

1970-1987: The contra war in Nicaragua



Noam Chomsky's account of the US-backed "contra" counter-insurgency in Nicaragua against the left-wing government brought to power on the back of a popular mass movement from below.

It wasn't just the [events in El Salvador](#) that were ignored by the mainstream US media during the 1970s. In the ten years prior to the overthrow of the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza in 1979, US television - all networks - devoted exactly one hour to Nicaragua, and that was entirely on the Managua earthquake of 1972.

From 1960 through 1978, the New York Times had three editorials on Nicaragua. It's not that nothing was happening there - it's just that whatever was happening was unremarkable. Nicaragua was of no concern at all, as long as Somoza's tyrannical rule wasn't challenged.

When his rule was challenged, by the [popular, left-wing] Sandinistas in the late 1970s, the US first tried to institute what was called "Somocismo [Somoza-ism] without Somoza" - that is, the whole corrupt system intact, but with somebody else at the top. That didn't work, so President Carter tried to maintain Somoza's National Guard as a base for US power.

The National Guard had always been remarkably brutal and sadistic. By June 1979, it was carrying out massive atrocities in the war against the Sandinistas, bombing residential neighbourhoods in Managua, killing tens of thousands of people. At that point, the US ambassador sent a cable to the White House saying it would be "ill-advised" to tell the Guard to call off the bombing, because that might interfere with the policy of keeping them in power and the Sandinistas out.

Our ambassador to the Organisation of American States also spoke in favour of "Somocismo without Somoza," but the OAS rejected the suggestion flat out. A few days later, Somoza flew off to Miami with what was left of the Nicaraguan national treasury, and the Guard collapsed.

The Carter administration flew Guard commanders out of the country in planes with Red Cross markings (a war crime), and began to reconstitute the Guard on Nicaragua's borders. They also used Argentina as a proxy. (At that time, Argentina was under the rule of neo-Nazi generals, but they took a little time off from torturing and murdering their own population to help re-establish the Guard - soon to be renamed the contras, or "freedom fighters.")

Ronald Reagan used them to launch a large-scale terrorist war against Nicaragua, combined with economic warfare that was even more lethal. We also intimidated other countries so they wouldn't send aid either.

And yet, despite astronomical levels of military support, the United States failed to create a viable military force in Nicaragua. That's quite remarkable, if you think about it. No real guerrillas anywhere in the world have ever had resources even remotely like what the United

States gave the contras. You could probably start a guerrilla insurgency in mountain regions of the US with comparable funding.

Why did the US go to such lengths in Nicaragua? The international development organisation Oxfam explained the real reasons, stating that, from its experience of working in 76 developing countries, "Nicaragua was...exceptional in the strength of that government's commitment...to improving the condition of the people and encouraging their active participation in the development process."

Of the four Central American countries where Oxfam had a significant presence ([El Salvador](#), [Guatemala](#), Honduras and Nicaragua), only in Nicaragua was there a substantial effort to address inequities in land ownership and to extend health, educational and agricultural services to poor peasant families.

Other agencies told a similar story. In the early 1980s, the [World Bank](#) called its projects "extraordinarily successful in Nicaragua in some sectors, better than anywhere else in the world." In 1983, The Inter-American Development Bank concluded that "Nicaragua has made noteworthy progress in the social sector, which is laying the basis for long-term socio-economic development."

The success of the Sandinista reforms terrified US planners. They were aware that - as José Figueres, the father of Costa Rican democracy, put it - "for the first time, Nicaragua has a government that cares for its people." (Although Figueres was the leading democratic figure in Central America for forty years, his unacceptable insights into the real world were completely censored from the US media.)

The hatred that was elicited by the Sandinistas for trying to direct resources to the poor (and even succeeding at it) was truly wondrous to behold. Just about all US policymakers shared it, and it reached virtual frenzy.

Back in 1981, a State Department insider boasted that we would "turn Nicaragua into the Albania of Central America" - that is, poor, isolated and politically radical - so that the Sandinista dream of creating a new, more exemplary political model for Latin America would be in ruins.

George Shultz called the Sandinistas a "cancer, right here on our land mass," that has to be destroyed. At the other end of the political spectrum, leading Senate liberal Alan Cranston said that if it turned out not to be possible to destroy the Sandinistas, then we'd just have to let them "fester in [their] own juices."

So the US launched a three-fold attack against Nicaragua. First, we exerted extreme pressure to compel the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank to terminate all projects and assistance.

Second, we launched the contra war along with an illegal economic war to terminate what Oxfam rightly called "the threat of a good example." The contras' vicious terrorist attacks against "soft targets" under US orders did help, along with the boycott, to end any hope of economic development and social reform. US terror ensured that Nicaragua couldn't demobilise its army and divert its pitifully poor and limited resources to reconstructing the ruins that were left by the US-backed dictators and Reaganite crimes. The contras were even funded by the US selling arms to Iran, in what became known as [the Iran-Contra Affair](#).

One of the most respected Central America correspondents, Julia Preston (who was then working for the Boston Globe), reported that "Administration officials said they are content to see the contras debilitate the Sandinistas by forcing them to divert scarce resources toward the war and away from social programs." That's crucial, since the social programs were at the

heart of the good example that might have infected other countries in the region and eroded the American system of [much higher-grade] exploitation and robbery.

We even refused to send disaster relief. After the 1972 earthquake, the US sent an enormous amount of aid to Nicaragua, most of which was stolen by our buddy Somoza. In October 1988, an even worse natural disaster struck Nicaragua - Hurricane Joan. We didn't send a penny for that, because if we had, it would probably have gotten to the people, not just into the pockets of some rich thug. We also pressured our allies to send very little aid.

This devastating hurricane, with its welcome prospects of mass starvation and long-term ecological damage, reinforced our efforts. We wanted Nicaraguans to starve so we could accuse the Sandinistas of economic mismanagement. Because they weren't under our control, Nicaraguans had to suffer and die.

Third, we used diplomatic fakery to crush Nicaragua. As Tony Avirgan wrote in the Costa Rican journal *Mesoamerica*, "the Sandinistas fell for a scam perpetrated by Costa Rican president Oscar Arias and the other Central American Presidents, which cost them the February [1990] elections."

For Nicaragua, the peace plan of August 1987 was a good deal, Avirgan wrote: they would move the scheduled national elections forward by a few months and allow international observation, as they had in 1984, "in exchange for having the contras demobilised and the war brought to an end...." The Nicaraguan government did what it was required to do under the peace plan, but no one else paid the slightest attention to it.

Arias, the White House and Congress never had the slightest intention of implementing any aspect of the plan. The US virtually tripled CIA supply flights to the contras. Within a couple of months the peace plan was totally dead.

As the election campaign opened, the US made it clear that the embargo that was strangling the country and the contra terror would continue if the Sandinistas won the election. You have to be some kind of Nazi or unreconstructed Stalinist to regard an election conducted under such conditions as free and fair - and south of the border, few succumbed to such delusions.

If anything like that were ever done by our enemies... I leave the media reaction to your imagination. The amazing part of it was that the Sandinistas still got 40% of the vote, while New York Times headlines proclaimed that Americans were "United in Joy" over this "Victory for US Fair Play."

US achievements in Central America in the past fifteen years are a major tragedy, not just because of the appalling human cost, but because a decade ago there were prospects for real progress towards meaningful democracy and meeting human needs, with early successes in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua.

These efforts might have worked and might have taught useful lessons to others plagued with similar problems - which, of course, was exactly what US planners feared. The threat has been successfully aborted, perhaps forever.

From [What Uncle Sam Really Wants](#), by Noam Chomsky.

Chomsky is of course an American citizen, and so "we" and "our" refers to the US. The article has been edited slightly by libcom – US to UK spellings and a few small details have been added for the reader new to the topic.