

The Contra's Valley Forge: How I View the Nicaragua Crisis by Enrique Bermudez

Contra Opposition to the Sandinistas

In November 1980, Jorge Salazar, whom I considered the Thomas Jefferson of our movement, was brutally gunned down by the Sandinistas at a gas station outside Managua. Though Salazar had not been involved in military actions against the Sandinistas, the Communist government had long been concerned about his immense popularity in the rural areas and they considered him a threat to their totalitarian power. Of all the brave Nicaraguans I have dealt with over the past nine years, I have met few individuals as dynamic and courageous as Jorge Salazar. When he spoke he gave Nicaraguans enthusiasm and power to embrace the cause of freedom. His killing brought many Nicaraguans into the anti-Sandinista movement and inspired those already in the movement, like myself, to intensify their efforts. Following Salazar's murder, Nicaraguans displayed posters with a picture of him and a quotation from a speech he gave in the presence of Daniel Ortega that began: "We are neither going to Miami, nor are we going to submit." To this day, I consider that a motto for our efforts.

In late 1980, after President Somoza was assassinated in Asuncion, the Fifteenth of September Legion [a group of anti-Sandinistas] received support from the government of Argentina, which had become concerned about developments in Nicaragua when the Argentinian Communist insurgency, the Montoneros, began using Managua as their headquarters. Though it has become "conventional wisdom" that our movement was initially aided by the U. S. government, it was the Argentinians who supplied us with the support we needed to commence our military struggle against the Sandinistas. We did not begin receiving aid from the United States until 1982, and, in the entire history of our movement, we have received less than \$110 million in military assistance from the United States. This figure compares with the \$118 million the Congress sent the Sandinistas after the revolution.

On March 14, 1982, the Nicaraguan resistance fired its equivalent of the American minutemen's "shot heard around the world." Our attacks in Nueva Segovia were largely successful, destroying bridges over both the Negro and Coco rivers, and served as an official declaration of war against a government that was increasingly recognized as illegitimate and brutal. The Sandinistas immediately issued a state of emergency, demonstrating to many Nicaraguans that they were not invulnerable. After this attack, Nicaraguans and the world community began to take seriously our movement, and we gained a new name from the Communist government--Contras.

Since 1982 our movement has been revolutionary, not counterrevolutionary, in nature. Our forces are composed mostly of campesinos who picked up arms after experiencing extensive religious, economic, and political persecution at the hands of an illegitimate, repressive government. The reasons we are fighting are not unlike some of the reasons why the American minutemen picked up arms against the British, though the persecution we have faced in Nicaragua is far worse than

anything that existed in the American colonies in the 1770s. For instance, many Nicaraguans who have been imprisoned for their political or religious beliefs have remarked that the prison conditions are even worse than those Armando Valladares has described in Cuba. Over 400,000 Nicaraguans have fled the Sandinista tyranny [Nicaragua's 1980 population was only 3.3 million].

It is ironic that our forces are composed primarily of the people that were supposed to have benefited most from the revolution. However, the life of the typical Nicaraguan campesino is far worse today than under Somoza. Under the Sandinistas, many campesinos have been forced into cooperatives, and they must hand their produce to the state in exchange for ration coupons worth far less than the market value. In thousands of cases, property has been confiscated from small land owners. But most important, the campesino faces a totalitarian climate that restricts almost all individual initiative and persecutes him for his religious values. He is always within reach of the Sandinistas' ultimate enforcement tool, the local block commanders, who serve as gestapo-like thought police. As a result, the campesinos despise the Sandinista government, and thousands have joined our cause.

In 1986, the Congress appropriated \$100 million to our cause, and our forces reached the pinnacle of their fighting by the Soviet-supported *piricuacos* (a term we use to describe the Sandinistas, meaning "rabid dogs"), the determination of our forces, combined with the immense support we received from the Nicaraguan people, turned the war in our favor. Within months, our forces overran Sandinista military bases and destroyed many military-related government facilities. In 1987, we carried out more than one resupply operation a day to our forces. In the first six months of 1987 alone, we engaged the Sandinistas in combat 1,360 times, destroying 55 military posts and temporary bases of the Sandinista army, 15 bridges, and 83 military trucks, and shooting down five Soviet helicopters. One of our biggest victories occurred on October 15, 1987, when we launched an offensive along Rama Road [a main thoroughfare from Managua, the capital, to the Atlantic coast]. We... destroyed several Sandinista garrisons. We also... shot down a Soviet attack helicopter. In December 1987, we carried out another immensely successful assault at the gold mines of Zelaya in central Nicaragua. During this offensive, we overran several military installations, captured approximately 27 SA-7s, and destroyed several trucks, bridges, and helicopters. I have little doubt that this is what forced them to the negotiating table for the first time in the history of our movement. Since the beginning, we have stated that we would sit down with the Sandinistas to negotiate the freedom of Nicaragua in exchange for a cease-fire once those freedoms were implemented, but until 1987 the Sandinistas never took our proposal very seriously.

Our forces are not going to surrender. Today, we are three times the size of the so-called people's army that toppled Anastasio Somoza in 1979. We represent the largest armed insurrection in Latin America since the Mexican Revolution. We are facing seemingly insurmountable odds, but the lessons of David are not lost on us, and the determination demonstrated by men like Jorge Salazar is increasingly manifest in the people of Nicaragua.

Inconsistent US Policy towards Nicaragua

The biggest mistake the Carter administration made in Somoza's final days was allowing the Nicaraguan National Guard to fall apart. Though the National Guard was never a very large force (in 1979 there were only 7,000 members), it was a professional force not subject to Sandinista party control, and was thus the only force capable of ensuring that the Sandinistas abided by the promises of democracy and political pluralism they made to the Organization of American States (OAS). Instead, the Sandinistas created their own party-controlled militia and monopolized the force of arms. Had the National Guard stayed intact, the Sandinistas could never have achieved their totalitarian ambitions.

In Managua, I warned Ambassador Pezzullo that unless the Carter administration sent a signal that the United States wanted the National Guard to remain, most guardsmen would flee the country, giving the Sandinistas a blank check of power. Though Pezzullo and other U. S. officials promised to support the National Guard after Somoza's departure, this support never materialized. As a result, most of the National Guard fled Nicaragua following the Sandinista triumph, and the Sandinistas took total control of the nation's political and military apparatuses. Today, the Sandinista military, the EPS [Sandinista Popular Army, or Ejército Popular Sandinista], is a party-loyal militia that has drafted more than 90,000 young Nicaraguans--many as young as 12 years old--into its ranks. This militia, which is used frequently to support the Sandinista party, remains the most significant obstacle to establishing democracy in Nicaragua. The demise of the National Guard and the transfer of military authority to the Sandinistas was the ultimate triumph of Communism in Nicaragua.

As Soviet military support to the Sandinista government increased dramatically in the early 1980s--today it stands at over \$1 billion a year--it became clear to me that our movement would need the support of the United States if we hoped to achieve victory. Though we were receiving support from private individuals who cared about the cause of freedom in Nicaragua, and from the government of Argentina, it was not enough to carry out a war against the Sandinista militia--the largest in the history of Central America--with its liberal support from Moscow and Havana. I have often wished we did not have to rely on Washington for our support. I have a lot of respect for the United States, but it has fumbled its role as a reliable ally of freedom. Had the United States consistently supported our movement since the beginning, I have little doubt that Nicaragua would be free today.

Our forces are well acquainted with the Bay of Pigs, for instance, where President Kennedy betrayed the promises his administration had made to provide American air cover to the Cuban freedom fighters. As a result of Kennedy's betrayal, thousands of Cuban patriots died defenseless in the Cuban swamps fighting Castro's artillery with almost nothing but guts and determination. Histories of the Bay of Pigs now reveal that President Kennedy was golfing as the Brigade 2506 was being annihilated at the hands of the Soviet-supported Cuban militia. The Cubans, Angolans, and we Nicaraguans are still paying a heavy price for that betrayal. We have all seen the U. S.

track record thus far on Nicaragua, where the Soviet Union has come half-way around the world to outspend the United States 30-to-1 in military assistance. Those are enormous odds to beat, and I am consistently puzzled at why the United States allows this situation to exist in its hemisphere. Even following Ronald Reagan's landslide victory in 1984 and the powerful testimony of Colonel North, the White House did not launch an aggressive campaign of the magnitude necessary to ensure that the truth about Nicaragua was heard in the Congress. With consistent support from the United States, the Soviets and Cubans could be sent packing from the North American mainland, and freedom could be restored to Nicaragua. Without that assistance, Central American democracy will be facing its final days, and the United States will very soon be looking at the greatest national security threat in its history.

Apart from its unreliability, one of the other major problems in dealing with the United States has been the extensive control it has sought to exert over our efforts. This has been no way to run a war. Though many of the security personnel I have dealt with from the United States have had significant military experience in Korea or Vietnam, the battle we are engaged in inside Nicaragua is extremely different from those conflicts. Furthermore, many of these advisors have not been very receptive to our needs and requests. As a commander, I have seldom been allowed to make a military decision I consider in the best interests of our forces.

Such control over our operations has been most damaging when Washington bureaucrats have actually attempted to choose our leadership. Our movement's leaders would naturally emerge if given the opportunity, as they did, for instance, in the field, where many of our commanders demonstrated skill and bravery, and were subsequently promoted to leadership positions. There was no reason to believe this would not also have been the case with our directorate.

The U. S. government, however, wishing to market our cause in Washington and to exert influence over our organization, recruited individuals with limited, often zero, experience in our movement for positions with overwhelming levels of responsibility. Edgar Chamorro was chosen because of what his family name meant inside Nicaragua; Alfonso Robelo was chosen largely because of his past association with the Sandinistas; and Arturo Cruz was chosen because of his name recognition in Washington. In fact, the entire leadership of the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO), with few exceptions, was chosen by the United States.

When many of these Washington-appointed individuals realized that running a war was a 24-hour, seven day-a-week commitment, they left our movement, causing us negative publicity, damaging the morale of our forces, and leaving leadership gaps in our directorate. These individuals were all genuinely opposed to the Sandinista dictatorship, but none of them were prepared to engage in the day-to-day process of a war against a foreign-supported enemy. Each left after short periods of service for lucrative private sector positions, long forgetting the cause of a free Nicaragua in the process.