

Through 30 Years of Politics and Personalities in Nicaragua

Los Angeles Times, April 19, 1987. Arturo Cruz, Jr.

Arturo Cruz Jr. is one of the most respected voices in his generation of Nicaraguans. Cruz, 33, is the son of banker Arturo Cruz Sr., a longtime opponent of former Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza who spent 10 years in exile in Washington before the Sandinista-led revolution in 1979. Cruz Sr. initially supported the Sandinistas and served as a member of their ruling junta for a year. But in 1982, he broke with the new regime, accusing it of having turned overly authoritarian. In 1985, Cruz Sr. became one of the three leaders of the rebel contra leadership, only to resign last month, when he decided that the rebels, too, were led by authoritarians.

Arturo Cruz Jr., educated largely at the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex, England, and at Johns Hopkins University, returned to Nicaragua after the revolution to work for the Sandinistas. He was assigned to the foreign affairs branch of the party. But, like his father, he gradually became disillusioned with the regime, and in 1982 he moved to Washington and became a political adviser to Eden Pastora, the former Sandinista leader who had defected to the contras. When Cruz Sr. joined the contras, Cruz Jr. became his principal aide.

Cruz Jr. recently made national headlines when it was revealed that he had carried on a 15-month romance with Fawn Hall, the secretary of fired White House aide Oliver L. North. At North's urging, U. S. counterintelligence agents investigated Cruz to determine if he had used Hall to obtain secrets as a double agent for the Sandinistas or for Cuba. They concluded, however, that he was not a spy.

According to Robert Leiken, a Central American expert and author of several books on Latin America, Cruz Jr. was "unquestionably the leading ideologist and one of the leading protagonists in the effort to reform, modernize and democratize the contras." Cruz, who resigned from the contra movement shortly after his father, is writing a book; the following are excerpts from his notes.

Growing Up

I grew up in two Nicaraguan cities, Jinotepe, my father's town, and Granada, my mother's. Jinotepe was a coffee town, a cool village of small houses. Each year my great-grandmother's sisters used to invite me to stay at their home in Jinotepe and pray for the soul of my poor Uncle Pancho. Uncle Pancho had been such a terrible sinner before he was called from this earth, the sisters told me, that he was lingering unhappily in purgatory and needed my prayers to reach heaven. Every day during my visit, at 6 p.m., I sat quietly and prayed to redeem the lost soul of Uncle Pancho, and every Sunday I dedicated my communion to helping him enter heaven. Thousands of prayers later, I decided he had made it.

Granada, founded in 1524, a city of Spanish-style plazas and wrought-iron balconies, is larger than Jinotepe. My earliest memory of Granada is Easter Week at my grandmother Adela's house. It was a Granadan credo that during Easter Week the devil himself prowled the streets of

Granada, hunting for young boys to abduct to hell. Adela was sure that I was just the kind of boy the devil wanted. To protect me, Adela locked me inside her house the entire week and draped me with religious chains and medals.

As I grew, Granada grew also. I remember the day of the first traffic light. People heard about the new invention and traveled miles to watch the red light change to green. The light created Granada's first traffic jam. Every Granadan who thought he could drive wanted to ride beneath the light.

To solve the traffic problem, Granada appointed its first traffic policeman. His name was Luna; he was a simple man from a small village miles away. If it was his whim, he would stop your car, and you would offer him bribes. If, however, you were short of cash, Luna, an accommodating man who wished to be liked, was willing to give you credit.

In Granada, time was a social rather than a chronological phenomenon. I knew when it was 4 p.m., because that was when the funeral procession marched past Miguel the shoeshine man's corner. If we missed the day's funeral, Miguel would tell us who had died. (Miguel, who had never cared for politics, became a radical after his wife died giving birth because her doctor, off at a baseball game, refused to leave the game for a lower-class client.)

On the corner opposite Miguel, the 80-year-old Urbina sisters--called the ninas (the girls) because they were still unmarried--appeared like the moon at 5 p.m. and sat quietly on their stoop. I knew it was time to go home if the ninas were no longer sitting on the corner, because at exactly 9 p.m. they disappeared as promptly as they had arrived.

In 1972, an earthquake devastated Managua. To save electricity, Gen. Somoza decided to move Nicaragua time one hour forward. Father Vilchez, the local priest, would have nothing to do with it. He announced that the hour of God could not be changed by secular hands and promptly moved Granada time back one hour. For about two years, until Somoza retreated to the hour of God, Granada existed in two timetables, and we had to schedule every appointment either at secular or holy hours.

America crept slowly into our lives. It came through baseball, movies, tennis shoes, schooling; my grandfather, who was well-educated, encouraged me to read the Federalist Papers, and my early heroes were his: Franklin Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. And when I was 13, my cousin sent me a Playboy calendar, which I rented to the other kids for 20 cents a day. When my father went to the United States in 1969, I went with him, and then to school in England and America.

America, especially California, meant much to my generation. Despite the contradictions America has forced upon my land, I have come to admire America deeply. But I have always refused to lose my Nicaraguan accent. To lose my accent, I think, would somehow make me forget my Nicaraguan identity.

Why I Joined the Sandinistas

Among my friends, to be anti-Somoza was as natural as breathing. But my friends were the so-called *la gente bien* (the good people). The revolution against Gen. Somoza most certainly did not occur as my American friends have carefully explained it to me; the masses did not suddenly rise and oppose Somoza. Somoza left the people alone, if the people left him alone. Not to be openly against Somoza was to be with him.

Early opposition to Somoza came only from those like my father, who fought openly with Somoza and was jailed twice, once in 1947, for four months, and once in 1954, for a year. Somoza never feared my father's generation, because he knew that the Nicaraguan political elite could never unite. Over the years the members of the political class had compromised themselves so egregiously, they had been manipulated so often, that no true organized opposition to the Somozas developed until the Sandinistas in the mid-'70s.

The Sandinistas hardly spoke for the people either. The genius of the Sandinistas was that they understood that if the country's political center could be manipulated, they could attract a viable power base and that the masses would follow. Sandinistas were Marxists to those who wanted Marxism; they were social democrats to those who wanted social democracy.

The Sandinistas understood something else: that for most Nicaraguans, political struggle is personalized rather than ideological. Most of the participants in the Nicaraguan revolution identified with faces, not ideas. For them, the war was more of a boxing match than a political contest. The Sandinistas learned how to fashion heroes, and they created in Eden Pastora a public face to challenge the champion Somoza.

I joined the Sandinistas in 1978. By then I knew that the Sandinistas had managed to unite the political center, that the people were behind them, and that President Carter's commitment to Somoza was shaky. It was unclear to us how the Sandinistas would govern when in power, because we were all Sandinistas, and we did not know ourselves. We did not know which of us would have power, who would rule, or how. Daniel Ortega, the current president, was a Marxist. At the time, the educated elite were all Marxists or technocrats. The technocrats were the Chicago boys: They had gone to the University of Chicago and had come back imbued with monetarism. My friends and I joined the Marxist side, because I knew the country required radical economic change and I preferred Karl Marx to Milton Friedman.

Now, with nine years behind me, I also see that I became a Sandinista because I did not want to be left off the train of history. We all needed to be present at the creation of the new Nicaragua. Creation is a terrifying act, but it would have been more terrifying to have been left out of creation entirely.

Why I Left the Sandinistas

In May of 1982 I left my position as an adviser to the Sandinista Department of International Relations because, first of all, I realized that the Sandinistas did not wish to reach an understanding with the United States, an understanding that I felt was necessary. The Sandinistas interpreted the war in Angola as a Cuban victory over South Africa. This intoxicated them; in their view, for the first time in history, a Third World power had met a First World power in combat and triumphed. Cuba's image changed from a Soviet naval base in the Caribbean to a true global power, and the Sandinistas decided that the United States feared Cuba too much to interfere in Nicaragua.

I argued that there was no reason not to remain friendly with the United States; that the factors that make the United States an inconsistent power also make it a good ally. The United States can never really dominate another country. Its politics are too fractured. A country can receive millions of dollars in economic aid and arms from America yet still feel free of its yoke. The United States will never command an imperial network because it does not maintain enough internal consistency to create such hegemony. The Soviets offer a much more homogeneous force. You can count on their commitments. They are a reliable ally. So much so that they can overrun a country.

Whenever the Sandinistas negotiated with the United States, they were only buying time to consolidate their power. Their diplomacy has never been an end in itself. I disagreed.

The second reason I left was because I was fed up with my dual life. My official role as a spokesman for the government forced me to take positions opposed to my personal beliefs. For instance, we were all required to condemn Poland's Solidarity movement. The junta's stance was that Solidarity was a reactionary development rather than a social movement; that Solidarity was instigated by external Western manipulation rather than by internal dissent. *Barricada*, the official Nicaraguan newspaper, dutifully published imaginative reports on how the Polish economy had defeated inflation and how miraculously the socialist government had served the country. But privately I supported Lech Walesa, despite the Sandinista claim that he was a CIA agent.

And I found it difficult not to criticize the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which the Sandinistas refused to do. I remember once, just after the 1979 Soviet invasion, I went to a cocktail party in Washington with the first Sandinista ambassador to the United States, Rafael Solis, who was 27. Anatoly F. Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador to the United States, was telling our ambassador how baffled he was by the strenuous American objections to the invasion. After all, Dobrynin said, Afghanistan "is in our sphere of influence." Solis came over to me, shocked at Dobrynin's imperialistic attitude. That's a classic example of great-power behavior, he said. He couldn't believe it. Welcome to the real world, I said to myself.

Publicly I praised the Nicaraguan economy but privately I disapproved. The Soviet Union was supplying us with military aid, not economic aid. The security of a country cannot depend solely

upon weapons. But the Sandinistas would tell me: Look at all we have done in the last two years. We have a powerful army. A political machinery. An efficient security apparatus.

What we had done, while devastating the economy, was to establish power. That was the Sandinista concept of good government: one that provided for their own power. I privately disagreed, but I wasn't allowed to disagree publicly.

And I quit because the Sandinistas, pretending to be the liberators of our country, were helping to destroy it. Nicaragua has undergone rapid changes under the new regime, some of which are beneficial. But certain traits of the Nicaraguan character, traits that for centuries have colored our country, were being ravaged. The most devastating of all has been the loss of our open nature. Nicaragua has always been a country of conversation, even under Somoza. As I have said, in Somoza's time, if you were not actively against him, you were with him. Today, if you are not with the Sandinistas, you are against them. We used to live in a society where the houses were unlocked, where people used to sit in the streets and complain about politics. Today the security and ideological apparatuses are more efficient. Block committees have been established throughout the country. They have many eyes and ears. People who used to talk to their neighbors are now afraid of them.

The best elements of the Nicaraguan soul were withering. I didn't trust anyone. I became afraid to disagree.

Finally, I left because I have a fierce sense of loyalty. My father quit the Sandinistas in the beginning of 1982. I heard rumors that they were planning to use me against him. I knew I could never do what they wished. And so, I left my country.

The Contras

Eden Pastora: The contras have always been dominated by personalities rather than ideology. Eden Pastora was the most dominant contra of all--a tremendously charismatic man with a magical soul. His wizardry, his preference for emotion over reason, always reminded me of a character from Gabriel Garcia-Marquez's "A Hundred Years of Solitude"; Pastora's presence was so colossal that he seemed to straddle centuries.

Pastora's overwhelming ego was responsible for his charm. It also induced his downfall. Sometimes Pastora was a child; in front of his men, he would stage contests against the champion arm wrestler, rigged so that Pastora would win. He used to boast that a firing squad would have to line him up in front of the Momotombo volcano to kill him, because he was such a giant of a man.

Then, like anyone whose ego is too large for his soul, Eden Pastora began to believe his own stories. In 1983, Pastora fell in love with a woman named Nancy. Like the rest of us, Nancy had been a Sandinista. But there was considerable evidence that, unlike the rest of us, Nancy was still a Sandinista. Pastora shrugged it off. I am not afraid of a woman, he said. I am not afraid of anyone.

Nancy and Pastora were lovers for more than a year. Pastora confided the revolution over his pillow. When Nancy heard enough she returned to the Sandinistas and showed them the notes she had been keeping for all those months. She knew everything. How much money Pastora was receiving each month from the United States. The location of each safehouse in the country. The code names of all his contacts. The Sandinistas published the information, word for word, in *Barricada* [the official Sandinista newspaper].

The Americans assumed that Pastora was driven by revolutionary fervor. The contra insurgency was indeed important to Pastora, but not to defeat communism for America. Pastora wanted to show his countrymen that he was more intelligent than Humberto Ortega, Daniel's brother and the current minister of defense. In the Sandinista military, Pastora had always been subordinate to Humberto. He needed a military victory to prove his superiority.

Moreover, Pastora, like the other Nicaraguans, sought the approval of Fidel Castro as a child seeks the approval of the father. Pastora became obsessed that Castro would someday officially designate Pastora a genius. He wanted Castro to demand that Pastora, and Pastora alone, rule Nicaragua.

Castro is the only Latin leader who has sustained his own power in his own manner. Because of this, in Latin America, belief in Fidel Castro is addictive. Castro is more than a man. He is a drug.

Privately, Castro called Pastora Guajiro . The Peasant.

The Americans asked Pastora to establish the southern front of the contra war. To do so, Pastora had to create a military infrastructure. He couldn't do it. He couldn't delegate responsibility; he refused to give away power. The Americans demanded a strict, American management-style organization. Organization made Pastora paranoid: Where the Americans saw order, Pastora saw conspiracy. The Americans wanted results. Pastora wanted publicity. His men referred to him as Commander Kodak. He insisted that his picture be taken at each battle.

Today Pastora spends his time shark-fishing in Barra de Colorado, in northern Costa Rica. He says he is out of the game.

Pastora never cared to understand the Americans. The Americans never could understand Pastora. Between two such personalities you need more than a translator of words. You need an interpreter of cultures.

Carlos Coronel: Coronel was the brains behind Eden Pastora.

The Coronel family is part German, part Spanish. They came to Nicaragua generations ago, and they developed the southern region of the country. Before they arrived the land was jungle; the Coronels turned it into plantations. The Coronels were colonizers, but they always had peasant-like habits, and so they understood how to manipulate the Nicaraguan peasants and Indians. They ruled their lands like feudal lords: gracefully, absolutely. The peasants were loyal to three generations of Coronels, and they remained loyal to Carlos. It did not matter to them whether

Carlos was a Sandinista or a contra. They went to battle for him, and perhaps they were never sure what side they fought for but they knew whom they fought for.

Carlos Coronel was both a feudal lord and a leftist. Despite their rhetoric, few members of the Left really comprehend the people. Coronel knew how to talk, how to interact with the people. Most important, he knew how to drink. In Nicaragua, the art of drinking is crucial to interaction among social classes--what to say, when to drink. Carlos Coronel knew how to rule the table better than anyone I've ever met.

(The drinking table was part of my own contra experience: I had to prove that I could hold my liquor. Drinking started as early as 1 p.m.--the excuse was always something like, it's already 8 p.m. in Egypt, so why not start now?--and it continued until past 11 p.m.; rum and Coke, whiskey, tequila. From the table came serious decisions and military assignments. The drinking table was the scene of conspiracy and intrigue, where you could show how smoothly you could shift alliances and stay sober. I managed it only once, but it was one of my most important rites as a Nicaraguan. I never drank with the Sandinistas, though; their Marxism provided them a slightly greater sense of discipline, and their table was less necessary and less interesting.)

Because Carlos Coronel, in his heart, believed in the superiority of European stock, he decided that an alliance between the ruling European-descended families of Nicaragua and the Sandinistas was crucial; that superior heritage was necessary for the revolution. And so he created the alliance between communist and capitalist that no one else could have accomplished, that no one, in fact, believed could have happened. Lenin once said that the capitalists would fight among themselves to sell the rope with which they would be hanged. Perhaps the Nicaraguan ruling families, still aligned with the Sandinista junta, know they will be destroyed. In the meantime, they will make their millions of dollars. Maybe in 20 years the Sandinistas will be gone. Maybe they will flee. Regardless, the old families will be rich.

In 1981, Eden Pastora left Nicaragua to create the southern front. A year later, Carlos Coronel went with him. The prevailing rumor at the time was that Coronel joined Pastora because the Sandinistas did not recognize his genius; that they did not understand all he had done for them; that he had not received enough power in the Sandinista structure. But others suspected Coronel's loyalty to the contras, for Coronel was rumored to have been the personal agent of Castro himself. It is widely believed that even though the Sandinistas never recognized Coronel's talents, it has always been Coronel, and only Coronel, whom Castro has loved.

Today Coronel is back on his land in northern Costa Rica, once again a lord. No one knows what he intends to do. He remains a mystery.

Why the Contras Are Failing

Whatever else the contras mismanaged, however their personalities interfered with their struggle, when they lost their political viability in the United States, they started to lose the war. The contras, unknowingly, allowed themselves to be aligned with the agenda of one small group in the United States--the Far Right. A lesson for the Third World: The United States can only be trusted when you can maintain the support of the political center.

The contras, so charismatic in Nicaragua, were always terrible at public relations in America. In American marketing terms, they had an excellent product but inferior marketing techniques. The genius of the Sandinistas was not only their military strategy but also their presentation to America. The Nicaraguan war was fought on three fronts, north Nicaragua, south Nicaragua and Madison Avenue. The Sandinistas won the latter handily. They learned how to please America and how to play with American public opinion. They understood exactly when to remind America about Vietnam and how to release foreign prisoners, such as Eugene Hasenfus, to their best advantage.

The Sandinistas have hired the effective American mercenaries: not the soldiers, but the public relations firms--American mercenaries of ideas.

Americans in Nicaragua

Americans come to Nicaragua every day.

The American Left comes to Nicaragua. The Left is always searching for the perfect society. Nicaragua is today's Utopia. A trip to Managua is more salubrious than a visit to a psychiatrist. One visit resolves the meaning of life. One visit provides the seriousness and the commitment that members of the American Left find lacking in their own domestic lives. Every day radical pilgrims jet down to Managua and scurry about, picking coffee beans, going home feeling as though they have participated in the improvement of the course of social history. Nicaraguans call these Americans, who try to blend into our culture with their sandals, blue jeans and Trotsky eyeglasses, the sandalistas . Nicaragua is the Intellectual Disneyland for these Sandalistas.

Liberal politicians come to Nicaragua. I remember once when two key Democratic senators came to Managua to talk with one of the top comandantes . We expected a difficult exchange; instead we were met with amiable chatter. The senators simply wanted to align with us so that they could take their alignment back to the United States and pose with it for their constituency.

Jesse Jackson came to Nicaragua. It was assumed that he would want to meet with the large segment of black Nicaraguans who live in Bluefields, a city on the Atlantic Coast, and who are violently anti-Sandinista. Black Nicaraguans are the victims of constant discrimination from the predominant Pacific Nicaraguan culture. Jackson did not seem interested in Bluefields. As far as I know, he spent his entire time with the Managua junta.

Ultraconservative politicians, too, come to Nicaragua. They also want a shot at making history, and Nicaragua is the new shooting range for the anti-communist wars. Perhaps the conservatives are correct. But then what? What happens if the contras do defeat the Sandinistas? The conservatives aren't concerned with Nicaragua; they want to demolish communism.

Hollywood comes to Nicaragua.

The Third World is only beginning to comprehend the power of American actors and actresses. As soon as an actor becomes an activist, he commands immediate attention for whatever cause he picks. Most actors choose the Left, because the Left, in America, evinces more intellectual credibility. These celebrity activists have a far more dramatic influence on the American public than an editorial in the New York Times; they have the ability to galvanize the attention of the public, and they can raise a significant bankroll.

The Somozas once developed ingratiating relationships with the American political Right. The Sandinistas have learned how to manipulate Hollywood. Daniel Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo, are daring, glamorous, charming. When the new revolutionary jet set invites Murillo to California, she is a guest at the most exclusive mansions in Beverly Hills and Malibu.

The Sandinistas have taught these actors a minimal understanding of Nicaragua, an understanding just large enough so that they consider their knowledge of my country greater than mine. The actors tell me that Central America is in turmoil because of its incredible social inequities, inequities that, of course, require revolution. This is true. But it is only one part of the truth. It doesn't matter that they compress the entire history of our region into a sentence. Nicaragua is a small country. We must have small motivations.

In my time as a Sandinista I only knew of one radical pilgrim who tried to understand our country. Joan Baez had the integrity to confront the Sandinistas. Perhaps she had been through so many similar situations that she had learned how to make up her own mind. I never agreed with her conclusions because she came to support the Sandinistas as I grew away from them. But I respected that she knew how to make up her own mind.

And I knew one American official with integrity and understanding: Lawrence Pezzullo. Pezzullo was ambassador to Nicaragua from 1979 to 1981. He not only understood Nicaragua's history and its intricate relationship with the United States, but he even wanted to rectify the situation. Pezzullo refused to be intimidated by either side. He alone tried to piece together a sensible package of economic support. He was recalled in 1981.

Americans come to Nicaragua. They do not learn about our people or our country. They don't learn because their priority is not our country but the image they wish to project to other Americans when they return. When Americans come to Nicaragua, they never seem to leave America behind.

There Were No Secrets

Our country has always been a land without secrets. We have been a notoriously open society, almost to the point of imprudence. In Nicaragua, everyone used to know everything about everyone. We talked to our own press as though we were talking to our neighbors. Or strangers. Our national character has never possessed an instinctive sense of internal discipline about information. We passed along whatever we knew. Worse, we passed along whatever we felt.

We have been as open to the United States as we have been to each other. Our openness has cost us much. We have revealed too much to America. We lay our country bare: its problems, its failures.

It appears that Americans have observed this openness and have come to look upon us with contempt. They have monitored our internal bleeding. Perhaps they have decided that "these chaotic people can't possibly run their own affairs," that all we can do is fight among ourselves.

Even though I have lived many years in America, I am guilty of the same openness. I have revealed too much about my political life and my romantic life. I should have remained quiet. But it is the Nicaraguan national character to always speak what we perceive to be the truth. It remains to be seen, over the next few years, whether we will be allowed to speak any longer.