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THE ARMED CITIZEN
PILLAR OF DEMOCRACY

by

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the armed citizenry and how they contribute to the establishment of democracy; its resilience, and longevity. My method is to examine the Twentieth century example of Nicaragua and the rise to power of the Sandinistas. The Sandinistas believed in the power of the armed citizenry as a key resource in their success. They also understood that the formation of a new government did not ensure success. While the armed populace had been critical in the rise of the Sandinistas to power, the ruling Junta realized that a counter-revolution would surely follow – and it did in the form of the contras or “freedom fighters” that were clandestinely supported by the United States throughout the 1980s. Though monetarily “outgunned” and less sophisticated than the United States, the armed citizenry led by the Sandinistas were able to survive the counter-revolution.

In the 21 years leading up to the new millenium, the people of Nicaragua have accomplished much: they removed the burden of the Somoza regime; withstood a Counter-revolution supported by the United States; and have went on to hold popular elections that resulted in the peaceful transfer of power. At the root of this success was an armed populace that had a common identity of being oppressed and a hero of “old” – Augusto Sandino, a warrior of the 1930s. He and his band of men were to be “reborn” with the formation of the Sandinistas. This is their story: one that shows the inextricable link between democracy and an armed citizenry.

Part 1

The Armed Citizen and Democracy

Tyrants do not represent nations, and liberty is not won with flowers.

— Augusto Cesar Sandino

This paper is about revolution. Successful revolution conjures up many images, but everyone understands the basics: it is a change in power. One party increases in power and the other loses power. Walker draws the distinction that the once subservient class displaces the once privileged class. Additionally he makes the observation that the displaced class departs.¹

This paper will explore revolution and its relationship to democracy. Specifically, it will explore what I believe to be an element that is both the instrument of change and the stabilizing force in a democracy. I contend that this instrument is the firearm. My model for this is the Nicaraguan revolution that brought the Sandinistas to power in 1979. My focus will be on what I consider the three roles of firearms in revolution. They are used in the actual overthrow, they stymie any possible counter-revolution and finally they protect the citizen's rights from infringement by the central government. In short, firearms preserve democracy.

I will attempt to show that firearms are strictly the “tool” or means of executing the will of the masses and of the individual. There is no unity or mobilization of the people without a common denominator for unification – and the firearm is not the root of unity.

In Nicaragua, many things comprised the national identity, but primarily it was a bad leader and a history of oppression. Somoza provided the oppression and when he was overthrown in 1979, he was “replaced” by the United States who supported the “contras,” who sought to wage a counter-revolution.

This was new in the history of revolution in Central America which had been a proving ground for failed revolution. It usually took the form of a military “coups d’etat” which usually ended in failure because there was no plan or vision of what the end state would look like. The “victors” soon realized after the euphoria of overthrow, that the people soon clamored for the basics of food, shelter and employment. The Sandinistas anticipated this, for when they came to power, the national treasury was broke, the infrastructure was broken down but the people of Nicaragua were not – they had a vision of what they wanted their country to be. The firearm would be a means to achieving and preserving that end state.

Why did the Sandinistas decide to arm their population? They apparently modeled their revolution after the American experience. The Constitution of the United States guarantees the right of the people to “keep and bear arms” and this is what the Sandinistas have practiced throughout the last 40 years of the Twentieth century. We will look at the common threads upon which the Nicaraguan revolution was built. Once this social fabric was woven, the firearm allowed it to come to fruition. And once success had been achieved, the firearm preserved the fruits of their labor. The Sandinistas brought democracy to Central America and it still exists because of an armed citizenry.

Part 2

NICARAGUAN BACKGROUND

The foundation of any revolution can be found in the American Declaration of Independence which states, “Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient Causes; and accordingly all Experience hath shewn, that Mankind are more disposed to suffer...than to right themselves by abolishing the Forms to which they are accustomed.” People will endure oppression, but to a degree, for the founding fathers go on to say, “But when a long train of Abuses and Usurpation...evinces a Design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, *it is their Right, it is their Duty, to throw off such government and to provide new Guards for their future security.*” (Italics added)

The situation of 1979 Nicaragua is very analogous to the situation in the United States 200 years before. Though the Nicaraguan revolution took place in the Twentieth Century, the oppression of the Somoza regime was one which kept a great majority of the people living in squalor associated with the Dark Ages.

The forces that lead to the Nicaraguan revolution are many and varied, but they were forces that evolved over time. In order to understand Nicaragua or any people for that matter, it is important to examine their history and content. We will examine the history of Nicaragua and in this way, we can see the weaving of a social fabric – a fabric that with some catalysts added – ignited into armed revolution

The history of Nicaragua is one littered with foreign “interference.” The Spanish conqueror Gonzalez arrived in 1522. Disease, battle and slave trade soon reduced the native Indian population from one million down to tens of thousands. Class conflict set in as the Indians resisted Spanish rule for the next 300 years. Throughout this colonial period Nicaragua became a “predominately mestizo nation in which a small elite dominated the economy through exportation of beef, hides and lumber.”²

Nicaragua attained Independence in 1822. Contrary to the popular “banana republic” image held by Americans, a segment of the Nicaraguan populace had always been devoted to higher education. The National University was founded in the 1820s and in 1835, the government founded the country’s first newspaper which was used as a means of political expression.³ Shortly thereafter, in 1838, a political struggle broke out between the Liberals and the Conservatives in which both parties were controlled by the landed aristocracy. Simultaneously, the British occupied the Caribbean City of Greytown.⁴ It was here in Greytown that British and American businesses jockeyed for advantage in the transportation business. After all, the geography was ideal for building the fastest land - water bridge across the Isthmus.

As fate would have it, gold was discovered in California in 1848, and New Yorker Cornilius Vanderbilt, at the invite of the Conservative Party, formed and ran a transit company for those seeking their fortune in California. In fact, commercial interests grew at such a rate that in 1850 the United States and Great Britain both signed the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty. The treaty stated that should a canal be built across Nicaragua, neither the United State nor Britain would maintain exclusive control. Moreover, neither country would colonize any Central American country.⁵

J. P. Morgan also had a transit company that operated in Nicaragua. William Walker of Tennessee worked for Morgan and he maintained a deep belief in Manifest Destiny which as he saw it, extended to Nicaragua as well as to the American West. Invited in 1855 to Nicaragua by the Liberals, Walker and his mercenaries accepted the invitation, and by the next year, Walker had declared himself President, proclaimed slavery legal and had made English the official language.⁶ This set in motion a war between most of Central America and the invader, the United States through its implicit support of Walker. That same year, 1856, Walker was forced out. He tried again to gain power in 1860, only to be captured by the British and handed over to the Hondurans who executed him. Walker was gone, but a theme was emerging: Nicaraguans were growing tired of U. S. interference.

Coffee production began in the 1860s and with it the Nicaraguan infrastructure and educational system grew.⁷ Liberal philosophy expanded as manifested by the formation of the school of college preparation in 1874, and two years later an independent literary group was formed.⁸ In 1881, the National Library opened and Nicaragua's first analytical literary society was formed in Leon.⁹ The academics read the works of Juan Cortes on socialism, liberalism and Catholicism.¹⁰ Newspapers were more popular in Nicaragua than in any Latin American country. The news was dominated by politics that was both national and international.¹¹ The political flavor of life spilled over into the poetry of Ruben Dario who lived most of his life in the nineteenth century and surprisingly became the most quoted man in Nicaraguan history.¹² Ernesto Cardenal was "the poet" of the twentieth century and even today holds the highest esteem in Nicaragua.¹³ . As Liss succinctly summarizes, "Foreign interests increased in Nicaragua

as a potential site for an inter-oceanic waterway, and anti-imperialist ideas assumed a prominent place in the type of Nicaraguan prose and poetry...”

The first genuine cohesive government was that of Jose’ Zelaya who ruled from 1893 to 1909. Zelaya, who was a Liberal, sought to build a canal through Nicaragua with Japanese or German financing – purposefully shunning the United States who threw its support behind the Conservatives.¹⁴ Zelaya, a Liberal, but yet an authoritarian, tried to modernize Nicaragua and promoted Central American unity. He sent the British away and refused the United States canal building rights.¹⁵ Tensions between Nicaragua and the United States mounted as the meddling of the U. S. became well known, and in 1904 Dario wrote his ode *To Roosevelt* which warned about the Anglo menace.¹⁶

When Zelaya executed two U. S. mercenaries, the U. S. dispatched troops to Nicaragua.¹⁷ Zelaya was forced into exile and the United States supported President Diaz’. In 1912, when Benjamin Zeledon, a newspaper editor and lawyer led an uprising against Diaz’, President Coolidge sent in the Marines as a safeguard. Conservative forces captured Zeledon and dragged his dead body through the streets of Niquinohomo. A seventeen-year-old saw this event and would be forever changed by it. His name was Augusto Sandino.

American control of Nicaraguan events was further enhanced by the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty of 1914 which granted the United States the right to build a canal. The United States had no intention of building a canal, but the treaty ensured that no one else would. The treaty only fueled anti-American sentiment in Nicaragua.

Adding to the political instability of the region during this time was the recent success of the Russian revolution. The revolution fostered the formation of the Central

American Communist Party in 1925, and its ideas were quickly infiltrating Nicaragua.¹⁸

When Liberal rebellion broke out in 1926, President Coolidge asserted that the Soviets had incited the rebellion. He claimed it threatened the Panama Canal and consequently the vital interests of the United States. Having just left the year before, the U. S. Marines were recalled to Nicaragua to fight what would be a 7 year anti-imperialist war of liberation led by Augusto Sandino.

Notes

¹ Walker, Thomas W. editor. *Nicaragua in Revolution*. page 1

² Liss, Sheldon B., *Radical Thought in Central America*, page 159

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid, 160

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid, 161

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid, 161

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid, 162

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

Part 3

SANDINO: THE THREAD OF THE FABRIC.

Born in 1895, Sandino was raised in poor surroundings and at the age of nine he accompanied his mother into debtors prison¹. But his father was a prosperous man and “rescued” him from his stagnant environment. He ran the family farm and came to realize that the merchant class took advantage of the peasants. To rectify this, he formed a cooperative to help the peasants overcome their plight. The situation of the inequality between his father and mother became entrenched in Sandino.

At age 25, his life took a dramatic change. Injuring a local politician in an argument, he fled his hometown and began a journey outside Nicaragua. He worked in Guatemala for a time and finally ended up in Mexico which was coming off a revolution itself. It was here that Sandino was ridiculed for being a Nicaraguan for Nicaraguans were considered subservient to the United States². Sandino came under the influence of anarchists like Ricardo Magon and the Mexican peasant Zapata, who sought land for his people³. His spare time in Mexico was spent in political discussions or reading and studying. It was during this time that he wrote about the influence of U. S. imperialism on Nicaragua. In May of 1926 he returned to Nicaragua to “rectify” the situation.

He attacked in October of 1926. The target was a government fortress at Jicaro.⁴ The attack was unsuccessful but he learned the value of guerrilla warfare and a friendly populace. He befriended and courted the support of the local population. In January 1927, he and 800 fellow guerrillas attacked in the mountains of northwestern Nicaragua.. He wrote in 1928 at the age of 33, concerning the United States.

“...since the United States of North America, exercising the right only of brute force, presumes to take away our Native Land and our Liberty, I have accepted this unjustified challenge against our territorial sovereignty....To remain inactive or indifferent, as do the majority of my fellow citizens, would be to join up with the great multitude of those who sell out and kill our nation...I love justice and will sacrifice myself for it. Material treasures do not hold power over me.”⁵

When others had signed the Stimson peace agreement in 1927 with Somoza, Sandino had not. He led his resistance from the mountains of northeast Nicaragua. His support base was the peasantry of the mountains and their simple arms. He wrote the following to fellow fighter Moncada who advocated the Stimson agreement, “...you are aware of my temperament and know that I am unbreakable. Now I want you to come and disarm me. I am here and wait for you. Otherwise, you will not make me give up. I do not sell myself, nor do I surrender...”⁶ But Sandino was never a direct threat to the regime of Somoza, who was well protected by the Guard and lived on the Pacific shore in the capitol of Managua.

When Marine Captain Hatfield labeled Sandino nothing more than a common bandit, Sandino replied, “What right have the foreign troops to call us bandits and to say that we are the aggressors? We are in our own house...the peasants brought cattle and food right to the trenches of our men. We have lacked for nothing...if we were bandits, could we have resisted for a year and half against the immense power of the United States?”⁷ Remember that the Marines were also using Air Power against Sandino and his men. Sandino adds further in this same letter, “We are no more bandits than Washington was. If the American people...would not so easily forget their past, when a handful of ragged soldiers marched over the snow, leaving bloody footprints behind, in order to gain liberty and independence. If their consciences had not been hardened by material riches, the (italics added) *Americans would not forget so easily that a nation, however weak it may*

be, sooner or later obtains its liberty. Each abuse of power hastens the destruction of him who exercises it.” Sandino had a clear grasp of the fundamentals.

In 1933, hostilities ceased and the United States Marines left having never accomplished their goal. Sandino realized that progress was to be made in the political arena as he characterized his movement Nationalist while at the same time anti-imperialistic. He had come to believe that capitalism could be carried out in a fair manner and that liberalism was alive and well. Not only could Sandino lead men in battle but was at the same time a man of conviction and thought – though its growth and foundation was unorthodox.

Sandino understood capitalism and how it related to the imperialism. He combined patriotism, nationalism and populism. His ultimate goal was for true reform in government where the workers and the peasants became the backbone of society. He believed in their ability to organize and persist until they achieved victory, and to establish a society where the peasant could effect his own change. His vision for society was one of a popular independent government where the national wealth was used for the benefit of the masses. He believed in equal pay for equal work.

Since Nicaragua was largely uninhabited he believed in “homesteading” where peasants would be encouraged to settle the outlying regions. And finally, this new independent nation would avoid any overarching dependence on another country – especially the United States.

Sandino was a force to reckon with, for when Hollywood sought to make a film about Sandino – the State Department denied permission to make the film.⁸ Sandino inspired Alberto Bayo who advised Fidel Castro on guerrilla warfare.⁹ Unable to oust

Sandino with the U. S. Marines or with the “National Guard”, Somoza, under the pretense of resolving differences, invited Sandino to dinner where he was machine gunned to death. Though dead, “Sandinismo” had been born and would mature to fruition forty-five years later with the downfall of the Somoza regime.

But every revolution needs a leader and with Sandino dead in 1934, the leader was born two years later. His name was Carlos Fonseca. As a child he sold newspapers and read voraciously – anything he could get his hands on. At 17 years of age, he and a classmate Tomas Borge began to read the works of Marx and Engels.¹⁰ Graduating first in his class he began to read the works of Sandino.

In 1956 Somoza was assassinated and because Fonseca was a member of the Communist party, he was jailed for a month where he was tortured. In 1957 he went to Moscow. Upon his return to Nicaragua, he praised the Soviet model, but still wanted Nicaragua to remain separate from Soviet influence. He believed that Nicaragua could grow into its own unique society - a unique Nicaragua (a recurring theme of Sandinismo). In 1959, Fonseca was deported to Guatemala. He made his way to Honduras and from there took the fight to the government forces. Wounded in fighting with the National Guard, he recovered in Cuba¹¹. In Cuba he learned about guerrilla warfare and saw it succeed in establishing a new government. Armed with all this experience, knowledge and only 23 years of age, Fonseca adopted and refined the ideas of Sandino. He felt that while Sandino had developed adequate anti-imperialist and revolutionary positions, he had failed to build the necessary social fabric, a fabric that was essential to motivate the populace to action. But what action should take place and when should it take place? With these difficult questions to answer, Fonseca sought answers.

Part 4

FSLN FORMATION

In 1961, the Sandinistan National Liberation Front (FSLN) was formed. Though dead for 28 years, Sandino represented a philosophy. After all, he was the only one in Nicaraguan history that had “successfully” resisted the forces of authority and oppression. He had never compromised and had earned the respect and support of the masses. The Sandinistas wanted to abolish the old regime, its power base and as Liss states, “rebuild the economy with a mixture of private and state enterprises, reduce class inequalities, improve living standards, form a popular democracy, protect human rights, eliminate corruption, and design a nonaligned, anti-imperialist, internationalist foreign policy.”¹² The FSLN strove to get people to examine their history, and to analyze it critically.¹³ The “competing” Communist party published its “Plan of Basic Reforms.”

When Luis Somoza died of natural causes in 1967, his brother Anastasio Somoza replaced him as President.¹⁴ This Somoza was far greedier than his predecessors and his personal wealth skyrocketed. Besides being worth 3-4 million dollars, his family owned most of the land and most of the countries industry. As Liss says, “they controlled everything from parking meters to prostitution.”¹⁵ As Somoza gained wealth, the FSLN stepped up their attacks which were staged from the mountains of Matagalpa. They received little popular support and even the Communists refused to help, citing that the time was too early for armed action.¹⁶

In the early 1970s, opposition to the Somoza regime grew as many small groups became discontent. Religious opposition came from Father Ernesto Cardenal who openly acknowledged that at times it was alright to fight for social justice. A small Maoist group

called the Popular Action Movement organized the Worker's Front in 1974.¹⁷ There were multiple labor federations that criticized the government and all the while the Sandinistas worked and tried to figure out a way to unify the masses against the Somozas. This was a fundamental difference from the Cuban experience and from armed revolution in the past. Typically in other Latin American countries the military 'coup' or takeover at the "top" was the instrument of change. But the FSLN leadership realized that these revolutions never fully succeeded – and they never succeeded for a variety of reasons.

The Sandinistas struggled with how to effect the revolution. Three schools of thought were evolving within the FSLN. There was the "prolonged popular war". This group sought to fight a protracted war by gaining popular support first from the peasants and then by gaining support from the total populace. This was the classic guerilla strategy based on a belief that a lengthy struggle would nurture the social consciousness which would spark the ultimate overthrow of the ruling regime. An alternate method was that of the "Proletarians." They favored an overthrow that was rooted in political education and unity. Marxism-Leninism would be the political vehicle to success.¹⁸ The third and final way for revolution would be the "insurrectional" way, better known as the *terceristas*. Their plan advocated "broad class alliances" and a rapid overthrow of the Somozas. The *Terceeristas* felt that the key to FSLN success was a pluralistic appeal to all the different groups. Most importantly, these three different factions learned how to align their differences and to keep unity within the FSLN.¹⁹

Important to all this was the theory of Ricardo Morales. Morales published much in the name of the FSLN and much of what he said concerned the implementation of Marxism as a route to success. But more importantly, he said that Marxism was not the

desired end state.²⁰ The Sandinistan leadership was wise enough to realize that theory was a guide, and just a guide, to action - not a dogma.²¹ The FSLN decided that the revolution would have to be one of arms. Operating from the mountains of the northeast, the FSLN launched many small attacks that in total amounted to very little. Somoza and his guard were too strong to be moved by a small insurgent group. The FSLN realized that the missing element was popular support. Without popular peasant support, FSLN progress would be severely limited. A revolution operating from the rural mountains – even with peasant support – would be difficult. With arms from Cuba, the Sandinistas armed themselves and the peasants. This built loyalty and made the peasant an actor. This was new. It had never been done. It improved the situation but more was needed.

An FSLN attack on 27 December 1974, resulted in the kidnapping of prominent members of the Somoza regime. The regime was humiliated and forced to give into FSLN demands which were primarily the return of political prisoners.²² Somoza did not take it well and unleashed a wave of repression that lasted until September 1977.

In 1978, the final remaining pieces fell into place. The first mistake was the assassination of Pedro Chamorro, a journalist who had long opposed Somoza.²³ The result was a two-week general strike in Managua. The National Guard was called in and brutalized protesters. The Catholic church was galvanized. They started to state that there were times when popular, violent uprising was warranted. The next move was the rebellion at Monimbo. The Catholic celebration marking the 44th anniversary of Sandino's death drew the attention of the National Guard again. They fired on people at the ceremony. All out rebellion and mayhem erupted on the spot. The people used homemade weapons, machetes, clubs and barricades to force the Guard out of their

barracks. For five days the people held out against 600 soldiers with tanks, machine guns and helicopters.²⁴ More than 200 people were killed. But the secret was starting to show itself: popular neighborhood organizations were the backbone of revolution and could be successful in the face of an organized military.

In July, President Jimmy Carter sent a letter to Somoza congratulating him on , “his concern to improve human right in Nicaragua.” The people were in disbelief. They plotted an attack on the National Palace (the legislature). Disguised as Somozan security forces, 25 trained guerrillas took over 2,000 hostages. After 45 hours of negotiations, the FSLN got its demands. The masses began to believe that Somoza could be defeated.

On 28 August 1978, a spontaneous popular uprising started in which youngsters armed only with pistols, rifles and homemade contact bombs forced a unit of the National Guard back into their barracks. This caught the leadership of the FSLN offguard. At first, they hesitated but then decided to support the uprising.²⁵ On 9 September, four other cities experienced uprisings against the Guard. This time the cities were in the western half of the country where the majority of the population lived. Somoza struck back with all his might: ground and air forces forced the FSLN back to the hills. Tanks and troops went house to house committing genocide in an operation called, “Operational Cleanup.” The death toll was over 5,000 in the month of September.

In retrospect, many casualties had been caused by a lack of coordination in the FSLN leadership. To solve this problem, the Civilian Defense Committees were formed. These committees were sometimes as “small” as a city block. They gathered and trained in first aid, stored food, did surveillance of the Guard and maintained communications for the different branches of the FSLN.²⁶ Additionally, weapons were made, repaired and

ammunition was cached away. Tunnels were dug and hidden wall compartments built. The excesses had given the people a focus: Somoza and his Guard were the enemy.²⁷

By early 1979, the FSLN had increased its forces to 2,500 and the National Guard stood at 10,000 strong. The FSLN strategy was to launch simultaneously a national strike, run a popular insurrection and to make military attacks. The general strike was launched on 5 June. On 9 June the battle of Managua began. The Sandinistas managed to hold the city for 17 days. Simultaneous attacks were launched throughout the country. For example, in the area around Masaya, there were 6,000 FSLN troops operating. Half of these were guerrillas and militia, while the other half consisted of civilians. But in the end, Air power and the military might of the National Guard turned out to be no match for a nation of poor, united people determined to undo centuries of oppression. Managua fell on 19 July 1979.

Notes

¹ Liss, 176

² Ibid, 177

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Bragg, Wayne G. editor. *Sandino in the Streets*, 6

⁶ Ibid, 32

⁷ Ibid, 46

⁸ Liss, 182

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Liss, 185

¹¹ Ibid, 183

¹² Ibid 167

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid 168

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid 169

Notes

²¹ Ibid

²² Walker, *Nicaragua in Revolution*, 28

²³ Ibid, 30

²⁴ Ibid, 31

²⁵ Ibid, 32

²⁶ Ibid, 33

²⁷ Ibid

Part 5

COUNTER-REVOLUTION.

The rise of the Sandinistas to power in July of 1979 posed an interesting problem for the United States who had supported the deposed Somoza regime. Although the United States was uncertain as to what the Sandinistas were all about, they did provide 75 million dollars out of a total 1.2 Billion in foreign aid to Nicaragua.¹ The pictures of jubilation are clear: crowded capitol streets burgeoning with young men and women holding automatic weapons high in the air in triumph. The euphoria was genuine, and it had enough inertia to move forward. But there also was the inertia of bad living conditions: there was 150,000 war wounded and only 5000 hospital beds, Forty thousand children were orphans and half a million people were homeless. Additionally over half the country was illiterate. The average life expectancy was 53 years and infant mortality was a staggering 12 percent.²

Non-existent was a government, police force, army and there was no judicial system.³ But the Nicaraguan people worked. Walker writes that upon his arrival into Nicaragua just days after victory, he found travel, lodging and food offered - many times for free. The people worked - not for money, but to improve their lives. The people volunteered all their spare time to clearing debris, building roads and parks. In the vein of working together the government formed was a Junta and not a person. It was composed of three Sandinistas, Violeta Chamorro (1990 election winner) and industrialist Alfonso Robelo.⁴ It was a Junta of five with minority representation. But in reality Nicaragua was anarchy. But it was an anarchy of the best case. It was an anarchy of self-starters. It had to be: Somoza had left only 3.5 million dollars in the national

treasury. It definitely did not look good. The country was broke, there was no “government” and it lay in a region where the revolution was traditionally violent and short-lived.

The “easy” part of the revolution was over. The attainment of the “new” Nicaragua would be the difficult part. But change was occurring and occurring quickly. On 23 August 1980, Managua's main square was packed with 250,000 people welcoming home 70,000 volunteers of the “Literacy Crusade”.⁵ The Literacy Crusade consisted of the urban middle class who had gone to the poor rural areas. The Crusade was a large success. It was a rapid, directed, but yet spontaneous change. The Literacy crusade received an award from the United Nations.

Urban rents were cut in half and medical coverage was extended to the entire population. A distinct socialist trend was developing. Idle farmland was slow to be settled. Sandinistan opposition saw this as an attack on private property. Always politically mindful, the Sandinistas watched the United States and specifically the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) carefully. The CIA was known to meddle in Latin American affairs – and this case would be no different.

The good news continued: between 1980-82, 54 percent of all low interest government approved loans went to private producers. But at the “Crusade” homecoming, Defense Minister Humberto Ortega announced that elections would not be held until 1985. Conservatives were stunned. When La Prensa, the primary newspaper, started writing critically of the Sandinistas, it was censored.

As 1980 came to a close, the Sandinistan revolution was 18 months old. The quality of life was improving for all and at the same time becoming more “even.” A socialist

country was in the making. Internally, political dissent was growing as the Conservatives viewed the Sandinistas as on their “own program.” It was true, but they needed time to institute a government, and then to let the people go forward via the voting booth.

In the seizing of power, the Sandinistas had done many things differently. Most telling was the fact that they had not put the “Guard” up against a wall to be shot. They were determined not to go the route of Cuba who had totally eradicated the opposition. At the same time they did not have enough stability to just break into “open democracy” – American style. To be sure, at the end of 1980, Nicaragua was like no other country in Latin America. It was drawing attention.

The inauguration of Ronald Reagan in January 1981 brought to office a generation that had lived and fought in World War II. Reagan was born in 1911 and Bill Casey the director of the CIA was only 4 years his junior. They viewed things in two distinct ways: Democratic or Communist. Nicaragua fit clearly, but indirectly into the picture: the Soviets supported the Cubans who were supplying arms and aid to the Nicaraguans. It was easy to classify Nicaragua as a Communist state. It was easy, it was neat, but was it true?

Nicaragua didn’t look like America nor could it. Good things were happening: Nicaragua had a faster growth than any other country in Latin America. This would continue through 1985. Per capita consumption of pork and rice was 60 percent greater than 4 years ago.⁶ But land and farming was a problem. By the summer of 1981, 30 percent of the farmland lay idle. On 19 July, the Agrarian Reform Law was announced by the Sandinistas. It allowed the confiscation of idle land by the peasants, the cooperatives and the state farms. Problems were compounded when the U. S. froze all

aid to Nicaragua, and Nicaraguan fears were realized when on March 9, Reagan authorized CIA operations against Nicaragua. In August when the Sandinistas refused to acquiesce to a U. S. envoy's demands, the United States engaged in a show of force through military exercises with the Honduran Army. In November, Reagan and Congress approved 20 million dollars for the "contras" who were former members of the Somozan National Guard. These were the famed "freedom fighters." The Nicaraguans armed. They distributed arms to the peasants. They prepared for invasion. Sandino had survived with popular support and so would they.

On 14 March, the contras struck by blowing up two bridges on the Honduran border. They were operating from Honduras and would continue to strike just across the border. The entire border region is very mountainous. The Sandinistan Defense Committee's slogan was, "All the People to the Militias." It was painted on the walls of all the public places, and the call was answered. The militias grew and as arms became available, arms were put in the hands of these peasant militias – it became their war – it was everybody's war.

The United States sought to isolate Nicaragua economically and politically by secretly mining (low yield mines) Nicaraguan harbors to keep goods from reaching the people of Nicaragua. Ships from the Netherlands, Panama, Soviet Union and Japan were struck and damaged. Upon discovery of the operation, Senator Barry Goldwater wrote Bill Casey of the CIA, "I am pissed off."⁷ Mining possibly violated international law. The contras became increasingly more brutal in their attacks as they targeted civilians as well as the Sandinistan army. They were blowing up schools, health clinics, cooperatives, nurses and teachers. The Sandinistas initiated the draft to sustain the

supply of soldiers. But the draft took farm hands out of the fields and harvest suffered – it was a viscous cycle.

The Sandinistas announced that elections would now be the same week as Reagan's 1984 election. Perhaps free elections would convince the United States to leave Nicaragua alone. In an election declared free and fair by foreign observers that included the British, the FSLN won 67 percent of the vote and Daniel Ortega was elected President. The United States dismissed the elections and the result. The war would continue.

However, the plan for the United States started to go awry when on 5 October 1986, a C-123 cargo plane was shot down. The U. S. Congress trained its microscope on the CIA, and they didn't like what they found. Iran was discovered to be involved in an arms for hostages deal and in 1987, Congress cut off all funds to the contras. With no money, the loyalty of the contras quickly evaporated. In 1988 and 1989, spurious fighting continued but the Contras were beaten. But the damage to Nicaragua had been done. The Nicaraguan people were tired of the war and living conditions that had steadily declined. Elections in February 1990 were held in which Ortega and the FSLN was beaten. The FSLN garnered 41 percent of the vote – they were still the largest single political party. The transfer of power to Violeta Chamorro's coalition government was peaceful. The costs of the war totaled over 2 billion dollars and over 30,000 killed. But they had survived.

Part 6

Conclusions and Inferences

In considering revolution, what conclusions can we draw? First, arms played a critical role in the Sandinista rise to power. Secondly, arms were instrumental in defeating the counterrevolution waged by the contras. But do arms, in and of themselves, make for revolution? The answer is no; the mere presence of arms did not make for revolution but rather facilitated the revolution – the difference is critical to understanding revolution.

I discovered that leadership is an essential ingredient of revolution. Sandino and Somoza were just two of the many leaders and both relied on arms to accomplish their ends. Sandino used arms in his 7-year war against the U. S. Marines and the Somoza regime. Sandino even traveled out of Nicaragua in search of arms. He was convinced that arms were essential, and it turns out he was right. Successful leadership fosters the support and faith of the masses. For Sandino it was the peasantry of the rural areas; in later years this same peasantry formed the support base of the FSLN.

Moreover, Sandino had principles that were unflappable. He despised outside international interference and did not root himself in material goods. He transformed himself into one of the peasantry and they identified with him. In the end, he was considered victorious; the fact that he was murdered did not silence his cause. Somozan leadership was rooted in the making of money and furthering his personal agenda.

Tightly linked to the United States, the Somozan leadership, over time, came to be identified with outside interference.

It took generations for the Nicaraguan people to become sufficiently motivated to action. Part of this was the lack of education that existed in the masses at the time of Sandino. While Sandino recognized the importance of mass support for his own survival, he failed to recognize that the masses would have to act to topple the controlling regime. By the year 1970, the dedication to higher education at the university level and the education of the masses by the FSLN, began to pay dividends. But even with the revival of Sandinismo and an emerging unity of thought in the masses, another ingredient of the successful revolution was lacking. That missing ingredient was a “lost” leadership. It wasn’t until Somoza displayed a total lack of regard for his own people did armed insurrection take place. All hope in the Somozan regime had been “lost.”

And while arms are not a source of revolution, they are a source of force. Also important to note is that while arms are a source of force, they are not a source of strength. The government forces clearly, on the face of it, dominated the military equation. They had western-trained ground forces and a viable air force. The insurgency, which drew its strength from the people and their resources, realized victory. This is a critical lesson: arms without a moral backing are doomed to failure; arms with the moral and material backing of the people will ultimately succeed in toppling the “evil” regime.

External factors well beyond the contestant’s control will always play a role. In Central America these factors manifested themselves in the long held American belief of Manifest Destiny and the Cuban revolution which took place in 1959. The Cuban

revolution ultimately resulted in a totally communist regime. It looked logical to the United States that Nicaragua intended to go the same way. Here is where misinterpretation of the facts played a crucial role. Careful study of the FSLN leadership would have shown that it was their goal to implement a socialist but yet democratic government. Their actions bore this out; the Sandinistas did not eradicate the opposition but rather included them, because in the end state, the opposition would play a critical role. Further complicating the picture was the fact that in 1983, the United States invaded Grenada under the overarching pretense of “communist influence”. The Sandinistas had every reason to believe that the United States might consider invading Nicaragua.

What is the future of revolution? And what is the future of revolution in the modern, industrialized countries? In short, the “modern democracy?” Revolution does have a future. As long as central governments overstep the will and wants of the masses, then half of the conditions are met for revolution. Now, whether the masses will resort to armed recourse depends on many factors. Primarily, do they have a belief that the leadership is acting maliciously, or just misdirected? In Nicaragua, the “trigger” point was never reached until it became clear that the leadership had no regard for its own citizens. True revolution is an infrequent event and should not be confused with the rebellion or sporadic violence of some minority faction. True revolution goes from one state of being and arrives at another; and the new state is dramatically different. Key to this is education of the revolutionary leadership and the education or indoctrination of the masses. Therefore, if trying to predict where revolution is going to take place, it is important to spot these key “differentiators.”

The armed citizen in the modern democracy stands as a deterrence. Arms provided the means in Nicaragua and they provide the means for any true insurgency that has the support of the masses. Revolution in the modern state is farther away but yet closer than many would care to admit. By design, the mechanism is in place: the armed citizenry. All that remains is for the state leadership to overstep its bounds and for the revolutionary leadership to provide a better vision. Add the unexpected; the intangibles; and any state can experience revolution.

Notes

¹ Vail, 16

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid, 28

⁶ Ibid, 34

⁷ Woodward, 322

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