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Author(s): George Philip
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The Nicaraguan conflict: politics and propaganda

George Philip

The conflicts now taking place in Central America are being fought at several levels. The military conflict is low-intensity and at present seems roughly stalemated. No Central American government is in imminent danger of collapse and no insurgent group currently faces elimination. The future of Central America will be affected, however, not only by the balance of force within the area but also by the ways in which the protagonists seek to win the sympathies of the outside world and by their success in doing so. For example, Washington's commitment to democratisation within the area—genuine enough, it seems, if somewhat belated—has played an important part in the political evolution of El Salvador and may yet have its effect upon Guatemala. It has also greatly helped rally opinion within the United States round President Reagan's policies and has also helped attract support for these policies in western Europe and elsewhere. The propaganda war has obvious implications for the way in which Central America is perceived in other parts of the world. These perceptions may ultimately matter far more than events within the region itself.

Nicaragua is a case in point. Here, the propaganda conflict is particularly acute because the Sandinista government is seeking international support with at least as much energy as is Washington. For Nicaragua, a good international reputation is necessary to produce the aid needed for economic survival. The United States faces a particularly hard task in Nicaragua. Its aid to the anti-Sandinista *contras* is a far more difficult project to sell than support for President Duarte in El Salvador Moreover, if there is to be a major escalation of the military conflict in Central America, this is most likely to occur in Nicaragua. Certainly if Washington were to step up its pressure upon Managua to the point of direct military involvement, the international repercussions would be very great indeed.

Policy and propaganda in Nicaragua

The importance to the Sandinista government of maintaining a favourable international image can virtually be summed up in a single statistic. In every year from 1980 to 1984, Nicaragua's trade deficit has approached the value of its exports (actually exceeding it in 1984). In 1984 its exports totalled $374m and its imports $790m. If allowance is made for some repayment of debt, its seems clear that Nicaragua 'earns' at least as much from foreign aid as it does from trade.

Some of this aid does indeed come from the Soviet Union, including such vital elements as guaranteed oil supplies and weaponry. The east European countries have also been increasing their involvement. Indeed, as aid to Nicaragua from Latin America and international agencies supported by the United States has declined, so the proportion of aid provided by the Soviet bloc has increased.

Nevertheless, it does not seem possible for the Nicaraguan government to try to follow the 'Cuban model' of socialising the domestic economy, aligning itself with Moscow and then relying on a heavily increased aid inflow from the Soviet Union. One obvious difficulty here is that the Soviet Union is already too heavily involved financially in Cuba, Afghanistan and elsewhere to want to embark on a major new commitment. Even though the absolute sums involved in shoring up Nicaragua may not be large, it is only one of a number of potential client states which Moscow feels unable fully to satisfy. In any case, its geographical location hardly makes it a crucial factor in Soviet thinking. Another major difficulty, probably even more serious, is that a high-profile Soviet involvement in Nicaragua would almost certainly lead to the stepping up of military pressure from the other side—both from Nicaraguans decisively alienated from the government and from Washington which can ultimately always put more resources into Central America than can the Soviet Union.

There are some indications, however, that Soviet policy toward Nicaragua may be both more subtle and more active than this essentially negative calculation might suggest. Fundamentally, the Soviet strategy is a propaganda one. In a situation somewhat analogous to that of the 1936–9 Spanish Civil War, Soviet support for Nicaragua is given with a sharp eye to its effect upon the European democracies. That is to say, the aim is to use Nicaragua to divide, as far as possible, the United States from its west European allies. This strategy has the merit of being effective whether or not the Sandinistas survive in power. A Sandinista government has a powerfully irritating effect in Washington, whereas an American invasion—or even a limited military action—would obviously intensify anti-American feeling in Europe and Latin America. The obvious middle strategy open to Washington—a mixture of financial squeeze and indirect military pressure—can be countered by the present Soviet policy of guaranteeing oil and counter-insurgency weapons to Managua while encouraging the Sandinistas to seek the less essential aid in precisely those European countries which Moscow hopes to alienate, as far as possible, from Washington.

This Soviet strategy seems relatively new. Indeed, in 1981 the Cubans and the Russians were hoping that a revolutionary tide would sweep Central America and pose major problems for any American government. By last year this hope was temporarily, though not necessarily definitively, abandoned. The Salvadorean rebels, dropping their earlier objective of an early seizure of state power, ended their use of large military units and switched to the use of smaller sabotage squads. They also sought to rebuild their urban political strength, which was largely eliminated by the 'dirty war' in and after 1980, and began exploratory peace negotiations with the Duarte government. In July 1985, moreover, President Castro told an international conference in Havana that it was more important for all Latin American countries to agree to a debt repudiation than for there to be 'three or four isolated revolutions' in Latin America. Castro's outspokenness on the debt may have helped men like President Garcia of Peru to appear moderate. It may also have helped persuade Washington of the need for some kind of new initiative on the debt issue. The other side of the message, however, clearly understood in Managua, was that 'isolated revolutions' needed broad diplomatic support from the Latin American mainstream if they were to survive. Cuba alone could not protect the Sandinistas from Reagan. It was a

call for consolidation, which was later re-echoed in Managua itself.

An important part of this stategy is precisely for the Soviet Union not to enthuse too much over the Nicaraguan government. Publicly, Soviet spokesmen state their belief that the Nicaraguan question is a north-south issue rather than an east-west one and, however great their contribution may be to sustaining what is admittedly a very small Central American country, the 'headline aid' comes above all from western Europe. The aim is to capitalise on errors and failures on the part of Washington while giving Reagan himself as little as possible to aim at.

All of this may give the impression that the Reagan Administration's diagnosis of Nicaragua—a hardline Marxist state with an unsuspected talent for disguise—is essentially the correct one. Such a conclusion would, however, be misleading in a number of ways. For one thing, the character of the Nicaraguan system is not so well defined. During 1985, for example, some major changes of direction have been announced. There has been a marked (though so far incomplete) shift of economic emphasis in the direction of giving incentives to agriculture and a real, if more limited, shift toward offering material incentives to private export interests; the government has also shifted emphasis away from large agricultural units to a policy of permitting land distribution and support for peasant agriculture. Autonomy has been promised to the peoples of the Atlantic Coast, although the situation in this area remains highly complex. The final role of the opposition parties is not yet assured, but this is another area where the government may make changes. The Sandinista government's enforced responsiveness to international opinion has had far more than a marginal effect on the policies pursued; nor, in the best of circumstances, it is likely that the Sandinstas will become autonomous of opinion in the developed democracies for many more years by which time the system may have evolved in some unexpected ways.

Moreover, Nicaragua's international situation plays a major part in determining the balance of forces within the government. Specifically, the Sandinistas are at present advised by a small number of well-known international figures (many of whom have links to Catholic radicals). While there is undoubtedly some resentment at these 'foreigners' among native-born Nicaraguans, these advisers have proved their usefulness to the Sandinista leadership by their effectiveness at international public relations ('telling the truth about Nicaragua', as one of them put it). This effectiveness has a direct financial return. It is this which gives these advisers influence with the Sandinistas themselves. Since these advisers tend, almost without exception, to be on the moderate *blando* side of discussions their collective influence is considerable. But it is so mainly because there is a sympathetic and financially generous sector of international opinion to which it can relate. A corollary is that the Sandinistas have been able to rely on a highly sophisticated set of advisers (by no means all of them foreigners, of course) and have, at times, shown a political cunning which has taken their opponents by surprise.

This is not to say that the Sandinistas have avoided clumsy errors in their handling of international issues (examples include the poor reception given to the Pope on his 1983 visit, President Ortega's notorious visit to Moscow in the spring of this year, and, in all probability, the recent re-introduction of a state of emergency within Nicaragua). Nor is it to deny that hard-liners are to be found in the Sandinista hierarchy. These are *duros* rather than just left-wingers. It is, after all, true that the Sandinistas began as a military organisation and, in any case, the continuing civil war—even though 'low-intensity' in the eyes of Washington—presents a real test for the capacities of a small state such as Nicaragua. The need to enforce conscription is obviously a sore point here although this has obvious advantages as well as disadvantages for the government. For example, it removes any threat of unemployment, presents opportunities for indoctrination of troops and disciplines some of the Sandinistas' own formerly wild supporters. If the war goes badly, the Sandinistas will retain the capacity (and, assuredly, the motivation) to return to the hills and offer military opposition to any new government in Managua. If only for these reasons, there are authoritarian tendencies within the Nicaraguan regime which must be set against the moderate public image which the Sandinistas seek to cultivate. It would nevertheless be misleading to identify the hardliners too closely with the Soviet Union and Cuba.

Indeed, the conventional American interpretation of the Sandinistas gives insufficient weight to another of their important characteristics—their generation. By no means all of the leading Sandinistas have been educated abroad, but almost all have been sensitive to the contemporary intellectual currents of their youth. Thus, whereas Reagan's mind seems to have been set in the days of the Second World War and the early Cold War, the Sandinistas are the first Latin American government—and one of the first in the world—to be generationally a part of the student radicalism of the 1960s. (Alan Garcia in Peru is another such figure as, in a different way, is Felipe Gonzalez in Spain. Daniel Ortega's very warm welcome in Madrid earlier this year was surely no coincidence. Nor is the degree of esteem felt for the Sandinistas on the left wing of the British Labour Party.) The Sandinista heroes are Castro and Guevara rather than Stalin. Many leading Sandinistas spent years of exile in Havana and became critical of the excessive Sovietisation of Cuban society. Their 'third-worldism' and dislike of orthodox bureaucratic structures is real. So is their attachment to the radical trend within the Roman Catholic church. They claim to represent 'the people' rather than 'the proletariat' (a tiny fragment of Nicaraguan society, in any case) and prefer to retain a quasi-military structure rather than seeking to transform themselves into an orthodox Communist Party. Many outsiders find these characteristics attractive. The emergence of the Sandinistas as one of the preferred causes of the no-longer-so-new Left in north America and western Europe should not be a matter for surprise.

The Latin American dimension

Another obstacle to the Reagan Administration's efforts to present the Nicaraguan conflict as an east-west issue is the attitude of several Latin American governments. The Mexican government, in particular, has an interpretation of the Central American conflicts which is very different from that held in Washington. During the oil-boom years of the Lopez Portillo presidency, Mexico was quite aggressively opposed to American policy in the area. In August 1981, Mexico, together with France, where President Mitterrand had just come to power, called for a negotiated solution to the civil war in El Salvador. Under Lopez Portillo's successor, Miguel de la Madrid, a financially-strapped Mexico has been far less sympathetic toward Managua; earlier this year Mexican oil exports to Nicaragua were drastically scaled down owing to Nicaraguan non-payment for previous supplies.

Nevertheless, no Mexican government can avoid viewing Central America in quite a different perspective than that of the east-west conflict. There is the traditional 'safety valve' intepretation of Mexican politics: that a left-wing foreign policy is used to co-opt potential opponents of far more conservative internal policies and is, therefore, an important component of internal security. But, quite apart from this, there is the additional point that the Mexican Foreign Ministry is largely composed of

nationalists who will find ways of seeking to help Nicaragua which are not specifically forbidden by the Mexican President.

Moreover, recent political changes in South America have tended to help the Nicaraguan position. The emergence of Garcia in Peru and of a civilian government in Brazil—to add to earlier changes in foreign policy orientation in Colombia and Argentina—have virtually ensured that the United States cannot find a majority in the Organisation of American States (OAS) or a similar international body for an intensification of diplomatic pressure against Managua. Instead, the addition of the so-called Lima countries (Peru, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay) to the Contadora countries (Mexico, Venezuela, Panama and Colombia) at the end of July has been a considerable source of comfort to the Nicaraguan authorities. The fact that Costa Rica and, very recently also, Ecuador have taken positions which are openly hostile towards Nicaragua only emphasises Washington's inability to swing Latin American opinion as a whole. The United States' position would have been much stronger had it not been for the South Atlantic conflict in 1982 in which the United States supported Britain rather than Argentina. Meanwhile Costa Rica, whose hostility to Managua has been increasing, has found itself increasingly isolated diplomatically within Latin America.

Space here does not permit a detailed survey of recent diplomatic manoeuvring around the question of Nicaragua. Nevertheless, this is an important issue particularly as the original Contadora initiative came to its conclusion at the end of November. Of even greater potential importance will be the composition and outlook of the new governments in Honduras, Guatemala and Costa Rica which will be formed after elections scheduled between November 1985 and February 1986. It may be that Washington will finally succeed in welding together its allies in Central America into an effective united front, but there are still powerful obstacles in the way. No Honduran government, in particular, will want to face an outright confrontation with Nicaragua. All Central American politicians will be aware, moreover, that even the successful destruction of the Sandinista government would not end the civil conflicts in the region. The Sandinistas would survive as a military force even if the *contras* took Managua. Moreover, if the Nicaraguan government did fall, Cuba would have an incentive to abandon its present stance of studied moderation and to supply left-wing insurgents with higher-calibre weapons. An armed Left, working as much against the American presence as against domestic governments, might well spring up in countries such as Honduras which have so far had relatively few internal conflicts. Other Central American governments, therefore, face a trade-off; their ability to control their own internal situations will be greater if the international status quo is allowed to remain —however unwelcome they may find the prospect of sharing the region with a Sandinista government. The public unwillingness of the Honduran military leaders to become too closely involved with the *contras* shows that this perception is widely shared.

Conclusions

All of this highlights some of the dilemmas which Washington now faces in its dealings with Nicaragua. It could, of course, try to negotiate a status quo agreement with the Sandinistas. Nicaragua would certainly negotiate on international military matters with Washington—the number of foreign military advisers, the avoidance of foreign bases and so on. It has already offered an amnesty to the *contras,* except the *Somocistas,* and might accept international observers to check that its terms were not violated. Nevertheless, the Sandinistas would not agree to make fundamental political changes. Nicaragua would remain essentially a 'Socialist' state. Daniel Ortega recently defined the ruling Sandinista party (the FSLN) as 'a political party like the others, but not exactly like the others'. This is more of a Leninist concept of a vanguard party than a liberal concept of one party in free competition with others—although one quite far removed from orthodox bureaucratic Stalinism. Such an outcome would not be in line with the aims and objectives of the present American Administration although Washington may later find it has little choice but to accept it.

Alternatively, the United States could choose a military escalation. While an invasion of Nicaragua by American troops would probably still be prohibitively costly in terms of men and reputation, a slightly softer option might involve the selective targeting of Nicaraguan installations (bridges, the oil refinery and so on) for air attacks. Some Sandinistas fear that Washington is now looking for an excuse, possibly a staged border incident with Costa Rica, to launch precisely such an attack. Yet even if the political and diplomatic opposition to this tactic from western Europe and Latin America could be contained, there would remain a Sandinista military movement and possibly still a Sandinista government. The military conflicts in Central America would only intensify.

The present direction of American policy, steering between these two extremes, is not free of difficulty and embarrassment either. Above all, despite the optimistic pronouncements of some American spokesmen, the demise of the Sandinistas does not seem imminent—a fact which Washington may soon have to face. The ability of Daniel Ortega to draw a massive crowd in Madrid, the twinning of Labour-controlled British cities with Nicaraguan towns, the obvious sympathy expressed for Nicaragua in smaller European countries such as Sweden and Holland—will all help the Sandinistas survive and add to friction within the Atlantic alliance.