanish Republic in the 1930s – is right to say that the “Sandinista Revolution altered the structure of international relations during the cold war.”

A foreign policy which cultivated the sympathy wrought from the FSLN’s novel revolutionary agenda was one of the Sandinistas’ greatest successes, because it mobilized Western public opinion against U.S. intervention. As a burgeoning literature demonstrates, this engagement also shaped the North American and European societies from which solidarity activists hailed.

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706 Ramírez, Adiós Muchachos, 197.
707 Bendaña, previously cited interview with the author. See also Alejandro Bendaña, “David resitió a Goliat: 10 años de política exterior,” Envío, no. 95, 1989.
708 Ramírez, Adiós Muchachos, 2.
Nevertheless, the most significant changes in Latin America took place at the level of state-to-state relations. In 1962, Fidel Castro denounced the Organization of American States (OAS) as the “Yankee Ministry of Colonies.” The multilateral institution had been created by postwar U.S. policymakers in 1948 to prevent Soviet meddling in the hemisphere and, when necessary, to provide Washington’s Cold Warriors with a veneer of regional backing for interventions in countries like Guatemala (1954) and the Dominican Republic (1965). By the 1979 Sandinista Revolution, however, Latin American countries – including Castro’s Cuba, despite having been suspended from the grouping – turned the OAS into a forum for regional organizing against U.S. intervention and U.S.-backed dictatorships. Specifically, the Carter administration was forced to minimize its support for the Somoza regime – and saw its other alternatives frustrated – by a pan-ideological, intra-Latin American alliance. As Gerardo Sánchez Nateras recently wrote, that novel South-South coalition presaged the multilateralism which characterized regional affairs in the 1990s and 2000s.

Once in power, the Sandinistas accelerated these trends towards multilateralism and integration. The revolutionary upheaval and various proxy interventions unleashed by the Revolution created the need for constant consultation and dialogue between states. The 1983 Contadora group (Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela), expanded in 1985 with the creation of its Support Group (Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and Uruguay), and culminated in the late-

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710 Along with the OAS, the U.S. promulgated the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, also known as the Rio Treaty, which bound the hemisphere’s countries to a mutual defense arrangement which in practice enabled U.S. pursuit of regime change in the region.

1980s with the Rio Group, the first pan-Latin American alternative to the Pan-American institutions led mostly by the U.S. dating back to the Independence era. In 2011, the Rio Group would be succeeded by another regional bloc, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), a grouping explicitly championed by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez to reduce U.S. influence in the region.\textsuperscript{712} In Central America specifically, the Sandinista Revolution did more to integrate its countries than the U.S.-led Central American Common Market of the 1960s; the regular high-level meetings from Esquipulas gave way to the founding in 1991 of the Central America Integration System (SICA), another supranational union which facilitated migratory integration between several of its countries and helped create a Central American Parliament (PARLACEN). The Spanish diplomat Manuel Montobbio aptly summarizes the upshot of the international changes caused by the Central American crisis (Europeans, who had suddenly found themselves at odds with their Cold War ally, were especially attuned to these changes): the Reagan Offensive’s defeat in Central America saw the U.S. “lose its monopoly as the sole relevant international actor on the Latin American scene (if not its quality as decisive and indispensable actor in any situation).”\textsuperscript{713}

Latin America’s Sandinista Decade also foreshadowed the multipolarity we observe in international politics more generally in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. One of the Revolution’s interesting byproducts, for example, was its boosting of global multilateral institutions. Much like the Algerian revolutionaries who used the United Nations to win legal and political rights previously reserved for recognized states, Nicaragua’s revolutionary government perfected the use of global institutions like the UN as a means for small states to make claims against larger ones. Those efforts climaxed in the International Court of Justice’s ruling that the U.S. must pay Nicaragua

\textsuperscript{712} With a similar purpose, twelve South American countries formed the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) in 2008.
reparations for illegal acts of war taken as part of the CIA’s overt and covert operations against the Sandinista regime.\textsuperscript{714} Additionally, the prevalence of UN electoral monitoring and peacekeeping in conflict zones in the post-Cold War era was due in part to those institutions’ relative success in Central America. U.S. policymakers, dizzy with their perceived Cold War victory, widely saw these institutions as part of a Washington-led, “rules-based” order of international affairs characterized by multipolarity within an essentially unipolar world.\textsuperscript{715} But by the mid 2000s, and increasingly today, it has become clear that the unipolar moment was a transition period which preceded the creation of what Brazilian political scientist Oliver Stuenkel calls the “Post-Western World.” As Stuenkel notes, European and American analysts failed to realize “transition from empire [of either the European or Cold War variety] to multilateral order were not Western-led processes but products of intense bargaining between Western and non-Western actors.”\textsuperscript{716} The Sandinista moment – whether it was the 1979 insurrection or the late 1980s peace processes – is a perfect example: the use of multilateral institutions previously seen as instruments of North American meddling emerged \textit{in response} to U.S. unilaterализm.

Relatedly, an underappreciated trend in 1980s Latin America was the renewed importance of extra-hemispheric actors. In the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, the United States developed the capacity to actually enforce the Monroe Doctrine, which stated Washington’s opposition to European (or, implicitly, any non-American) efforts to colonize Latin America or otherwise pursue regime change in the Western hemisphere. Reagan administration officials saw Western European support for the FMLN and FSLN as an unacceptable violation of that doctrine.\textsuperscript{717} Though the U.S. successfully reversed Soviet attempts to influence regional politics,

\textsuperscript{717} See RAND analysis cited in Chapter 2.
the globalization of Latin American politics seen in the late-Cold War – which saw the region
cUGHT up in far-flung battles like the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Sino-Soviet split – persisted
into the 1990s. As of this writing, the People’s Republic of China – which, at the behest of
U.S. officials, had involved itself in the Nicaraguan Civil War by sending weapons to the Contra
– is Latin America’s second largest trading partner. The United States, for better or worse, has
less ability or willingness today to react to such extra-hemispheric presence.

The transnationalization of local affairs seen during the Central American crisis also had
a distinct effect on regional politics. One example is ethnic-based movements. Since
Independence, racial and ethnic cleavages have driven paradigm shifts in regional politics,
mediating waves of liberalism, revolution, and reaction. Yet until the post-Cold War period,
direct ethnic mobilization in Latin America politics was rare compared to labor- or class-based
mobilization. Political scientist Deborah Yashar explains how changing citizenship regimes in
the late-20th century had the unintentional consequence of politicizing ethnic cleavages; to
explain why this produced powerful indigenous electoral movements in some countries
(Ecuador, Bolivia) but not others (Guatemala, Mexico), Yashar points to the importance of
transnational networks in providing the mechanisms, capacity, and resources necessary for
sustained legal organizing. The paradox of Nicaragua’s importance in the 1980s was
particularly acute with regards to its Caribbean Coast, which was a marginalized region within a
small country within a peripheral region. The internationalization of the Nicaraguan Revolution
allowed Afro- and Afro-indigenous leaders to exploit new opportunities – such as forging an

718 One surprising revelation of the Iran-Contra testimonies was that the People’s Republic of China provided
surface-to-air missiles to the Contra upon Oliver North’s request; see Mateo Jarquin, “Las dos caras de China en
719 Contesting Citizenship in Latin America: The Rise of Indigenous Movements and the Postliberal Challenge,
(Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005). For historical background on the politics of Miskito Indians in
Nicaragua, see Charles Hale, Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894-1987,
alliance with the American Indian Movement, which enjoyed the unlikely support of the Reagan administration – to press ethnic-based political demands. Their success in attaining the Nicaraguan government’s recognition of the country’s pluri-ethnic and pluri-national character foreshadowed similar constitutional milestones in Bolivia and Ecuador.

Most importantly, the re-ordering inspired by the Nicaraguan Revolution helped shape a distinctly liberal-democratic order in post-Cold War Latin America. The way this came about was curious: the Sandinistas, hoping to preserve Nicaraguan sovereignty in the face of U.S. intervention, signed a peace agreement which subordinated questions of sovereignty to borderless values of human rights and democracy. The emergence of this new norm-building, which came about in response to United States aggression (and the sidelining of the United States by which it came about), defined the 1990s. With more countries than ever consolidated as democracies, governments began multilaterally intervening to counter or prevent coups in Peru, Guatemala, and Paraguay. Whereas the U.S. had used democracy promotion to justify unilateral interventions in Latin America, this shift in norms and values saw the Monroe Doctrine – as one political scientist put it in 1999 – “transformed into a multilateral instrument though, interestingly, not repealed. The key difference is that, as the 20th century ends, nearly all the countries of the Americas believe in their collective right to intervene in the domestic affairs of any American state where democracy is threatened.”

This process culminated in 2001 with the signing of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, designed to give the inter-American community wide latitude to intervene in countries’ affairs following the authoritarian

consolidation and human rights abuses of Alberto Fujimori, Peru’s democratically-elected
president. Specifically, the charter formalized a resolution made at the 2001 Summit of the
Americas in Quebec, which established that “any unconstitutional alteration or interruption of
the democratic order in a member state” constitutes grounds for collective action.\(^{723}\) This clause,
which subordinated member state sovereignty to shared international values of representative
democracy, was formally invoked for the first time a year later, when Latin American countries
unanimously condemned an abortive coup – which had received the tacit support of the United
States – against Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Latin America’s reaction to the 2002
attempted coup in Venezuela highlights a theme illustrated throughout this dissertation: moments
of multilateralism, integration, and democratic norm-building often came in reaction to U.S.
policies which cut against regional and national autonomy.\(^{724}\) The late-Cold War, which
intensified U.S. interventionism in Latin America as ideological divides were beginning to lose
salience, created conditions which were particularly conducive to this dynamic.

“BORN IN BLOODSHED”

Nowhere was this democratizing effect more evident than in Central America. Sergio
Ramírez maintains that the Sandinista Front has cause to celebrate two truly great moments in its
history: when it won power, and when it peacefully gave it up.\(^{725}\) In 1990, the Sandinistas

\(^{723}\) General Assembly of the Organization of American States, “Inter-American Democratic Charter,” Lima,

\(^{724}\) Historian John Coatsworth notes this dynamic in his summary of the Cold War in Central America: “The Cold
War provided a convenient rationale for enlarging and institutionalizing preexisting US efforts to impose its
ideological and policy preferences on other states. As the United States insisted on greater conformity, however,
opposition to its influence often intensified.” See, “The Cold War in Central America, 1975-1991,” in The
Cambridge History of the Cold War, eds. Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, (London, UK: Cambridge
University Press, 2010), 203.

\(^{725}\) Ramírez, previously cited interview with the author.
became the first Third World revolutionary government, which after having come to power by armed means, exited power via competitive elections. This fact sealed Nicaragua’s incipient democratic transition but also that of its Central American neighbors. As Victor Hugo Tinoco recently put it, “By the end of the 1980s we found ourselves in a situation where nearly all of Latin America’s military dictatorships were disappearing. This was one of the byproducts of the Nicaraguan Revolution, of the crisis it provoked and of the neo-conservative reaction.”

Indeed, Nicaraguans’ general consensus around the necessity of the armed struggle – and its eventual triumph in 1979 – set in motion a decade of polarization and, eventually, democratization. Once the Sandinista government fulfilled its promises to the Esquipulas process, the corresponding dominoes also fell in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The Central American Peace Accords were designed to mitigate the violent consequences of ideological polarization and foreign intervention, particularly from the United States. Democracy, in other words, was “born in bloodshed”; this phrase borrowed from the historian James Kloppenberg, who has written that democratic ethics of reciprocity emerged in early modern Europe in response to the religious wars of the Protestant Reformation. This bloody basis for democratization highlights the indispensable role of the armed Left as well as the successes – and limitations – of liberal-democratic transitions in isthmus.

Was democratization the Sandinista plan all along? Critics of U.S. intervention were right to push back against Washington’s line that the Sandinistas’ Marxism-Leninism made them irredeemably undemocratic. Though Leninist in structure, there was a certain democratization of access to politics; as the late conservative intellectual Emilio Alvarez Montalván conceded,

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726 *Envío*, interview with Victor Hugo Tinoco, August 2016.
perhaps the Sandinista Revolution’s most transformational accomplishment domestically was the introduction, for the first time in Nicaraguan history, of a “sensibility toward the poor” in national political discourse. Nonetheless, there is no evidence to suggest that absent U.S. intervention, the FSLN was committed to competitive democratic elections and plural party politics. The 1969 Programa Histórico – written over a decade before taking power and confronting the Reagan administration – spoke of an “authentic democracy” but did not mention even in passing the possibility of free elections. FSLN founders envisioned before-the-fact that military conscription service would be a permanent feature of their revolutionary government. As the earliest programs demonstrate, the Sandinistas – who were born under a cruel dictatorship which legitimized itself via a sham republicanism – saw representative democratic institutions as a farce which served only bourgeois interests and those of the United States. The Sandinistas went to the mountains – inspired by Sandino and Guevara in equal measure – in order to correct their country’s injustices, not to bring about a liberal-democratic regime.

“The great paradox,” Sergio Ramírez observed, “was that in the end, Sandinismo left a legacy that it had not intended: democracy. It was not able to leave what it had proposed: an end to backwardness, poverty, and marginalization.” Some of the most critical Sandinistas look back on this paradox and explain it as a historical accident: the circumstances of war and frustrated social transformation forced the democratizing outcome. Others, such as Jaime Wheelock, suggest that the promise of representative institutions was a tactical one in the early years, but became sincerely held as their necessity became more evident towards the end of the

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729 Paraphrased by Sergio Ramírez in Adios Muchachos, p. 225.
731 Sergio Ramírez, Adios Muchachos: A Memoir of the Sandinista Revolution, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 76. Ramírez adds, from interview with the author: “The presuppositions of political pluralism ended up being fulfilled out of a need to survive. That necessity led to loyalty to that principal, which is not what the revolution wanted. Put differently, the Revolution inverted the order of these factors. Social justice could be done at the expense of democracy, but not democracy at the expense of social justice. But in the end there was no social justice, but there was democracy as well as the opening of a transitional period which allowed three governments…to succeed one another.”
decade. Still others, like Humberto Ortega, are content to affirm that Nicaragua’s political institutions took a “qualitative leap” under the Revolution beginning with the frustrated 1984 elections and advanced with the drafting of a representative democratic constitution in 1987.\textsuperscript{732} One of these perspectives’ common denominators was the youth of Nicaraguan revolutionaries and the improvisational character of their struggle and revolutionary process. Gioconda Belli quipped in her memoir that “After many years of a one-man authoritarian rule in our country we were supposed to build a perfectly functioning democracy.”\textsuperscript{733}

The bigger paradox was that the rest of Central America’s countries transitioned to democracy as well. The multilateral instruments born from the Nicaraguan crisis, such as Contadora, eventually matured into the sub-regional Esquipulas process which, in turn, flowed into successful peace- and democracy-building initiatives in Nicaragua’s neighboring countries.\textsuperscript{734} The triumph of the armed Left in Nicaragua formed the crucial context for changes in each of the country’s political systems, but particularities in each case – notably, the relative strength of armed leftist groups by 1990 – shaped outcomes and legacies in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

El Salvador’s democratic transition was defined by the fact that, as the scholar of revolutions John Foran put it, the country “underwent perhaps the most intense revolutionary experience in human history that failed to come to power.”\textsuperscript{735} The FMLN, which was

\textsuperscript{732} Humberto Ortega, \textit{La Odisea por Nicaragua}, 181.
\textsuperscript{734} Former Mexican Foreign Minister Bernardo Sepúlveda sees democratization and peacebuilding in Central America as the direct consequence of the Contadora process he helped organize: “The result, and I think this is one of Contadora’s important legacies, is that we find ourselves in a Central America with democratic institutions, a Central America that has embarked upon a new project of regional integration where respect for human rights is a fundamental piece (the violence that persists notwithstanding)…In other words, the legacy of Contadora, in great measure, is clearly observed with the results that were obtained over a long time period. In that we should include the peace process in El Salvador, where Mexico played an important role – where I had meetings with the FMLN leadership – in a way becoming co-sponsors of a dialogue between the Salvadoran government and guerrillas. The result was the signing of the Chapultepec Accords in Mexico.” Previously cited interview with the author.
comparable to the U.S.-backed Contra in size, consistently threatened the territorial control of the Salvadoran government. Rebel success, beyond Cuban- and Nicaraguan- backed military prowess, owed to the FMLN’s cultivation of a rural support base of peasant communities that provided guerrillas with supplies and information even in the face of enormous government and paramilitary repression. The U.S. government supplied the Salvadoran military with training and weapons because it believed – as did the Salvadoran government – that absent such support, the FMLN would take power. The Nicaraguan Revolution, which inspired and eventually supplied the FMLN in the early 1980s, further reinforced American officials’ belief that they should draw the line in El Salvador. Further complicating revolutionary prospects was the lack of a multi-class coalition: quite unlike the successful Nicaraguan case – where the middle class and even sectors of the economic elite backed or joined the Sandinistas in 1977-79 – the Salvadoran and Guatemalan civil wars played out more clearly along class lines.

Though these circumstances left the seizure of state power outside of their reach, the Salvadoran guerrillas still managed notable gains. Joaquín Villalobos, founder and leader of the Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP) – one of the FMLN’s constituent factions – described the Marxist Left’s accomplishments:

The historical coalition which confronted the dictatorship showed audacity and creativity in conducting the war as well as political nous in transforming El Salvador into a liberal democracy through pragmatic negotiations which ended the military’s political power, gave real power to the judiciary and parliament, and gave citizens the right to vote. Before that, the only thing that made a difference was changing points of view among the generals and coronels of the Armed Forces.

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A war with no clear winners allowed talks between government and guerrillas, born from the Esquipulas process, to mature into a full-blown peace agreement by 1992.\textsuperscript{739} The Chapultepec Accords, named after the Mexico City castle where they were signed, ended the Salvadoran civil war which had claimed some 75,000 lives.\textsuperscript{740} As part of the agreement, the government restructured its intelligence and security forces, formally subordinated these institutions to civilian authorities, and created an ad hoc committee which purged the armed forces of some officials guilty of particularly grave human rights abuses. In exchange for demobilizing under UN supervision, the FMLN won legal standing as a political party as well as a quota in the restructured National Police. Given the global collapse of socialist paradigms which accompanied the fall of the Soviet Union, the FMLN’s political survival was no small feat. As historian Andrea Oñate puts it, “The political and military successes of the Salvadoran insurgents throughout the 12-year civil war ensured the FMLN’s position at the bargaining table, on an equal footing with the Salvadoran government and secured the organization’s voice in the future of El Salvador as a legitimate political party of opposition.”\textsuperscript{741}

The Nicaraguan Revolution was central to that outcome. In 1979, the Somoza regime’s violent collapse inspired the Salvadoran military government to attempt a short-lived reformist program with liberals and elements of the moderate Left. The Salvadoran business elite, concerned that such a project threatened their interests and actually increased the likelihood of a Nicaragua-style scenario, subsequently sabotaged the “revolutionary junta.” As a result of renewed repression, El Salvador’s fractious armed Left came together in a bid to repeat the


Towards the end of the decade, the Sandinistas’ decision to accept a democratizing settlement undermined the FMLN’s armed struggle, but also showered it in the political legitimacy required for its participation in the Chapultepec Accords.

Unlike its Salvadoran counterpart, the Guatemalan armed Left never came close to taking power. Guatemala’s war was much longer-running – dating back to the 1950s, when progressive military officers defected in protest of the country’s bloody anti-leftist repression – and claimed more lives than the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan conflicts combined. In 1979, as in other countries, the Sandinista Revolution – which called into the question the exceptionalism of the Cuban success – reinforced Guatemalan leftists’ belief in the viability of the armed struggle. The country’s four major guerrilla groups – FAR, ORPA, PGT, EGP – unified under the flag of the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG – Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity) in 1982. The loose coalition was decimated, however, by the Guatemalan military’s scored earth policies described in the previous chapter, which also displaced over a million civilians. The URNG struggled to cultivate the level of rural popular support that the FMLN achieved and won virtually no backing from the country’s middle classes barring some sectors of the university intelligentsia and student movement. Nonetheless, though the government had “strategically defeated” the armed Left by the time it started transitioning to civilian rule in 1985, it had failed to destroy it, thereby keeping the need for some sort of negotiated settlement.

Because the military was in such a stronger position, Edelberto Torres Rivas explains, the ensuing Guatemalan peace process was less about ending the war than it was about preventing future armed conflicts. Under the Esquipulas framework, the Catholic Church headed a series

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742 The constituent factions were the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR – founded in the early 1960s), Organización Revolucionaria del Pueblo en Armas (ORPA – founded 1979), Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo (PGT – the Moscow-line communist party founded in 1949), and the Ejercito Guerrilero de los Pobres (EGP – founded 1972).

of failed national dialogues in the late 1980s. But an agreement reached between the government and the URNG in Oslo in 1991 set the basis for a substantive peace process later in the decade. In yet another example of multilateral institutions intervening in local affairs to promote democracy, the United Nations brokered and supervised a comprehensive agreement in 1996 which formally ended the country’s civil war and allowed the demobilized URNG to participate in competitive elections.\textsuperscript{744} International agencies helped civil society and the Catholic Church lead truth and reconciliation efforts, culminating in 1998 with the publication of ¡Nunca Mas!, a fact-finding report which blamed the Guatemalan state for the bulk of the human rights abuses committed during the civil war. In spite of the agreements, unfortunately, state repression continued: two days after the publication of ¡Nunca Mas!, one of its authors – the Catholic Bishop Juan Gerardi – was brutally murdered by paramilitaries.

The consequences of Esquipulas were less obvious in Honduras, which did not experience a major leftist insurrection and civil war. Nonetheless, the effects were still significant, because the country had, after all, been sucked into the Central American wars when it became a base for CIA-sponsored anti-Sandinista rebels. \textit{De jure} democratic institutions in place since 1982 gained real power as the military ceded \textit{de facto} control with the end of U.S. military funding and direct presence.\textsuperscript{745}

In handing over power in 1990, the Sandinistas spearheaded a transformation whereby Central Americans traded ballots for bullets in the making of politics. The end of full-scale armed conflict, which had claimed 300,000 lives in two decades, was an achievement in and of itself. Moreover, this political change derived into other transformations – the flourishing of independent journalism and civil society, for example – \textit{for the first time in the region’s history}.\textsuperscript{744,745}

\textsuperscript{744} \textit{Ibid.}, 479.
In many Latin American countries – such as those of the Southern Cone – the Third Wave of democracy meant the restoration of earlier republican traditions which had been interrupted by the democratic closing which accompanied U.S. National Security doctrine after World War II. This was not the case in Central America. As Edelberto Torres noted, “In Central America, the emergence of electoral democracy was not, save for the Costa Rican case, the restoration of interrupted tradition, but rather a novel establishment which occurred under special circumstances: in the middle of a severe economic crisis and in the context of armed conflict.”

That democratization was the response to these crises depended on the successes and strength of the armed Left, which was the only significant political force in these countries to oppose militarized authoritarian regimes which had historical roots dating back to before the Second World War. Therefore, as it pertains to Central America at least, Jorge Castañeda is right to argue that “The Latin American left has probably been the most important domestic factor in the continent’s political evolution.”

For all of their successes, the nature of these democratic transitions foreshadowed future troubles. As Luís Guillermo Solís explains:

You can’t ask of Esquipulas more than what Esquipulas promised. And Esquipulas promised nothing more than what was in its title: “Procedure for the Establishment of a Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America.” It was a modus operandi for achieving a specific objective: peace. Nobody ever said that Esquipulas would solve the problems of inequality and misery.

Given the full collapse of Soviet-style communism, a popular line of Western thought maintained that liberal democracy and market economics “triumphed” because these models provided better prosperity; this victory was “evident,” wrote Francis Fukuyama, “in the total exhaustion of systematic alternatives to Western liberalism” and “in the ineluctable spread of

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746 Ibid.
748 Luis Guillermo Solís, previously cited interview with the author.
consumerist Western culture.”749 In Central America, however, liberal democracy was born in bloodshed, aimed at the very narrow goal of ending civil wars and foreign interventions. Therefore, as Solís suggests, it is not entirely surprising to see old problems resurface under an ostensibly new political economy. In 2015, El Salvador – which had enjoyed several competitive elections and peaceful transfers of power – witnessed more deaths from gang and police violence than it saw at the height of its civil war. The country has also been plagued by constant corruption, with several of its democratically-elected ex-presidents currently serving or facing jail time. Similar problems affect Guatemala, whose judicial system came close but ultimately failed to prosecute Efraín Rios Montt for genocide. Honduras also had competitive elections until 2009, when a democratically-elected government was ousted in a legislative coup backed by a resurgent armed forces. Finally, as the Epilogue explains, Nicaragua’s democratic experiment has ended as of this writing, with the country returning to the political arrangements and state repression of the Somoza era. As this project has argued, the rise of the Revolution and the democratic wave that it rode were contingent phenomenon that must be understood in their historical context. Democratization was not a structural response – or solution – to underlying problems of inequality and weak institutions.

CONCLUSION

In the early morning hours the day after his shock defeat, Daniel Ortega officially recognized Violeta Chamorro’s victory. As he confirmed his intention to honor the vote and cede power, he added:

We feel proud to be contributing to Nicaragua, to be contributing to the peoples of Central America, Latin America and the Caribbean, to the peoples on the road to development, to be contributing in this unjust world divided between the strong and the weak, to be contributing a little bit of dignity, a little bit of democracy, a little bit of social justice from this small territory in Central America which saw the birth of men who made Nicaragua shine in the world as did Dario and Sandino.750

What exactly did the Revolution contribute? As of this writing, Nicaragua remains the poorest country in Spanish-speaking America. Despite this dubious honor, some of Nicaragua’s social indicators track the Latin American average, a sign of the Sandinistas’ successes in expanding healthcare and access to education. Nonetheless, and unfortunately given the Revolution’s redistributionist goals, inequality has only worsened; land tenancy ratios resemble pre-1979 levels, and Nicaragua has more millionaires than Costa Rica, which is five times wealthier as measured by GDP per capita. Like the other rare cases of victorious socialist rebels – such as the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) or the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) – the Sandinistas learned that controlling the state was one thing, while remaking society was another. Victor Hugo Tinoco, who belonged to the FSLN’s left-wing until his expulsion in 2005 by General Secretary Daniel Ortega, says that “In retrospect, I can tell you that one of the errors we committed was that we had a romantic vision of revolution and of societal transformation. We believed that revolution spontaneously generated a just society and a new man – all of that was jargon used in Guevarian romanticism. Looking back, we have realized that a revolution can change a government or a system, but not necessarily a society, its values, its principles, its culture, nor can it change the individual automatically.”751

The silver lining was that the Sandinistas could now bring their policy goals to democratic, electoral competition. The Cuban government assured the international community

751 Victor Hugo Tinoco, previously cited interview with the author.
that it supported the Sandinistas’ decision to enter the world of pluralistic party politics. The upside of losing power was the opportunity to return to it by better means. When Jimmy Carter visited Ortega and the high command on election night, hoping for a rapid recognition of electoral defeat, he emphasized this point:

the FSLN can come out as heroes, having triumphed in a revolution against an oppressive dictator, survived a war against an enemy that was financed abroad, and at the end of ten years, brought democracy…You are all young men. Six years may seem like a long time, but it’s not.

The former U.S. President, who had developed a strangely sympathetic relationship with the revolutionaries who had once imperiled his country’s foreign policy, added: “My feelings for you are very deep. Like you, I have won a presidential election, and I have lost one, but losing the election wasn’t the end of the world.”

Indeed, Jaime Wheelock later confessed that “If we had won the election of 1990, democracy in Nicaragua would not have advanced as much as it has with us in the opposition.” Referring to the conventional wisdom that Latin America suffered a “lost decade” of economic growth in the 1980s, Ecuadorian sociologist Agustín Cueva wrote that it had also been a lost decade for the region’s Left. In a 1991 essay titled “Latin America and the End of History,” Ecuador’s leading Marxist intellectual prophetically wrote that the asymmetrical, imbalanced triumph of U.S.-style capitalism over socialism would lead to new global conflicts on a North-South, rather than East-West axis. But in lamenting the “ideological disarmament” of the radical Left, he underestimated the long-lasting consequences of the Left’s participation in the region’s liberalization. Today, it is rather common to see retired Marxist combatants as democratically-elected heads of state in the region such as Brazil’s Dilma Roussef, Uruguay’s

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754 Quoted in Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed*, “Introduction.”
Pepe Mujica, and El Salvador’s Salvador Sánchez Cerén. The Sandinista transition was at the center of this normalization of the former armed Left in electoral politics.

As an obvious corollary to the transformations they spearheaded, the Sandinistas gave up on their own ideal of violent revolution, but that was a natural consequence of seeing the Cold War era for what it was. Villalobos, the former FMLN leader, recently put it well when he wrote: “When the continent was governed primarily by dictatorships, the dominant belief was that we guerrillas were the solution, but in reality we were just another symptom of the conflict that the dictatorships themselves were generating.”

Not all former Marxist combatants indulge in Villalobos’ self-effacement. Though their opponents might disagree, Central American guerrillas can plausibly take credit for the flourishing of civil society in the region. In Guatemala, for example, Thelma Cabrera’s Comité de Desarrollo Campesino (CODECA) directly descends from the collective action of rural peasants in rebel-controlled regions. Similarly, most of Nicaragua’s contemporary social movements and human rights organizations are headed by former FSLN officials who, after the collapse of their state-led revolution, brought their ideas and practices to the realm of civil society. The global ideal of socialist revolution clashed against real conditions in Central America: foreign models from the Eastern Bloc were grafted onto an entirely different context, and Central America’s tortuous relationship with the United States – though it may have inadvertently helped the rebel cause – ultimately constrained any revolutionary agenda. But this does not change the fact that, at least in Nicaragua in 1979, the vast majority of the political arena came to see the armed option as the only option – to paraphrase sociologist Jeff Goodwin, there was “no other way out.” Torres Rivas, himself both a keen analyst of the region’s revolutions and an active participant (his father, incidentally, was a communist activist who

757 Jeff Goodwin, No Other Way Out.
assisted and influenced the early FSLN) puts it thusly: “revolution in Central America was as necessary as it was unviable.”\textsuperscript{758}

\textsuperscript{758} Torres Rivas, \textit{Revoluciones sin Cambios Revolucionarios.}
Epilogue

Democracy and its Discontents in Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua, 1991-2019
“What never should have happened is happening again in Nicaragua.” Gioconda Belli, who by 2018 had been divorced from the FSLN for over two decades, wrote these words as the country approached the 40th anniversary of Somoza’s ouster. Like Belli, dozens of well-known figures from the revolutionary government abandoned the Sandinista Front in the years following its 1990 defeat at the polls. The gradual decomposition of the FSLN elite paralleled the broader failure of Nicaragua’s transition to democracy during the 1990s and 2000s. Abandoned by his erstwhile comrades, Daniel Ortega – who successfully remolded the electoral-era FSLN in his image – abandoned the redistributive and socially progressive agenda advanced by the Revolution. New alliances with his former, “counterrevolutionary” foes in the business elite and Catholic Church allowed Ortega to return to the presidency in 2006 and consolidate increasingly authoritarian rule. In its sultanism, ideological flexibility, and in the Faustian bargain of stability-for-power that it forged with the Nicaraguan elite, 21st-century orteguismo strongly resembles 20th-century somocismo. Writing for Foreign Affairs, Belli remarked that it “is as if Anastasio Somoza – the country’s previous dictator, toppled in 1979 – has returned to Managua.”759

Ortega’s regime suffers many of the same vulnerabilities as its 20th-century predecessor. For over a decade, Nicaraguans – particularly those in the business elite – quietly condoned the government’s curtailment of civil liberties in the name of decent economic growth and stability. But as experts of sultanism have written, these authoritarian systems rarely provide the stability that they outwardly project. Shortly before Belli published her article in Foreign Affairs, university students woke the country from its political slumber and brought about the largest wave of street protests in Nicaraguan history. The regime’s decision to respond with police and paramilitary force mired Nicaragua in violence and instability, leading the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to accuse the government of crimes against

Daniel Ortega’s refusal to loosen his grip on power, aside from creating one of the worst human rights crises seen in Latin America since the end of the Cold War, has also put a final nail in the coffin of the democratic transition which the Sandinista Revolution helped bring about.

Like that revolution’s history, the ignominious collapse of the Nicaraguan transition must be viewed in regional perspective. Depending on when one begins the counting, the end of this decade also marks the 40th anniversary of the beginning of Latin America’s Third Wave of democratization. The most important and understudied aspect of the Sandinista Revolution, with more durable legacies than Washington’s war on Nicaragua, was how it bookended that wave of regime change in the 1970s and 1980s. This dissertation argued that the triumph of the armed Left was a regionally-determined response to a U.S. interventionism which intensified during the Cold War and left the region littered with military dictatorships. The Revolution’s transnational origins help explain its paradoxical ending: the FSLN failed to bring about social transformation, but unwittingly succeeded at creating Nicaragua’s first-ever attempt liberal democracy. The story of that transition’s failure between 1990 and 2006 exposes the fragile, Cold War basis for democratization in much of Latin America. Electoral-based transitions served their purpose in putting an end to cycles of dictatorship, revolution, civil war and intervention. But they left fundamental problems of inequality, poverty, and weak institutions untouched. The FSLN’s degeneration into an ideologically-vacuous, personalistic vehicle took place in the context of the declining salience of old ideological debates about socialism and capitalism, and in a post-Cold War era where domestic political concerns are no longer seen as zero-sum, winner-takes all scenarios in a global struggle which constantly generated revolutions and foreign interventions.

The chaotic conditions which created the need for democratization in the 1980s no longer exist, and therefore – as the Nicaraguan example demonstrates – the favorable international context for democratization seen in the 1990s is also evaporating. The transnational story of the Sandinista Revolution – like previous waves of political change in Latin American history – shows that just as the “Third Wave” was contagious years ago, so too could present-day authoritarianism spread like a virus.

SANDINISTA SPLITS, 1990-2006

When Nicaragua began its full-fledged experiment in liberal democracy in the wake of the 1990 elections, the defeated FSLN underwent its own “transition within the transition.”\(^761\) The Sandinista Front, after all, had undergone a direct evolution from guerrilla movement to governing apparatus. At no point in between had circumstances forced the FSLN, as cadre Vilma Nuñez pointed out, to formally “develop a party” and “consolidate democratic styles of leadership and participation.”\(^762\) Adaptation to the electoral arena necessitated an institutional revision. Moreover, the new Latin American consensus around orthodox, market-based economics – a neoliberal framework championed in Nicaragua by three successive conservative administrations between 1990 and 2006 – demanded an ideological and programmatic revamp. For all the above reasons, the First Party Congress of February 1991 was as significant for the definition of Sandinismo as the movement’s founding in the early 1960s or its sudden seizure of state power in 1979.\(^763\)

\(^761\) Described as such by Sofía Montenegro. Interview with the author, Managua, March 29, 2017.
The party’s fate – and to a certain degree, the future of the democratic transition – was defined by historical debates regarding the fall of the Revolution. At the congress, where elites and rank-and-file alike were still reeling from their shock 1990 defeat, two general narratives emerged. Some cadres explained the Revolution’s demise as the direct result of the United States’ efforts to undermine it, whereas others acknowledged the effects of intervention but emphasized the government’s own role in fomenting popular opposition to the Sandinistas through the botched implementation (and sometimes design) of major policies like the agrarian reform and compulsory military service. Roughly speaking, the former group (headed by Daniel Ortega, fellow National Director Tomás Borge, and leftist leaders associated with base organizations like the National Workers’ Front) were known as principistas, while the latter group (led by Sergio Ramírez, ex-combatant and former Health Minister Dora María Tellez, Sandinista intellectuals, and the FSLN’s delegates in the National Assembly) were called reformistas.764

These competing historical perspectives were the locus of the nascent opposition party’s debates on ideology, political strategy, and organizational structure. If the Sandinistas’ revolutionary agenda had been ill-conceived from the start, was socialism still viable as party doctrine, especially after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc? If the electoral defeat was the unjust product of North American meddling, should the FSLN collaborate in the legislature with the recently-installed government of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro? Finally, if the Sandinistas’ own mistakes produced the popular resentment which led to their ouster, should the party’s leadership be replaced? On this last point, Ortega was uniquely threatened: his seat on the first revolutionary junta and his later assumption of the presidency, along with his brother’s role as

head of the armed forces, had made him *primus inter pares* in the FSLN’s collective leadership during the 1980s.

Rather than factionalizing the party – something which occurred to the Salvadoran FMLN in the electoral era – these questions completely schismatized the Sandinista elite.\(^{765}\) Having failed to press its reformist agenda within the party, and under intense pressure from their opponents, the reformist wing simply broke away from the Sandinista Front in 1994. A massive exodus of revolutionary leaders, including National Director Luis Carrión Cruz, followed Ramírez and Tellez in founding the *Movimiento Renovador Sandinista* (MRS – Sandinista Renovation Movement) in 1995, on Augusto César Sandino’s 100\(^{th}\) birthday. Despite its leaders’ revolutionary pedigree, the MRS – which sought to portray itself as a modern, social-democratic Sandinista alternative – failed to siphon off a meaningful portion of the FSLN base. At this point, Ortega enjoyed the backing of the *Izquierda Democrática Sandinista* (IDS), the party’s radical left wing. With their support, he successfully painted the reformists as bourgeois traitors who “fled like rats from a sinking ship” as soon as the party lost power in 1990.\(^{766}\) Many high-ranking militants shared the reformists’ concerns but thought it inappropriate to fully break with the organization; change, Vilma Nuñez wrote in 2000, should be achieved within the FSLN. A few years later, however, Nuñez – who had competed for the party’s presidential nomination in 1996 – was purged from the party. Other revolutionary *históricos* who challenged Ortega’s grip on the party – Henry Ruíz, Victor Hugo Tinoco, and Herty Lewites – all met the same fate. These


Sandinista splits were so common that by the mid-2000s, the FSLN was left devoid of most of the cultural, military, and political leadership of the Revolution.\textsuperscript{767}

The controversy surrounding Daniel Ortega’s stepdaughter, Zoilamérica Narvaez, the child of Ortega’s wife – Rosario Murillo – encapsulated Ortega’s personalization of the party in the democratic era. In 1998, Zoilamérica – herself an active FSLN militant – published a lengthy testimonial in which she accused Ortega of having sexually abused her continuously from the time she was 11 years old.\textsuperscript{768} While the revelations sent shockwaves through the FSLN and beyond, a friendly Supreme Court judge dropped the charges against Ortega and, perhaps more importantly, Murillo denied her daughter’s claims and came out in defense of her husband. The country’s women’s movements, founded in the bosom of the Revolution but already somewhat distant from the male-dominated party leadership, closed ranks around Zoilamérica and completely broke with the FSLN because of the allegations.\textsuperscript{769} As much as Zoilamérica and her allies made it a point to “denounce Ortega, not the FSLN,” it was no longer possible to separate the two.\textsuperscript{770} Party cadres who openly supported the accuser were immediately defenestrated, marking new boundaries for membership in the Sandinista Front: it was now impossible to question Ortega’s leadership and remain affiliated with the party.

\textsuperscript{767} Three surviving members of the FSLN’s National Directorate – Luis Carrión, Henry Ruiz, and Víctor Tirado López – openly opposed Ortega’s attempts to return to the presidency in the 2000s. Jaime Wheelock and Humberto Ortega have become estranged from Daniel Ortega’s inner circle; only Bayardo Arce remains a visible ally. Perhaps more jarringly, very few of the insurrection’s Comandantes Guerrilleros remain in the FSLN. Of the leaders of the 1978 palace coup – Dora María Tellez, Hugo Torres, and Edén Pastora – only Pastora, a Sandinista-turned-Contra leader, is an Ortega supporter. In the intellectual sphere, the rejection is total; virtually without exception, the cultural figures best-known around the world – Gioconda Belli, Claribel Alegría, Daisy Zamora, the Mejía Godoy Brothers, etc. – identify with the most implacable sectors of the anti-Ortega opposition.


\textsuperscript{770} “El caso Zoilamérica en la voz de los protagonistas,” Envío, April, 1998. Núñez explains that when the scandal broke, “Ortega stayed silent and ordered the entire Sandinista Front to remain silent. The order was to not talk about that. And everybody was to obey, to not believe Zoilamérica even if they believed her, and even though the evidence was being discussed everywhere,” Núñez, “La descomposición de la cúpula del FSLN viene de atrás.” Most infamously, Henry Petrich and William Rodríguez – members of the party’s regional committee for Managua, were stripped of their party credentials for demanding an investigation into the affair: “Sandinistas divided over sex scandal,” Los Angeles Times, March 14, 1998
As Nicaragua’s democratic institutions and norms struggled to take shape in the 1990s, the Sandinista Front failed to formalize as a political party.\textsuperscript{771} It survived its bitter internal struggles, but only by succumbing to the “complete hegemony of Ortega,” who has been the party’s only General Secretary and nominee for every presidential election in the party’s history.\textsuperscript{772} In the first years of Nicaragua’s democratic transition, the FSLN began to resemble a formal political party; there were internal debates about ideology and strategy. Formal mechanisms – specifically, internal elections for a Sandinista Assembly and renewal of the National Directorate – existed to hold party leaders accountable and permit the existence of different factions and points of view. However, as political scientist Salvador Martí i Puig explains:

this process began to take steps backward from 1995 on. This was not simply because the FSLN became a political party that was oriented toward elections (Santiuste Cué, 2001) but because the deliberate process of deinstitutionalizing the party, once unity had been recreated around the leader, reinforced the Nicaraguan political culture linked to the caudillo, or strongman.\textsuperscript{773}

This informalization was significant because it allowed Ortega to make drastic changes to party policy, branding, and strategy without the obstacles posed by collective decision-making procedures and internal debates. The party’s stunning ideological metamorphosis began in the run-up to the 2006 elections, when the FSLN abandoned the black and red of socialism and workers’ power in favor of the magenta, canary yellow, and baby blue of familial and national reconciliation. The earlier break with the women’s movement also freed Ortega and Murillo of any obligations to a women’s agenda and enabled a conservative religious turn; thus, the old

\textsuperscript{771} Antonio Lacayo writes of a three-dimensional transition in Nicaragua in 1990: from central planning to market economics, from a partisan army to professional armed forces, and from partisan state institutions to rule of law in La Dificil Transición Nicaragüense.

\textsuperscript{772} Nayar López Castellanos, Nicaragua, avatares de una democracia pactada, (Managua: Publicaciones Universidad Centroamericana, 2013), 30.

slogan *patria libre o morir* – “free country or death” – was easily replaced by conservative appeals to traditional Nicaraguan Christian values.\(^{774}\) Additionally, the absence of rivals and internal checks gave Ortega and Murillo wide latitude to personally negotiate with other political actors on behalf of the FSLN, leading to unlikely alliances with former “counterrevolutionary” foes in the business elite, Christian institutions, and political parties representing “the most conservative sectors of society.”\(^{775}\) Those alliances, in turn, would provide the foundation for Ortega’s return to power and rebirth as a “right-leaning, neopatrimonial dictator in the older Latin American style.”\(^{776}\) In this way, the failure of democracy within *sandinismo* paralleled and accelerated the broader collapse of Nicaragua’s democratic institutions.

**THE END OF A BRIEF EXPERIMENT**

After three successive electoral defeats, Ortega finally re-won the presidency in the 2006 elections. At the time, scholars and pundits mistakenly conceptualized the FSLN victory as part of Latin America’s so-called “Pink Tide,” where left-leaning parties swept elections across the continent midway through that decade. In particular, observers associated Ortega with the populist leaders of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our Americas (ALBA), a multilateral alliance that Nicaragua joined in 2007. However, whereas Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez (founder of ALBA), Bolivia’s Evo Morales, and Ecuador’s Rafael Correa all came to power on

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\(^{774}\) See Kampwirth, 127.


the back of new political majorities born from the rejection of stagnant two-party systems, Ortega’s rise to the presidency was entirely different.\textsuperscript{777}

In fact, his victory was better explained as a \textit{retrenchment} of the rigid biparty system – between Sandinistas and anti-Sandinistas – that quickly emerged in Nicaragua’s electoral era. Ortega suffered heavy defeats in 1996 and 2001 elections to candidates from the right-wing Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC). This was one reason cited by Sandinista dissidents who jumped ship and unsuccessfully tried to forge an alternative left-wing party. In 1999, while leading the opposition, Ortega signed a power-sharing agreement with then-President and Liberal Party \emph{caudillo} Arnoldo Alemán Lacayo.\textsuperscript{778} Under \textit{El Pacto}, as it came to be known, the FSLN and PLC agreed to duopolize the judicial and electoral branches of government, effectively blocking the formation of third parties in the electoral arena.\textsuperscript{779} In exchange for judicial protection for Alemán, who had been charged with embezzlement and other forms of corruption in his administration, FSLN and PLC leaders agreed to reform electoral laws to reduce the threshold for a first-round victory from 45\% to 35\%. This change allowed Ortega to win in 2006 – following the division of the Liberals as a result of Alemán’s criminal activities and under-the-table dealings – with a \textit{smaller} share of the vote (38\%) than he had earned in his previous electoral defeats.\textsuperscript{780}


\textsuperscript{778} As Tinoco points out, this power-sharing agreement was not subject to discussion within either party; rather, it was crafted “in a hermetic environment to which only the inner circles of Ortega and Alemán have access.” “Pacto: frutos armargos y hondas raíces,” \textit{Envío} no.209, July 1999. Only Ortega and Alemán loyalists benefitted with posts in the newly-partitioned judicial and electoral institutions.

\textsuperscript{779} See a report by \textit{Envío} citing a study by Argentine electoral monitor Horacio Boneo, “Camino a las elecciones: dolores del pacto,” no. 220, July 2000. Since then, PLC-FSLN magistrates, who also count the votes in elections, have set prohibitively high barriers for the formation of new parties (helping explain the dramatic reduction in active parties since the 1996 elections, where over 20 entities participated). Other times, bipartisan-controlled authorities have simply refused to grant juridical personhood to a new party that met all the requirements, which was the case with the short-lived \textit{Movimiento de Unidad Nacional} (MUN), launched ahead of the 2001 elections by Comandante Guerrillero and ex-Army chief Joaquín Cuadra Lacayo with the support of many other ex-FSLN politicians.

\textsuperscript{780} In exchange, Alemán won a constitutional reform which guaranteed a seat in the National Assembly for the outgoing president. A seat in the legislature would grant him immunity from the inevitable criminal investigations into corruption in his administration. Alemán, moreover, could not foresee how lowering the threshold would
More importantly, and unlike his 21st-Century Socialist peers, the second Ortega presidency did not attempt a re-foundational political project. In fact, it did not even attempt to reconstruct the coalition of workers, intellectuals, and progressive bourgeoisie which supported the Sandinista government during the 1980s. In that coalition’s place, Ortega constructed new alliances with his former “counterrevolutionary” foes in the business elite and Catholic Church hierarchy. In exchange for the support of the country’s largest capital groups, Ortega deepened the neoliberal policy framework established by the Chamorro (1990-1996), Alemán (1997-2002), and Enrique Bolaños administrations (2002-2007). His government implemented policies in adherence to the policy proposals of the International Monetary Fund, avoiding any attempt to structurally transform the economy via tax reform, land redistribution, or the nationalization of key industries. Nicaragua’s alliance with Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela helped cement these alliances, because the oil-rich South American country became a preferential market for Nicaraguan export commodities. Moreover, massive economic assistance from Venezuela gave an additional stimulus to an economy which, at least until 2018, grew faster than that of Nicaragua’s Central American neighbors. In order to forge ties with the Catholic Church and growing Protestant institutions, Ortega turned the FSLN – which despite its ties to Liberation Theology finds its origins in Marxism-Leninism – into an overtly Christian party. In an act of faith which completed a socially conservative transformation that began with the Zoilamérica

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benefit his rival (Ortega suffered three consecutive first-round defeats against Liberal parties), because he did not anticipate that his criminal activities and under-the-table dealings with Ortega would produce a deep schism in his own party ahead of the 2006 elections. The vote of the two right-wing parties (the PLC and the splinter Alianza Liberal Nacional received 28% and 29% of the vote, respectively) far exceeded the victorious FSLN’s 38% share.


782 Alejandro Gutierrez outlines the gap between leftist rhetoric and economic reality under Ortega: “In spite of Ortega’s scorching rhetoric denouncing ‘savage capitalism,’ neoliberalism, and structural adjustment, his government has since 2006 worked hand-in-glove with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other multilateral financial institutions to formulate and implement their economic growth and poverty-reduction strategies. Successive injections of IMF aid, in fact, have been contingent on the Nicaraguan government’s strict adherence to the IMF’s policy recommendations. Spending for the poor has been only superficially redistributive and has been merely palliative.” “The Discourting ‘Success’ of Nicaragua’s Anti-Poverty Programs,” NACLA Report on the Americas, December 2009.
scandal, his government amended the constitution in order to criminalize abortion under any circumstances, reversing a constitutional right which existed in Nicaragua since the late 19th century and which the Sandinista Revolution had expanded in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{783}

Conservative elites gave Ortega their tacit support in exchange for stability and policies favorable to their interests, and they paid for this stability with the erosion of the country’s democratic institutions. Immediately after returning to power, the FSLN began manipulating elections, harassing civil society, restricting press liberties, and repressing any sort of popular protest or labor agitation. In order to eliminate constitutional roadblocks to re-election, Ortega did not – again, unlike Chávez and Morales – hold a referendum. Instead, he went to the friendly judicial system, which simply ruled that the Constitution violated the President’s human rights by not allowing him to run for another term.\textsuperscript{784} For the 2016 presidential elections, Ortega – who aside from controlling the judicial and electoral branches of government had also personalized all other state institutions, including the National Police – gave the \textit{coup de grace}: he expelled all opposition lawmakers from the National Assembly (barring those from collaborationist satellite parties) and prevented them from participating in the upcoming elections, for which international monitors were barred. Ortega’s domestic barter was accompanied by a transactional foreign policy which also defied the FSLN’s ideological origins: in the same way that Somoza offered anti-communism in exchange for U.S. quiescence, the Nicaraguan government promised to serve as a bulwark against illegal migration, drug trafficking, and gang violence in order to have surprisingly smooth relations with Washington.\textsuperscript{785}

\textsuperscript{783} Karen Kampwirth explains how the Zoilamérica scandal, and the break with feminists that it created, paved the way for the FSLN’s subsequent pro-abortion turn in “Abortion, Antifeminism, and the Return of Daniel Ortega.”

\textsuperscript{784} The Nicaraguan National Assembly subsequently passed a constitutional amendment which removed term limits, thereby retroactively legitimizing Ortega’s 2016 re-election.

\textsuperscript{785} Thaler, “Nicaragua: A Return to Caudillismo,” 157, 162-64.
Unlike any authoritarian government in the hemisphere in post-Cold War era, Nicaragua’s regime is sultanistic. The term, as described by the Spanish political scientist Juan Linz, denotes an authoritarianism where the caudillo is omnipresent in even the most minute aspects of politics and policymaking.\textsuperscript{786} Beyond the pursuit of self-preservation, sultanistic regimes lack ideological or programmatic goals. Most importantly, such regimes see public resources and interests intertwined with those of the ruler. The management of Venezuelan aid evidences such a confusion of public and private interests. Formally, this massive economic assistance package – which experts estimate at over 5 billion dollars – was supposedly agreed at the state level between the Venezuelan and Nicaraguan governments. In practice, Venezuela’s Chávez authorized the FSLN to directly handle the money and oil subsidies via companies owned by the Ortega family, rather than subjecting the aid to normal parliamentary budgeting procedures.\textsuperscript{787}

Sultanistic regimes also tend toward family power and dynastic successions. In this sense, the Ortega regime is also unique on the Latin American scene. In 2016’s façade elections, Ortega named his wife, Rosario Murillo – who already operated as the de facto prime minister – as vice president and therefore immediate successor to his rule. Almost all of their children work officially as special advisors to the presidency, and some have been groomed as future leaders of the country. Apparently alluding to Leon Trotsky’s The Revolution Betrayed, Ernesto Cardenal’s political memoir is titled La Revolución Perdida. “It was a beautiful revolution,” the


\textsuperscript{787} This aid helped the Nicaraguan government’s relationship with business elite, for two main reasons. First, because this Venezuelan economic assistance was administered completely apart from normal state budgeting and fiscal procedures, the government could spend this money on palliative social programs without upsetting the government’s balance-of-payments, something which would ordinarily discourage foreign and domestic investment. Second, aid and oil subsidies from Venezuela have filled the void left by bilateral aid donors like the U.S. and European countries, who have terminated their economic assistance programs in response to the regime’s growing democratic and human rights abuses.
nonagenarian poet maintained, “but what happened is that it was betrayed…now what we have is a family dictatorship run by Daniel Ortega. That’s not what we supported.”

A LATIN AMERICAN REVOLUTION, FORTY YEARS LATER

The reemergence of a Somoza-era *modus vivendi* in Nicaraguan politics highlights the fragility of Nicaragua’s democratic transition. For one, the 1990s brought individual liberties and competitive elections but also an economic framework which generated latent social discontent. The Chamorro administration, seeking to correct the excesses of the Revolution’s central planning but also inspired by the so-called Washington Consensus on development economics which swept the Third World in this period, implemented severe austerity measures and privatized much of the economy. These policies met their aim of curbing inflation and stabilizing Nicaragua’s debt-financing but failed to produce any GDP growth whatsoever until 1994. The reduction of social services – a policy poorly justified by anemic growth rates – created mistrust in democratic institutions and provided fertile ground for would-be authoritarian leaders like Daniel Ortega and Arnoldo Alemán. Specifically, Ortega capitalized on neoliberalism’s discontents in order to marry his personal image to the FSLN brand. As the previous chapter discussed, the Sandinistas failed to reduce poverty but succeeded in bringing popular sectors into politics. Nobody embodied this newfound rhetorical sensibility to the poor better than Ortega, who spent in the 1990s in “permanent campaign mode,” exhaustively maintaining his presence among the Sandinista base after the FSLN lost power. Edmundo Jarquín – another ex-FSLN

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789 “GDP growth (annual%),” World Bank national accounts data and OECD National accounts Data files, data.worldbank.org.
politician – explains the importance of this grassroots work in the context of the 1990s structural adjustment policies:

Merely the demobilization of the army and Sandinista militias implied the loss of more than 100,000 jobs. With the downsizing of other ministries and public institutions, plus the closing of businesses and frictions arisen during the privatization and redistribution of state-owned properties, the loss of employment may have affected more than 200,000 families, which represented a quarter of the total population. This was a decisive factor in the consolidation of Ortega within Sandinismo, because while the FSLN’s legislators in the National Assembly largely supported the main decisions of the Nicaraguan transition, including those related to the structural adjustment, he took to the street and plazas to vocalize his opposition to the “neoliberal adjustment”, sometimes through strikes and violent demonstrations, consolidating his leadership in the large sectors of Sandinismo who considered themselves displaced.\textsuperscript{790}

This dissertation argued that Central America’s transition to democracy developed in reaction to the ideological polarization and foreign interventions of the Cold War. This foundation proved excellent for peace-building, but insufficient for eliminating the social misery and inequality which has underpinned authoritarian regimes in the region dating back to the Colonial era. A harsh but insightful criticism of that transition is provided by historian Greg Grandin, who writes:

Latin America’s move away from military dictatorships in the 1980s was less a transition than it was a conversion to a particular definition of democracy…by abandoning social-democratic principles of development and welfare, opening up their economies to the world market, and narrowing their conception of democracy to focus more precisely on political and legal rights rather than on social ones.\textsuperscript{791}

Indeed, as soon as peace was achieved, Nicaraguan elites unwittingly re-created the political economy which ultimately led to such monstrous violence in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. When the FSLN first returned to power in 2006, the country’s capitalist class feared a return to the state-led economic policies of the 1980s. But Ortega’s “pro-business second act,” as the \textit{Wall Street


Journal put it, easily wooed the traditional aristocracy. Buoyed by high commodity prices and favorable fiscal conditions inherited from previous administrations who bore the brunt of the country’s reconstruction in the 1990s, the continuation of market-orthodox policies under Ortega generated relatively good economic growth. While Nicaragua grew and maintained its excellent public safety record, the gang- and drug-ridden countries of the so-called Northern Triangle stagnated and developed the world’s highest homicide rates. This comparison was more than enough to paper over his authoritarian abuses, especially when repression was aimed at dissidents and civil society who rejected his increasingly formal alliance with COSEP, the federation of businesses of chambers of commerce. In fact, some business leaders apparently came to see democratic institutions as an obstacle to prosperity. The same informalization which plagued the FSLN in the 1990s and early 2000s spread to Nicaraguan politics more broadly under the Ortega presidency, allowing the capitalist elite to negotiate major policy issues directly in closed-room meetings with the executive without the interference of civil society, independent regulators, or elected officials. The nominally leftist Ortega touted this policy of “intelligent alliances” and called it a model of “one single government composed of workers, businessmen, and the State.” The COSEP President, José Adán Aguerri, praised what he called a “corporatist” model. In disbelief, leftists critical of this arrangement, such as former Barricada editor Carlos Fernando Chamorro, pointed out that this was the political model that fascist leaders like Benito Mussolini first championed.

Oscar-René Vargas – another Sandinista histórico who left the FSLN shortly after its return to power – explains that the capitalist sector’s alliance with Ortega was motivated by “the

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goal of avoiding the elites’ worst nightmare: a second social revolution.” By positioning himself as the symbolic father of the original Sandinista Revolution, and by holding vertical control over the FSLN’s unmatched capacity for popular mobilization (through dozens of party-affiliated organizations, most notably the Sandinista Youth), Ortega offered social peace (business leaders remembered how he denied such stability in the 1990s when he promised to “govern from below”) in exchange for the business elite’s political quiescence. Nicaragua’s private sector leaders calculated that it was worth sacrificing human rights and political institutions in the name of stability. They genuinely believed that such an arrangement would avert a return to the polarization and state encroachment over the economy they experienced in the 1980s. But as Linz and others point out, sultanistic regimes seldom guarantee the stability that they seem to offer. The Nicaraguan elite failed to realize that they were re-constructing the same pact that their ancestors forged with the Somoza dynasty, and that the short-term stability they purchased was paid with the norms and institutions required to ensure stability in the long run. The transition to liberal democracy, born with the express purpose of ending the violence of Latin America’s Cold War, stood little chance against a pattern in Nicaraguan politics which long predated that era.

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797 In a strange irony given the history of U.S. involvement in Nicaragua, it was Washington’s ambassador to Managua who warned business leaders away from this arrangement. “I said that the future of Nicaragua was uncertain because of a lack of rule of law, a lack of democracy, and the choice of certain international partners. When I raised these issues before April, the business community frequently told me that they could accept sacrificing some fundamental rights because Nicaragua was not at war and did not have the violence of the countries to the north… Too often in the past, elites have set rules that disregard the interests of the rest of the population. One could argue that in the past, the United States was also part of the problem. This time is different for us all… For my three years in Nicaragua we have been willing to work with members of the Sandinista party and we remain willing to work with those seeking democratic reform. All of you are the real key to building the future Nicaragua, but it needs to be different than the historical cycles of the past. The Caudillo model needs to end now and power and opportunity need to be shared with everyone. That may sound scary to some of you, but it will be the key to building a sustainable future for the country.” “Remarks by the Ambassador: Thoughts of Ambassador Laura Dogu,” U.S. Embassy in Nicaragua, October 29, 2018.
Ortega’s authoritarian consolidation shows just how much the context of Latin American politics has changed since the end of the Cold War. For one, in the same way that Cold War ideologization transformed Nicaragua, the country has been flipped upside down by the declining salience of old ideological debates. Specifically, the collapse of the socialist paradigm allowed Ortega’s surreal ideological rebirth, enabling him to govern from the Right while preserving a monopoly on the leftist symbolism and apparatus of the Revolution. Like Angola’s MPLA under Eduardo dos Santos or Zimbabwe’s Zanu-PF party under Robert Mugabe, the sapping of a national liberation movement’s ideological substance was a necessary part of its transformation into a dynastic political vehicle.

For better or worse, politics in “Third World” countries are also no longer battlefields in a struggle to the death between competing universalistic worldviews. During much of the 20th century, instability in Asia, Africa, and Latin America invariably gave way to internationally-driven attempts at regime change in the form of either direct foreign intervention or international support for ideologically fueled insurgent groups. This dissertation shows how democratization came about in response to those conditions. Today, authoritarian regimes are finding that they can survive adverse conditions – such as economic collapse or weak political legitimacy – in ways which were not possible in the immediate post-Cold War period. The most obvious example is the pseudo-socialist government of Venezuela, which has defied analysts’ predictions of imminent collapse despite the economic catastrophe and humanitarian crisis that its mismanagement and repression created. This sort of muddling-along of an unstable regime did not and simply could not take place during the Cold War, when Third World countries were contested territory for superpowers, revolutionaries, and counterrevolutionaries locked in a global struggle.
In sum, in the same way that the Sandinista Revolution was a microcosm of the debates and conflicts which culminated in Latin America’s Third Wave of democratization, Nicaragua’s current crisis highlights a deteriorating democratic context in the region. In the second half of the 1990s, political scientists began taking note of the frustrated development – and in some cases, authoritarian regression – of young democracies in Eastern Europe and the Global South. Early post-Cold War predictions of liberalism had proven overly optimistic, as new forms of “illiberal democracy” began taking shape. Many Third Wave countries seemed to have ended up somewhere halfway between authoritarianism and democracy. On the one hand, domestic conditions were unfavorable to full-scale democratization; the Global South still suffered from poverty, inequality, and weak institutions. On the other hand, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way noted that the post-Cold War international environment also placed severe constraints on full-scale authoritarianism. Specifically, the perceived triumph of Western liberalism – and what, in retrospect, appears to have been an ideological fervor around democracy and its inevitability as a political system – “undermined the legitimacy of alternative regime models.” For most countries in the Global South, “the benefits of adopting formal democratic institutions – and the costs of maintaining overtly authoritarian ones – rose considerably in the 1990s.” In Central America, both the “demonstration effect” and the emergence of democratic norms – which found expression in multilateral organizations that advanced supranational values of democracy and human rights – buttressed fragile transitionary regimes. This favorable international context for democratization arguably reached its zenith in 2001 with the signing of the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

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The tepid international response to the crisis of the Ortega regime shows that this favorable context was ephemeral. Nicaragua’s current troubles are an advanced form of the democratic backsliding observed elsewhere in Latin America since the turn of the century. Indeed, well before Ortega’s repression grabbed international headlines, leaders across the region were beginning to emulate his marriage of liberal economics and political authoritarianism. As Oliver Stuenkel recently predicted, “others will follow Nicaragua’s path in Latin America.”

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**Acronyms and Abbreviations**

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<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>American Broadcast Corporation</td>
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<td>AD</td>
<td>Acción Democrática</td>
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<td>AG SRE</td>
<td>Archivo General de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores</td>
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<td>ALBA</td>
<td>Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America</td>
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<td>ANCR</td>
<td>Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica</td>
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<td>ARDE</td>
<td>Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática</td>
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<td>ARENA</td>
<td>Alianza Republicana Nacionalista</td>
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<td>BOS</td>
<td>Bloque Opositor Sur</td>
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<td>CDS</td>
<td>Comité de Defensa Sandinista</td>
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<td>CELAC</td>
<td>Community of Latin American and Caribbean States</td>
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<td>CIA</td>
<td>Central Intelligence Agency</td>
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<td>CIPRES</td>
<td>Centro para la Promoción, Investigación y Desarrollo Rural Social</td>
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<td>CMEA/COMECON</td>
<td>Council for Mutual Economic Assistance</td>
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<td>CODECA</td>
<td>Comité de Desarrollo Campesino</td>
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<td>COSEP</td>
<td>Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada</td>
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<td>CPUSSR</td>
<td>Communist Party of the Soviet Union</td>
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<td>Cold War International History Project</td>
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<td>DNSA</td>
<td>Digital National Security Archive</td>
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<td>DRI</td>
<td>Departamento de Relaciones Internacionales</td>
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<td>DRU</td>
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<td>Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional</td>
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<td>FPL</td>
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<td>Guerra Popular Prolongada</td>
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<td>Inter-American Commission for Human Rights</td>
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<td>Izquierda Democrática Sandinsita</td>
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<td>IHNCA</td>
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<td>Junta de Gobernación y Reconstrucción Nacional</td>
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<td>LP</td>
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<td>MPU</td>
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<td>Movimiento Renovador Sandinista</td>
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<td>NAM</td>
<td>Non-Aligned Movement</td>
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<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<td>NED</td>
<td>National Endowment for Democracy</td>
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<td>National Security Council</td>
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<td>NSDD</td>
<td>National Security Decision Directive</td>
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<td>OAS</td>
<td>Organization of American States</td>
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<td>ORPA</td>
<td>Organización Revolucionaria del Pueblo en Armas</td>
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<td>OPEC</td>
<td>Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries</td>
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<td>PARLACEN</td>
<td>Central American Parliament</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo</td>
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<td>PLC</td>
<td>Partido Liberal Constitucionalista</td>
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<td>PLO</td>
<td>Palestine Liberation Organization</td>
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<td>PRI</td>
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<td>PVP</td>
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<td>Research and Development Corporation</td>
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<td>RN</td>
<td>Resistencia Nicaragüense</td>
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<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
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<td>SELA</td>
<td>The Latin American and Caribbean Economic System</td>
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<td>SICA</td>
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<td>UDEL</td>
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<td>Unidad Nacional Opositora</td>
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<td>USAID</td>
<td>U.S. Agency for International Development</td>
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<td>USSR</td>
<td>Union of Soviet Socialist Republics</td>
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<td>UK</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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<td>ZANU PF</td>
<td>Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front</td>
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</table>
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