
Chapter Six, Nicaragua, 1981


10. “General Political–Military Platform of the FSLN,” 293, 301.

11. Kagan, Twilight Struggle, 195–196. According to Arturo Cruz, a prominent Nicaraguan economist who served in the Sandinistas’ initial Government of National Reconstruction, “During the first months after the victory, some of the commandantes adopted the extreme view that the United States had not intervened in Nicaragua in 1979 . . . because of the shift in the world balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union. They even claimed that the United States actually had been constrained by fear of Cuba. . . . At the beginning of the revolution,” he continued, “there was a pro-Soviet consensus among the commandantes” (Arturo Cruz Sequiera, “The Origins of Sandinista Foreign Policy,” in Central America: Anatomy of Conflict, ed. Robert S. Leiken (New York: Pergamon, 1984), 102, 106. Jaime Wheelock, leader of the FSLN’s “Proletarian” faction and Nicaraguan minister of agriculture in the Sandinista government, recalls that “we thought there was a great potential and vast resources in the socialist countries and the USSR. We underestimated the extent of the crisis of socialism” (quoted in Castréa, Utopia Unarmed, 108n38).


15. Pezzullo, At the Fall of Somoza, 50, 78, 123; Kagan, Twilight Struggle, 159–160; Castréa, Utopia Unarmed, 59; Miranda and Ratliff, The Civil War in Nicaragua, 98–99.

16. Castréa, Utopia Unarmed, 99n9; Pastor, Condemned to Repetition, 143.

17. Castréa, Utopia Unarmed, 32, 110–111; Dario Moreno, U.S. Policy in Central America: The Endless Debate (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1990), 63–66; Morris H. Morley, Washington, Somoza, and the Sandinistas: State and Regime in U.S. Policy toward Nicaragua, 1969–1981 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 298–300; Humberto Ortega, quoted in Kagan, Twilight Struggle, 122. Once Somoza had been overthrown, Ortega recalled, “We radicalized our model to look more like Cuba. Whether Terceristas or not, we wanted to copy in a mechanical way the model that we knew—which was Cuba—and we identified with it . . . We didn’t want to follow the other models” (quoted in Kagan, Twilight Struggle, 122).


22. Fonseca quoted in Pastor, Condemned to Repetition, 40; Karl Berman, Under the Big Stick: Nicaragua and the United States since 1848 (Boston: South End Press, 1986), chaps. 8–10; Nolan, Ideology of the Sandinistas, 45; Carlos Fonseca Amador, “Nicaragua: Zero Hour,” in Sandinistas Speak, by Tomás Borge et al. (New York: Pathfinder, 1982), 23; Ortega, quoted in telegram 1552, U.S. Embassy Managua to State Department, 2 April 1981, 2, in National Security Archive, Nicaragua: The Making of U.S. Policy, microfiche, document 01304. The historical record suggests that U.S. support for the senior Somoza’s regime fluctuated over time. During World War II and the early Cold War period, faced with security threats from European totalitarian enemies, the United States government welcomed Somoza as a reliable ally. From 1945 to 1947, however, the State Department actively promoted democratic change in Nicaragua, pressuring Somoza to step down as president, suspending U.S. military assistance, and even threatening to break relations. See Paul

23. Telegram 1552, U.S. Embassy Managua to State Department, 2 April 1981, 2–3, in National Security Archive, Nicaragua: The Making of U.S. Policy, microfiche, document 01304; Fonseca, “Nicaragua: Zero Hour,” in Borge et al., Sandinistas Speak, 23. It was the Somoza family, not U.S. firms, that controlled Nicaragua’s economy. According to Thomas W. Walker: “By the time the dynasty was overthrown the [Somoza] family had acquired a portfolio worth well in excess of $500 million (U.S.)—perhaps as much as one or one-and-a-half billion dollars. The Somoza owned about one-fifth of the nation’s arable land and produced export products such as cotton, sugar, coffee, cattle, and bananas. They were involved in the processing of agricultural exports. They held vital import-export franchises and had extensive investments in urban real estate. They owned or had controlling interests in two seaports, a maritime line, the national airline, the concrete industry, a paving-block company, construction firms, a metal extruding plant, and various other businesses including Plasmaféresis de Nicaragua, which exported plasma extracted from whole blood purchased from impoverished Nicaraguans” (Walker, Nicaragua: The Land of Sandino, 58). As late as 1978, direct U.S. investments in Nicaragua totaled a relatively insignificant $90 million (Bermann, Under the Big Stick, 295–296).


27. Morley, Washington, Somoza, and the Sandinistas, 114–115, 166, 175–176; Anthony Lake, Somoza Failing (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 193, 199; Pastor, Condemned to Repetition, 53–54; Kagan, Twilight Struggle, 74–75. Another conservative Democrat, Congressman Charles Wilson of Texas, a member of the House Appropriations Committee, warned the White House that he would block the administration’s entire foreign-aid bill if any further cuts were made in U.S. economic assistance to Nicaragua (Lake, Somoza Failing, 165; Morley, Washington, Somoza, and the Sandinistas, 114).


30. Moreno, U.S. Policy in Central America, 59; Morley, Washington, Somoza, and the Sandinistas, 188; Bermann, Under the Big Stick, 270; Pastor, Condemned to Repetition, 147; Lake, Somoza Failing, 220–221, 226.


32. Sklar, Washington’s War on Nicaragua, 25.


36. Pastor, Condemned to Repetition, 194.


45. Quoted in Pemberton, Exit with Honor, 133.


47. Haig, Cause, 95–96.

48. Ibid., 96.

49. Ibid., 30–31.

50. Ibid., 96–97. In his January 1981 Senate confirmation hearing, Haig stated that “over the last decade, America’s confidence in itself was shaken, and America’s leadership faltered. The United States seemed unable or unwilling to act when our strategic interests were threatened. We earned a reputation for ‘strategic passivity,’ and that reputation still weighs heavily upon us and cannot be wished away by rhetoric. What we once took for granted abroad—confidence in the United States—must be reestablished through a steady
accumulation of prudent and successful actions” (quoted in Schoenhals and Melanson, Revolution and Intervention in Grenada, 2:4).


56. Moreno, U.S. Policy in Central America, 312.


58. Haig, Caves, 129.


61. Cannon, President Reagan, 344. According to William LeoGrande, “In the midst of the [1980] presidential campaign, a skeptical reporter asked one of Ronald Reagan’s foreign policy advisers whether he and his candidate really believed their own rhetoric about the communist menace in El Salvador. ‘El Salvador itself doesn’t really matter,’ the adviser replied, ‘we have to establish credibility because we’re in very serious trouble’” (LeoGrande, “A Splendid Little War,” 27).

62. Moreno, U.S. Policy in Central America, 89.


68. Destler, “The Elusive Consensus,” 321; Cannon, President Reagan, 344.


70. Ibid., 351.


74. Ibid., 192; Pastor, Condemned to Repetition, 235; Woodward, Veil, 175.

75. Kagan, Twilight Struggle, 192; Gutman, Banana Diplomacy, 70.

76. Kagan, Twilight Struggle, 192; Gutman, Banana Diplomacy, 67.

77. Gutman, Banana Diplomacy, 67–68.

78. Kagan, Twilight Struggle, 193; Hybel, How Leaders Reason, 266. A U.S. military officer described the military maneuvers as “a deliberate attempt to stick it in their eye” (Gutman, Banana Diplomacy, 73).

79. Kagan, Twilight Struggle, 193–194, 197. For a different interpretation, which places the blame for the collapse of negotiations on the unreasonable demands imposed by Reagan administration hard-liners seeking to “ sabotage” Enders’ initiative in favor of a paramilitary option, see LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, 118–123.

80. Gutman, Banana Diplomacy, 66; Scott, Deciding to Intervene, 159.

81. Washington Post, 8 May 1983, A10; Gutman, Banana Diplomacy, 64, 84–85; Scott,

90. Kagan, Twilight Struggle, 202; Washington Post, 8 May 1983, A10. According to Duane Claridge, the CIA “did not ‘invent’ the Nicaraguan guerrillas, freedom fighters, or contras, whatever you want to call them. The truth is that anti-Sandinista forces, both political and military, were in Honduras before we got there. We simply capitalized on the disenchantment of a sizable Nicaraguan population with the anti-Catholic Church, agricultural-collectivization, single-political-party, and generally dictatorial policies of the Sandinistas themselves to create the single largest guerrilla force in Latin American history” (Claridge, A Spy for All Seasons, 198–199; emphasis in original).

91. Kornbluh, Nicaragua: The Price of Intervention, 22–23; Sklar, Washington’s War on Nicaragua, 100; Gutman, Banana Diplomacy, 84–85.


93. LeGrande, Our Own Backyard, 111, 141–142, 306–309; Scott, Deciding to Intervene, 160; Claridge, A Spy for All Seasons, 209; Cannon, President Reagan, 355; Sklar, Washington’s War on Nicaragua, 98–99, 131; Arnsen, Crossroads, 102.

94. Kagan, Twilight Struggle, 172; Howard J. Wiarda, American Foreign Policy in the 80s and 90s: Issues and Controversies from Reagan to Bush (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 8. In his autobiography An American Life, Reagan writes that “in late 1981, I authorized Bill Casey to undertake a program of covert operations aimed at cutting the flow of arms to Nicaragua and other Central American countries” (474). For additional evidence that interdiction was Reagan’s initial goal, see Douglas Brinkley, ed., The Reagan Diaries (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 50, 52. William LeGrande, however, concludes that “Reagan was one of the least enthusiastic supporters of the covert action proposal at first—not because it appeared overly ambitious, but because it was not ambitious enough. ‘It took some persuading’ to get Reagan interested in the contra program, according to a senior administration official. Plans for a small force to harass the Sandinistas or interdict arms did not interest him. He was only convinced the plan had merit when it was presented as a way to roll back the Nicaraguan revolution. The contra army would be Washington’s answer to Soviet support for wars of national liberation” (LeGrande, Our Own Backyard, 145).


Chapter Seven. Grenada, 1983