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Gerardo Sánchez Nateras

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The Sandinista revolution and the limits of the Cold War in Latin America: the dilemma of non-intervention during the Nicaraguan crisis, 1977–78

Gerardo Sánchez Nateras

Centro de Estudios Históricos, El Colegio de México, Mexico City, Mexico

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to understand the construction of a broad alliance between the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), a socialist inspired guerrilla group, and various Latin American liberal and authoritarian governments, mainly Venezuela, Costa Rica, Panama and Cuba, between 1977 and 1979. I will seek to understand the construction of this unusual partnership, as well as the deep conflicts and mistrust that existed between the parties during the revolutionary upheaval in Nicaragua. This process will be examined by analysing the way Cold War politics and Latin American regional tensions shaped the events leading to the Sandinista revolution.

KEYWORDS

Nicaragua; Venezuela; Panama; Costa Rica; Cuba; Mexico; United States; non-intervention; revolution; FSLN; Carlos Andres Perez; Omar Torrijos; Jimmy Carter; Anastasio Somoza; Latin America; foreign policy

This paper tells the story of how some Latin American countries sought to avoid radical change and ended up supporting a revolution instead. It will study the reasons why Venezuela, Panama, and Costa Rica ended up supporting the Sandinista National Liberation Front against the wishes of the United States. In doing so, they built a new political paradigm that envisioned the end of the bipolar conflict.

The article will further show the impact of the Carter Administration's policy of non-intervention, and later on multilateralism, and its profound impact on the Nicaraguan regional crisis. Of particular importance will be the study of the process of radicalisation of Venezuela, Panama, and Costa Rica in the context of an increased attempt by the American government to exercise non-intervention in Latin America, and the gradual, and in a certain way reluctant, involvement of Cuba in the crisis. The purpose of this work is to study how these dynamics fostered the decomposition of the bipolar paradigm in inter-American relations and the creation of a new political configuration in the region.

The history of the American government's involvement in the Nicaraguan Revolution has been extensively studied by historians.¹ However, the United States was only one of the actors in the revolutionary drama. While the non-interventionist desire of the United States

CONTACT Gerardo Sánchez Nateras  gsanchez@colmex.mx

¹Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling: A Case Study of Washington at Work* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1989); Robert Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1987); Lawrence Pezzullo, *At the Fall of Somoza* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1993); William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Back Yard: The United States in Central America, 1977–1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

weakened the regime of Anastasio Somoza, the actions of countries like Venezuela, Panama and Costa Rica, helped turn a political crisis into a revolution. The role that Cuba played in the victory of the FSLN will also be analysed in relation to the three countries mentioned, and the political developments in Nicaragua during 1977 and 1978. This work attempts to place the US and Cuban governments' policy in a complex network of inter-American relations, showing how the action of 'lesser' Latin American actors managed to push both countries into a reluctant involvement in the crisis.²

The main objective of this paper is to show how the Nicaraguan Revolution can be explained as the clash between two major forces: the inertia of the bipolar paradigm, understood as the struggle between communist and capitalist projects, and the need to break with the narrow limits of bipolar politics to achieve specific political objectives.

This work is divided into five sections: The first will examine the basis of Jimmy Carter's non-interventionist policy and its impact in Nicaragua; the second will focus on the political alliance that the Sandinistas established with Venezuela and Panama and the way both groups tried to manipulate and use the other to further their goals. The third section will analyse the way the different groups of the anti-Somoza opposition tried to push the United States into assuming a 'traditional' interventionist role, as well as Venezuela's plea to oust Somoza to prevent the victory of the FSLN-led revolution. This section will be followed by a quick look into the radicalisation of the crisis and the desperate measures that Venezuela and Panama took to push the American government to intervene. Finally, the last section will briefly examine the establishment of a true alliance between Panama, Venezuela and Costa Rica with the Sandinistas and Cuba, and their attempt to create a moderate revolutionary option for Nicaragua that tried to break the traditional pattern of Cold War dichotomies.

1. The intervention of non-intervention

In 1976, the special relationship between Anastasio Somoza and the American government began to wane. The presidential victory of Jimmy Carter deepened this process and generated considerable tension between the United States and Nicaragua. Carter had come to the White House promising to lead the government of the United States by strict moral imperatives, among which was respect for human rights as a cornerstone of foreign policy. For many years, American foreign policy had been guided by the 'imperial' prerogatives of the geopolitical confrontation. This had led to a wave of coups and support for anti-communist dictators in the Third World. Somoza was only one among dozens of dictators who benefited from the policies of American anti-communism.

For Daniel Sargent American foreign relations under President Carter were characterised by the tension between the desire to carry on a 'morally correct' foreign policy and the problem of converting this ideal into a reality.³ Carter's foreign policy, especially in Latin America, was centred on the idea that strong political relations with democratic leaders

²This paper draws from a number of archives in Mexico, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and the United States. These are the abbreviated notations: NARA: National Archive and Records Administration, Washington D.C.; AGN-Mexico: Archivo General de la Nación, Ciudad de México; AH-SRE: Archivo Histórico Genaro Estrada, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Ciudad de México; IHNCA-UCA: Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica, Universidad Centroamericana, Managua; AGN-Costa Rica: Archivo General de la Nación Costa Rica, San José. Telegrams from the State Department will be referenced by their title, origin and date. Their full source is: NARA, Record Group 59, Central Foreign Policy Files, Electronic Telegrams, 1978.

³Daniel J. Sargent, 'World Order Politics', *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 230–60.

would encourage respect for human rights. Behind this imperative there was a fundamental desire to transform Latin American politics and the approach of the United States towards the region.

The Carter administration sought to break the bilateral world order, which expressed itself in the *détente* between the United States and the Soviet Union, and to create a multi-lateral, interdependent, and globalised political order in an attempt to eliminate the strict pattern of Cold War politics. This meant that American unilateralism had to be avoided. In Latin America this approach to international politics created a contradiction between the administrations' human rights policy and its non-interventionist constraints.

In the case of Nicaragua, the imperative not to exercise power unilaterally was the most important element in the first stages of the regime's crisis, and not the human rights policy in itself. American unilateralism in Latin America had a long history, but the Cold War encouraged the United States to fulfil an 'imperial' role in Latin American politics that officials in the Carter Administration tried to change.⁴ This situation presented the United States with an insoluble problem to solve, not only because non-intervention clashed with Human Rights diplomacy, but because it also clashed with the desires of some Latin American governments and non-state groups for American intervention. In practical terms, Carter's foreign policy limited the capacity of the US government to guide political events towards its desired goals.

In rejecting its traditional role in the region, the United States also broke with a clear pattern of anti-communist interventions that helped redefine the bipolar order in Latin American political relations. This withdrawal from the internal affairs of the Latin American nations opened the door for new political configurations and alliances, despite the desires of American officials.

2. A marriage of convenience

By 1977, the situation in Nicaragua was slowly turning sour for Anastasio Somoza. The growing distance from Washington, produced by the new human rights policy, added to the growing internal problems caused by a poor economic performance and the weakening of the dictator's health. These events led to a political crisis as different opposition groups tried to improve their positions in preparation for what they saw as an imminent regime change. The opposition in Nicaragua could be roughly divided into two separate camps: the moderate opposition, composed of a coalition of young businessmen and landowners close to the government, and the radical left-wing *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN), that encompassed a wide variety of ideological positions, from hardened Marxist-Leninists to social democrats. The Sandinistas were divided themselves into three factions with different revolutionary strategies: the 'Prolonged People's War' that advocated a Maoist and *foquista*⁵ approach to revolution; the 'Proletarian tendency' that followed a more orthodox Soviet strategy; and the '*Terceristas*' that followed a strategy of alliances with the bourgeoisie.

⁴Robert Pastor, from the National Security Council, and Anthony Lake, from the State Department, were only two of many officials involved in the Nicaraguan crisis that shared a deep belief that American unilateralism was to blame for many tragedies in Latin America. Pastor, *Condemned to repetition. The United States and Nicaragua*, 79.

⁵*Foquismo* theory followed Ernesto Guevara and Régis Debray's writings on revolutionary theory in colonial, post colonial and underdeveloped regions. *Foquismo* argued that that a politically motivated armed group (*foco*) could create the appropriate conditions for revolution in rural areas not suitable for revolution according to traditional Marxist thought.

The Sandinistas were at a great disadvantage against the moderate opposition. By late 1977, there were only a handful of militants spread throughout the country. The counter-insurgency campaigns of the dictatorship between 1974 and 1977 destroyed the clandestine infrastructure of the *Frente* and aggravated the rift between the various factions of the FSLN. By late 1976, one of these factions, the *Terceristas*, sought to reconstruct the FSLN and wage war against the dictatorship, trying to take advantage of the political crisis looming on the horizon.

The *Terceristas* sought to change their public image by disavowing Marxist discourse and tactics in order to obtain support from moderate opposition groups, not only inside the country but from outside as well. The Sandinistas created a political front led by a 'group of twelve' which was composed of lawyers, businessmen, writers, and various others, with the purpose of presenting a politically appropriate front for the organisation. The *Terceristas* were masked behind layers of political moderation and openness, with businessmen as interim presidents and intellectuals acting as ambassadors, however, inside the clandestine organisation the power lay with the *Dirección Nacional (Tercerista)*, which was composed of three hardened militants. The *Terceristas* were careful not to openly state their strategies, and few internal documents of the group exist that clearly state their intentions, however a clandestine letter sent by Humberto Ortega, military commander of the *Terceristas*, to militants within Nicaragua can shed light on the perspective of the FSLN:

Without orthodox Marxist schemes, without ultra-left phrases like 'power only to the workers', 'towards the dictatorship of the proletariat', etc. We have been able -without losing at any moment our revolutionary Marxist-Leninist content- to mobilise the entire Nicaraguan people around the FSLN [...] We have not confused the content with the shape; in essence we are the ideological and political representation of the interests of the exploited, the class that is historically destined to bury Capitalism and Imperialism: the working class.⁶

Ostracised from Nicaraguan politics, the *Terceristas* sought support from foreign countries. Venezuela, Panama, Mexico and Cuba were among the first governments that the revolutionaries tried to convince to support their renewed campaign against Somoza.

In mid-1977, according to a US Defence Intelligence Agency document, Sergio Ramírez, a prominent *Tercerista*, asked the Cuban government for \$25,000 'to purchase arms in Costa Rica'. Even though the response of the Cuban government is unknown, the document indicates that Cuban support for the FSLN was limited: '[...] the increase in support to the FSLN appears modest and probably [...] does not portend a renewed Cuban intent to export the revolution to Latin America on a large scale.'⁷

Cuba, the traditional patron of Latin American revolutionaries, refused to lend any significant support to the first stages of the insurrection in 1977. According to Humberto Ortega, Manuel Piñero, director of the America Department of the Cuban Communist Party, supported the Prolonged People's War faction (GPP) of the FSLN. The GPP was, at that time, the only officially recognised faction of the FSLN by the Cuban government, and even had an official representative on the island, José Benito Escobar. In stark contrast, Juan Manuel Rivero, the Cuban consul in San Jose, Costa Rica, supported the *Terceristas*

⁶'Carta de Humberto Ortega al Frente Norte' 7 January 1979, IHNCA-UCA, Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, 0049, 5 folios (bis), 4.

⁷National Security Archive, 'Cuba-Nicaragua Outside Support to FSLN' Defence Intelligence Agency. [Classification Excised], Cable. 19 November 1977, 2 pp, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1679049719?accountid=15172> (accessed 17 January 2018).

but was unable to provide more than symbolic support for the insurrection.⁸ This lack of enthusiasm for the *Terceristas* had the benefit of distancing that faction from Cuba, with all its ideological and political implications.

Even though the Sandinistas had received considerable support from Cuba during the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s: training cadres, providing room and board and acting as an intermediary between the Sandinistas and other communist countries and groups. During the late 1970s Cuba's enthusiasm for armed revolution in Latin America waned, shifting its focus from armed insurgencies towards cultural diplomacy, normalising its political relationships with other Latin American and Caribbean countries.⁹ To make matters worse for the Sandinistas, between 1976 and 1977 the Cuban government saw the opportunity to normalise its foreign relations with the United States under Jimmy Carter, a project that was at odds with an increased support for armed guerrilla insurgencies on the continent.¹⁰ Even more, the division of the FSLN into three tendencies made it especially difficult for the regime to support the 'adventurist' plans of the *Terceristas*. With a large part of its armed forces committed in Angola, the Cubans were stretched thin and had little incentive to help the Sandinistas, compromising years of diplomatic efforts that had managed to end the political isolation of the island.

The Cuban rejection pushed the *Terceristas* to seek the support of other countries in the region, namely Mexico, Panama and Venezuela. In Mexico the Sandinistas were also disappointed. Even though President José López Portillo met with representatives of the Sandinistas (selected for their bourgeois pedigree), the envoys were unable to secure any kind of material or political support for their efforts from the Mexican government.¹¹

Venezuela proved to be more receptive to the Sandinistas. The president of Venezuela, Carlos Andres Perez, had a long history of enmity with anti-communist dictators, particularly with the Somoza family. The Sandinistas used their contacts in the business and intellectual circles to arrange a meeting with the Venezuelan president, to whom they presented their new, non-dogmatic brand of *Sandinismo*, that was clearly different from Marxism. Perez was especially pleased with the Sandinista-proposed interim president, Felipe Mantica, a well-known Catholic businessman.

Washington's distance from Somoza not only encouraged Somoza's internal opposition but also mobilised his international enemies. The Sandinistas thus became a way for Perez to intervene in Nicaragua's internal affairs and, eventually, an instrument to pressure the United States to take action against Somoza. Perez sought to avoid a revolution in Nicaragua, but he understood that there could be no solution without fully involving Nicaragua's radical factions in building a post-Somoza political order. The trick would be to limit their influence in the new government. Perez agreed to support the Sandinistas in late 1977 with a monthly stipend of \$100,000 to strengthen the opposition; eventually he would give the Sandinistas more than 1 million dollars in covert funding.¹²

⁸Humberto Ortega, *La epopeya de la insurreccion* (Managua: Lea Grupo editorial, 2004), 321.

⁹Dirk Kruijt, 'The mature years (early 1970s–late 1980s)', in *Cuba and revolutionary Latin America: An oral history* (London: Zed Books, 2017).

¹⁰William M. LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 157–58.

¹¹Gustavo Iruegas, *Diplomacia en tiempos de Guerra: Memorias del embajador Gustavo Iruegas* (Mexico: Instituto Mora, 2013), 198.

¹²Ernesto Cardenal, *La revolución perdida* (Madrid: Trotta, 2004), 33; Ortega, *La epopeya...*, 393.

During the following months, the Panamanian government was also contacted by the FSLN. The Sandinistas, again through their ‘intellectual’ agents, presented their plan to create a national moderate government through the ‘Group of twelve’. The idea was accepted by Omar Torrijos, who simply said, ‘That is correct, no radicalism [...] handle the Yankees with care. You have to play with the chain, not with the monkey’.¹³

The Sandinistas, in turn, understood that the international support they received was contingent upon them creating the illusion of political moderation. In an internal *Tercerista* letter, sent in 1979 to militants within the country concerned about this strategy, Humberto Ortega clarified the reasons behind his actions:

The art is in leading these changes – product not only of the popular and revolutionary participation but also of the bourgeoisie – towards the interests of the Popular Sandinista Revolution. Let’s keep collecting the support of the international bourgeoisie that opposes Somoza, [...] strengthening our moral and political hegemony over the masses.¹⁴

At the beginning of the crisis, both the Sandinistas and the Latin American governments tried to use each other to put pressure on Somoza, but ultimately, their goals differed considerably. As the situation became more radicalised, the alliance between the Sandinistas and their patrons began to fall apart.

3. Appealing to the United States

As the crisis became more violent, the moderate opposition tried to mediate a solution urging the United States to step in and solve the problem. After the assassination of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, a prominent member of the moderate opposition, on 10 January 1978, the government of Venezuela withdrew its ambassador in Managua, Audelino Ramón Moreno. The president of Venezuela also sent a letter to President Carter on 31 January to ask the US to take a clear and critical position against the Somoza regime, which he accused of masterminding the murder of the journalist. Perez raised the spectre of a ‘radical’ revolution in Nicaragua with the American ambassador, Viron Vaky, who stated, ‘He is afraid that if it continues to deteriorate, chaos will result and extremists, who are armed, will take advantage of the situation’.¹⁵ But on 4 February, when Perez insisted on getting a response from the US government, Vaky informed the Venezuelan deputy foreign minister that ‘Washington considered that it would be best if the Nicaraguans themselves could resolve the situation’¹⁶ stressing the US policy of neutrality in the Nicaraguan political process.

The US position began to cause a degree of anger within the moderate opposition in Nicaragua that was calling for the United States to exercise its ‘moral influence in Nicaragua’.¹⁷ Reports by the Embassy in Managua stated that their business contacts were complaining about the disinterested attitude of the United States towards the crisis:

¹³Sergio Ramírez, *Adiós muchachos* (México: Alaguara, 2015), 139.

¹⁴‘Carta de Humberto Ortega al Frente Norte’ 7 January 1979, AH-IHNCA-UCA, Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, 0049, 5 folios (bis), foja 4.

¹⁵‘President Perez sends letter to president Carter on Nicaragua’, Telegram 01053 from the American embassy in Caracas to the State Department, 31 January 1978, NARA.

¹⁶‘Request for reaction to Perez letter on Nicaragua’, Telegram 01199 from the American embassy in Caracas to the State Department, 4 February 1978, NARA.

¹⁷‘Nicaragua business leaders urge US action on Nicaraguan crisis’, Telegram 00566 from the American embassy in Managua to the State Department, 5 February 1978, NARA.

When [officials respond that] the Embassy cannot properly intervene in Nicaragua's internal affairs and that we hope the Nicaraguans can settle their own political problems in a constitutional and non-violent manner, many of our interlocutors express strong disappointment. They hold us responsible for enabling the Somoza family to seize power more than forty years ago [...].¹⁸

The non-interventionist stance of the Carter Administration began to cause confusion among opposition actors. After years of interference in the internal affairs of Nicaragua and Latin America, the reaction of both the domestic and international opposition was not to avoid an American political intervention but to urge the 'empire' to take a position in the conflict, as had been its pattern for many years. Opposition groups tried to turn the United States into an ally in their anti-Somoza efforts, or at least turn it into a foreign mediator that could enforce internal political arrangements.

On 17 February President Carter responded to Perez's plea rejecting any kind of American involvement. Carter wrote: 'We can and will be prepared to support basic human rights and to shape our policies towards this end. But we will not intervene or impose specific political solutions for individual countries'.¹⁹

Perez kept insisting, sending messages through the US ambassador in Venezuela and emphasising the need for the United States to take action to avoid the radicalisation of Nicaraguan politics. According to Viron Vaky:

The problem, Perez went on, was that the longer some moderate, 'elegant' solution was delayed, the greater the chance for polarisation and violence, and if violence is finally left as the only tool, those who use it—and he meant the Sandinistas—will install an extreme left regime; that will present a real problem to the U.S., which may find it necessary to take measures in response, and that, he said, would be a real crisis.²⁰

The difference between Perez and the Sandinistas became clear as the months went on. Despite Venezuela's monthly support for the revolutionaries, the Venezuelan president insisted with grave concern to the American ambassador that a firm stance from the United States was needed to stop the radicalisation of the country, which the Sandinistas wanted. He even suggested that some retired officers of the National Guard with sufficient 'prestige' could form a transition *Junta*, as had happened in Venezuela in 1958, and thus avoid the more radical elements from taking power.²¹ Worryingly for the FSLN, the junta proposed by Perez would almost certainly leave the Sandinistas on the periphery of the political accord and stop their revolution.

But just as Perez was sending distressing signals to Washington, in Havana there was little interest in the FSLN's revolutionary efforts. In March 1978, Sergio Ramirez and Ernesto Cardenal managed to arrange meetings with Manuel Piñeiro and Fidel Castro, both with the objective of securing Cuban support for the revolution. According to Ramírez his meeting with Piñeiro was not successful:

He insisted during our meeting in the necessity of unity [between the FSLN factions]; but in his words I felt little identification with the *Terceristas*, because we clashed with the rule of the

¹⁸'Indications of anti-embassy sentiment among segments of private sector', Telegram 00521 from the American embassy in Managua to the State Department, 2 February 1978, NARA.

¹⁹Presidential reply to Perez letter on Nicaragua, Telegram 043981 from the State Department to the American embassy in Caracas, 18 February 1978, NARA.

²⁰President Pérez comments again on Nicaragua, Telegram 02218 from the American embassy in Caracas to the State Department, 7 March 1978, NARA.

²¹Ibid.

guerrilla *foco*, and because there was little understanding of our strategy of alliances. Piñeiro gave no promise of support.²²

Cardenal's meeting with Fidel Castro was more successful. According to him Castro listened attentively, seemed sympathetic to their efforts and at the end of their interview he pledged to give some assistance to the guerrillas.²³ However, Castro's support only materialised in late March with the offer by the Cubans to train 11 militants on the island.²⁴ This incipient relationship grew when, on 7 April, a small *Tercerista* delegation headed by Daniel Ortega met with Fidel Castro. According to Humberto, Ortega, '[...] Castro paid great attention [to the plans for the insurrection] but was cautious.'²⁵ The relation between the *Terceristas* and the Cubans would grow over time, but by mid-1978 the Sandinistas only received limited Cuban support for the revolution, and much less than that received by the Panamanian and Venezuelan governments, or Costa Rican private citizens like José Figueres.

In Costa Rica, the Sandinistas received considerable support from the Communist party, *Vanguardia Popular*, led by Manuel Mora Valverde. Young elements within the party had established contacts with the *Terceristas* in 1976. *Vanguardia Popular* helped the Sandinistas considerably by establishing a network of safe-houses, and by making available their substantial human resources and contacts within the political establishment of Costa Rica. Some of *Vanguardia's* militants had trained in Cuba and the Soviet Union as radio operators, bomb makers, intelligence officers and more, and their expertise was invaluable for the fledgling *Tercerista* structure in Costa Rica between 1976 and 1978.²⁶

It was in coordination with *Vanguardia Popular* that the Cuban government and its envoys began to work on the unification of the FSLN. Fernando Camacho, responsible for the intelligence apparatus of *Vanguardia Popular*, organised at least 40 meetings between Sandinista leaders, Cuban envoys and members of the party, without significant success during most of 1978.²⁷

While popular agitation grew, the Carter Administration, engrossed in other matters of international importance, particularly in Iran, let the crisis in Nicaragua take its own course. In August 1978, Viron Vaky was named assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs. In his previous post as American ambassador to Venezuela he had discussed with Pérez the situation in Nicaragua. In his new position Vaky sought to find a solution to the crisis, recognising the profound implications that it might have for the region.²⁸ This led to a shift in American policy towards Somoza and the opposition, but the State Department still tried to find a new solution to the crisis that did not compromise the American policy towards unilateralism. The answer that Washington officials proposed was a multilateral effort to solve the crisis.²⁹

By September, Costa Rican President Rodrigo Carazo also became interested in a diplomatic solution to the Nicaraguan problem. In a conversation with Weissman, the American ambassador in San Jose, Carazo proposed to spearhead a mediation effort with the other

²²Ramírez, *Adiós muchachos*, 174–5.

²³Ernesto Cardenal, *La revolución perdida*, 60.

²⁴Ortega, *La epopeya...*, 341.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 391.

²⁶Manuel Mora Salas, 'Una brigada de nombre Calufa', in *Los amigos venían del sur*, ed. Jose Picado Lagos (San José: Universidad Estatal a Distancia, 2014), 39.

²⁷Fernando Camacho, 'En silencio tuvo que ser', *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁸Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling: A Case Study of Washington at Work* (Amherst: Massachusetts University Press, 1989), 113.

²⁹Pastor, *Condemned to repetition*, 83.

leaders of Central America. Like Perez, he was interested in creating a framework that would limit the Sandinistas' power after Somoza was deposed. Carazo proposed the formation of a transitional junta composed of 'some members of the twelve', individuals from the National Guard, and some prominent Somocista businessmen. However, he emphasised that without the strong support of the United States, efforts by Costa Rica would ultimately be futile, as the American ambassador in Costa Rica reported to the State Department: 'Whatever the formula, Carazo said it could only succeed with full support of the US'.³⁰ The proposal was welcomed by the American government, which considered that the option was viable and decided to support it as it played directly into the multilateral approach the Carter Administration favoured.

The government of Costa Rica tried to convince other Central American governments to take a firm stand against Somoza. In early September, Costa Rican delegates travelled to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to organise a regional bloc to pressure Somoza.³¹ These countries were also the most likely to provide support for the dictatorship if the crisis became radicalised.

As the situation continued to deteriorate in Nicaragua, and popular agitation grew, the spectre of a communist revolution began to take on greater weight in international discussions. During the visit of the Costa Rican Foreign Minister, Rafael Angel Calderon, to Guatemala City, the fear of a communist takeover became a hotly debated topic in the press when the Costa Rican official declared: 'We are dealing with a communist group fighting in a very serious guerrilla movement, and we are worried about the possibility that Nicaragua might fall into the hands of the guerrillas'.³²

In the region, other countries became interested in the growing Central American crisis. The reports sent to the Mexican Foreign Affairs Ministry were very clear that the efforts of Costa Rica, along with the Central American governments, at the behest of the United States, were clearly designed to prevent the overthrow of Somoza by the Sandinistas: 'Anyway, the central objective is to avoid that the FSLN take power in Nicaragua'.³³

4. The September offensive, the radicalisation of the opposition

In September 1978, rumours of a coup against Somoza began to circulate through diplomatic channels.³⁴ Meanwhile, the business opposition called for a general strike to force Somoza out of government. More importantly, there were strong indications that the Church might mediate talks between the factions of the opposition and the government. Sandinista leaders knew that there were many forces seeking a political compromise with the dictatorship, and more importantly, seeking to replace Somoza, including the FSLN international allies.

The Sandinistas had to move fast to prevent a political solution. For much of 1978 popular discontent towards the regime had grown considerably, fanned by the brutality of

³⁰President Carazo's views on Nicaragua, Telegram 03750 from the American embassy in San Jose to the State Department, 1 September 1978, NARA.

³¹Telegrams from the Mexican embassy in Guatemala; San Salvador; Tegucigalpa, 7 September 1978, AH-SRE, Topographic Classification III-3340-3, Nicaragua 1978.

³²*El imparcial*, Guatemala City, 7 September 1978, AH-SRE, Topographic Classification III-3340-3, Nicaragua 1978.

³³'Memorandum para información superior', Telegram from the Mexican embassy in Managua to the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 13 September 1978, AH-SRE, Topographic Classification III-3340-3, Nicaragua 1978.

³⁴Telegram from the Mexican embassy in Managua to the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 29 August 1978, AH-SRE, Topographic Classification III-3340-3, Nicaragua 1978.

the National Guard and the efforts of local FSLN cadres of all factions. As the people of Nicaragua became restless, the *Terceristas* understood that they had to channel the popular discontent against the dictatorship, or risk losing their political opportunity. In late August a group of 29 Sandinistas managed to capture all the members of the Nicaraguan congress meeting at the National Palace in Managua. The Sandinista commando unit successfully escaped and the operation received considerable media attention. In the wake of the raid, Sandinista sympathisers, the ‘*muchachos*’, took up arms in Matagalpa against Somoza without initial FSLN coordination, and were brutally repressed by the National Guard.

The political crisis and the popular enthusiasm that had erupted in Nicaragua emboldened the governments of Venezuela and Panama. After the assault on the National Palace, the Sandinistas received from Perez a shipment of 150 FAL rifles and other military supplies that were transported to the country with the help of Torrijos.³⁵ The government of Panama also supplied the Sandinistas with equipment: rifles, mortars, bazookas and grenades. Venezuela and Panama also sent arms to Costa Rica, which were transferred on a local level to the Sandinistas by the Civil Guard, including heavy anti-aircraft guns.³⁶

Following the Matagalpa uprising preparations for the final offensive were accelerated throughout the country. Finally on 9 September, at exactly six o'clock, Sandinista guerrillas launched coordinated attacks on the five major cities of the country, backed by strong popular support from ‘militia’ units and the population in general. Police headquarters and National Guard bases were targeted in an attempt to start a general uprising throughout the country. The September clashes were widely covered by the international press, along with the brutal repression unleashed by the dictatorship, bombing and killing civilians in its path as it took back the cities captured by the FSLN one by one.³⁷

The September offensive intensified regional fears about a communist takeover, and destroyed the mediation initiative of President Carazo. US diplomats in Guatemala reported on 11 September, just two days after the start of the offensive, that the Guatemalan government would reject the mediation efforts initiated by President Carazo under the notion that this would be an ‘intervention’ in the affairs of Nicaragua.³⁸ Talks with officials from El Salvador and Honduras also led to the same result. In a week, the Central American dictatorships abandoned the mediation efforts, worried by the regional threat of a communist takeover in Nicaragua. On 11 September, the American ambassador to Guatemala had a meeting with the foreign minister Castillo Valdez, who stated that:

[The Guatemalan foreign minister said that] we should not lose sight of the fact that we are dealing in Nicaragua with “a whole establishment”, not just one man [...] The present alternative to which was only a government of extreme left. He mentioned twice the analogy he felt existed between the present situation in Nicaragua and the earlier events in Cuba when efforts to get rid of Batista led to Castro.³⁹

³⁵Ortega, *La epopeya...*, 352.

³⁶‘Investigaciones sobre las declaraciones de Ramon Quiroz al Lic. José Rafael Cordero Crocheri’, AGN–Costa Rica, Presidencial, Signatura, 2350; ‘Declaración de Fernando Trejos al Organismo de Investigación Judicial’, 20 November 1980, AGN–Costa Rica, Presidencial, Signatura 2402; Ortega, *La epopeya de la insurrección*, 391.

³⁷María Dolores Ferrero Blanco, *La Nicaragua de los Somoza 1936–1979* (Managua: IHNCA, Universidad de Huelva, 2012), 250.

³⁸‘Guatemalan position on Nicaragua’, Telegram 05354 from the American embassy in Guatemala City to the State Department, 11 September 1978, NARA.

³⁹*Ibid.*

The government of Honduras, in turn, stressed its position on the events in Nicaragua, clearly stating that it would remain completely neutral to the political crisis.⁴⁰ Neutrality itself became a malleable issue; for countries like Honduras, neutrality meant avoiding any action or international mediation to pressure the Nicaraguan government and even to avoid penalising Nicaragua directly for violations of Costa Rican territory. As the crisis escalated, rumours of Guatemalan and Honduran armies intervening in Nicaragua increased.

While the situation was highly polarised within Nicaragua, internationally, the regime crisis was leading to greater polarisation among Latin American countries. The attacks of the Nicaraguan Air Force into Costa Rican territory during the September offensive, spurred the government of Costa Rica to seek military support from Venezuela and Panama. On September 14, the Venezuelan government sent bombers and interceptors to Costa Rica to show its solidarity with Carazo and to dissuade Somoza from taking direct action against Costa Rica. The government of Panama sent four helicopters to mobilise the Civil Guard in the event of armed incursions by Nicaragua.⁴¹ The same day president Perez met with the head of the US embassy in Caracas to announce the relocation of Venezuelan military planes, stating that he had 'authorised aircraft to undertake bombing missions in Costa Rica, if Carazo ordered, and even to bomb Nicaraguan installations if Carazo deemed it necessary'.⁴² The situation had become so radicalised, and animosity between Somoza and Perez so strong, that the Venezuelan airforce provided air cover for the Sandinistas attacking the border town of Peñas Blancas, from Costa Rica.⁴³

Perez still tried to influence the attitude of the United States, openly declaring his desire to intervene in Nicaragua to prevent a 'genocide' from being perpetrated by the National Guard. He also sought the support of other countries, like Mexico, to intervene in Nicaragua. However, as the American ambassador reported, President Lopez Portillo rejected any direct action against Somoza, instead suggesting a break in relations with Nicaragua.⁴⁴ In private however, the Mexican government became cautiously involved in the revolutionary process. In September 1978, when the new Mexican *Chargé d'Affaires*, Gustavo Iruegas was sent to Managua, the Foreign Minister, Santiago Roel, gave him direct instructions to 'Go to Nicaragua and do what you can for those people and their revolution, taking care of the forms [...]'.⁴⁵

Inaction by the Carter Administration was creating a political vacuum that other regional forces were trying to fill. However, most Latin American countries were worried about the possible repercussions of the fall of Somoza, and were waiting before committing themselves to a more active role in the process.

The events of September led to a shift in US policy. Two months before, the United States had rejected opposition calls to intervene directly in the mediation efforts, but on 15 September, in a message from Viron Vaky, the State Department sent instructions to

⁴⁰Informe sobre la posición de Honduras ante los acontecimientos políticos de la república de Nicaragua, AGN-Costa Rica, Presidencia, Signatura 2402.

⁴¹Venezuela sent two Canberra bombers, two O.V. 10 fighter-bombers and a C-123 transport aircraft. 'Comunicado de prensa', 14 September 1978, AGN-Costa Rica, Presidencia, Signatura 00157.

⁴²'Nicaragua MFM', Telegram 08735 from the American embassy in Caracas to the State Department, 14 September 1978, NARA.

⁴³José Picado Lagos, 'Queríamos ser como el Che', in *Los amigos venían del sur*, ed. Picado Lagos, 137.

⁴⁴Consultations with president Pérez on Nicaragua, Telegram 08801 from the American embassy in Caracas to the State Department, 17 September 1978, NARA.

⁴⁵Iruegas, *Diplomacia en tiempos de guerra*, 191.

its embassy in Managua to contact members of the moderate opposition and urge them to publicly ask for support for the creation of a mediating commission.⁴⁶

As the Sandinista offensive began to wane, the National Guard took control of the cities disputed by the Sandinistas. Dramatic images of aerial bombings, artillery strikes against cities, and indiscriminate shooting infuriated Latin American leaders who were opposed to Somoza. More importantly, the defeat of the Sandinistas strengthened the dictatorship. The notion that Somoza might outlive the crisis outraged the Latin American presidents opposed to the dictator.

While in previous months Panama, Venezuela, and Costa Rica had tried to engage and manipulate the United States into assuming a clear position in the Nicaraguan political process, namely, trying to rebuild a bipolar political scheme, Latin American leaders were now abandoning their diplomatic projects in favour of forceful action.

In mid-September, the United States sent William Jorden to consult with the governments of the region to propose a solution for the Nicaraguan conflict. The reports of his mission sent a clear message to Washington that for most Latin American countries the time for diplomacy had passed. Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras all refused to take an active part in any form of mediation and only agreed to participate in a meeting of foreign ministers at the Organization of American States (OAS). They were particularly concerned about the spread of communism on the continent.⁴⁷

On 18 September, Omar Torrijos talked frankly with the American envoy, William Jorden, openly declaring that the time for diplomacy was over: 'Only the most prompt and forceful action could bring about a solution' Torrijos declared to the envoy.⁴⁸ The picture presented by the Panamanian leader was not very encouraging for the United States. According to Torrijos, throughout Latin America there was a strong belief that the United States supported Somoza, compromising the policy of goodwill initiated by Carter towards Latin America. He also stated that Carlos Andres Perez was determined and emotional and that he would employ any means possible to depose Somoza. Torrijos also mentioned that President Carazo was in a difficult situation because of the constant Nicaraguan incursions into Costa Rican territory, but the only two options that he had were compromising the country's budget and political reputation to buy weapons, or giving covert support to the Sandinistas and using them as a shield against Somoza. Panama, meanwhile, understood that the situation in Nicaragua had become polarised between only two policy options: Somoza or the Sandinistas. Torrijos tried again to convince the United States to take direct action against Somoza, reminding the Americans of the real possibility of a communist takeover and a Cuban intervention. As the American envoy reported:

He was persuaded that the Sandinistas right now were more in tune with his own thinking than they were with Castro's. But that would not continue if the guerrillas did not receive moral and material support in their struggle against the Nicaraguan dictator.⁴⁹

The strengthening of dictatorship following the failed September offensive began to change the outlook of the Latin American countries towards the FSLN, and thus their perspective

⁴⁶'International appeal for mediation', Telegram 234252 from the State Department to the American embassy in Managua, 15 September 1978, NARA.

⁴⁷Only Guatemala would later join the mediation process.

⁴⁸Talk with Torrijos' Telegram 06765 from the American embassy in Panama to the State Department, 18 September 1978, NARA.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

on the Marxist nature of the Sandinistas. Months before, Venezuela and Costa Rica had openly declared the FSLN a communist and pro-Castro movement. The 18 September meeting between the American envoy and Omar Torrijos ended with a slight threat by the Panamanian leader. He openly declared that 'Until now, not one gun or other weapon provided by the US had gone to the Nicaraguan guerrillas. But [he could] not guarantee how long that would remain true.'⁵⁰ The previous day, the international media had announced the formation of a Panamanian internationalist brigade led by the former deputy health minister and other members of the government of Panama, who had renounced their government positions to help the Nicaraguan revolution.⁵¹

President Perez was also ready to take more dramatic action against Somoza. In a conversation with Viron Vaky, he openly stated: 'I do not trust the United States now,'⁵² and threatened to create an international incident, suggesting the use of the Venezuelan Air Force in offensive actions against Somoza, to force a more active international presence in the crisis, hinting to a possible UN involvement.

The bellicose positions of the presidents of Panama and Venezuela were a cause of concern for President Carazo of Costa Rica. The American ambassador wrote, 'He is not a believer in military solutions. He seems appalled by [the] emotionalism of his Panamanian and Venezuelan *compadres*.'⁵³ For the Costa Rican government, the problem remained how to depose Somoza without bringing the Communists into power. Carazo declared to the American Ambassador:

If Cuba now becomes involved [...], we could be sure it would be on a large scale as in Africa. In case of Cuban involvement, his country would have to reverse history and engage in a large military build-up, Cuba, he said, would not be going into Nicaragua, but into Central America and his country would be endangered.⁵⁴

Despite Carazo's irritation with Torrijos and Perez's attitudes, political options for the government of Costa Rica were considerably limited since it depended directly on Venezuela and Panama for its territorial defence. The Costa Rican government reports on territorial security were disappointing and clearly showed that the Civil Guard, the country's police and only armed force, could not maintain the integrity of its own borders against Nicaraguan incursions and Sandinista camps.⁵⁵ The United States suggested some form of military police mission led by the OAS in the border area, but the idea was firmly rejected by Carazo as it would have strong political repercussions inside Costa Rica.⁵⁶

The Sandinista offensive ended on September 22, when the National Guard recaptured the last Sandinista redoubt, the city of Esteli. As the Sandinistas were defeated, the anti-Somoza countries took drastic measures in an attempt to attract the United States to the conflict and to pressure the Carter Administration to unequivocally declare its opposition to

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹'No saben ni cuando ni cómo', Agencia Centroamericana de Noticias, 27 September 1978, AGN-Costa Rica, Presidencia, Signatura, 00157.

⁵²Conversation with president Perez, Telegram 237004 from the State Department to the American embassy in Caracas, 19 September 1978, NARA.

⁵³Talk with Carazo, Telegram 06809 from the American Embassy in Panama to the State Department, 19 September 1978, NARA.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵'Vigilancia y Seguridad Territorial. Ministerio de Seguridad Pública', September 1978, AGN-CR, Presidencial, Signatura 000156.

⁵⁶'Carazo-more on Nicaragua', Telegram 03998 from the American Embassy in San Jose to the State Department, 21 September 1978, NARA.

Somoza. On September 21, the Panamanian leader Omar Torrijos summoned the former US ambassador Gabriel Lewis to convey an urgent message to the American government that Venezuelan and Panamanian aircraft had instructions to bomb military installations in Nicaragua in response to ‘Somoza’s madness.’⁵⁷

Lewis immediately contacted the US embassy with the news, which was quickly sent through diplomatic channels. American officials immediately tried to communicate with General Torrijos, who was unreachable. At about half past four in the morning, US Ambassador Jorden managed to contact Colonel Manuel Noriega, Panama’s intelligence chief, who told him that no attack would take place in the following hours. Despite this information, the US government alerted fighter jets to intercept any attack on Nicaragua. The situation was reported to President Carter, who immediately proceeded to send messages to both Torrijos and Perez warning them that any provocation would result, in the words of Carter, in ‘[...] a devastatingly adverse effect on our bilateral relations.’⁵⁸ Carter was finally able to contact Perez, who said that he had no knowledge of any military plan and that he was offended that the American government considered such action possible. He was later able to reach Torrijos, who also denied any such plans.

The United States government was convinced that the move by Torrijos had merely been an attempt to pressure the United States with the possibility of an inter-American War, but intelligence showed that the Panamanian military was at an unusual level of activity.⁵⁹ The threat by Torrijos had also strained relations with Venezuela. On 23 September, Venezuelan deputy foreign minister Lauria spoke with Torrijos, reproaching him for his lack of communication and his bellicose threats against Nicaragua. The conversation was forwarded to the US embassy in an attempt to disassociate itself from the Panamanian government.⁶⁰

5. Latin American intervention and the revolution

The Panamanian incident and the defeat of the Sandinistas opened the door once again to the possibility of finding a diplomatic solution to the Nicaraguan problem. Somoza accepted a mediation initiative under pressure from William Jorden on 26 September. Somoza was confident, however, that the worst part of the crisis had passed and that the Sandinistas were defeated.

But the brutality of the National Guard and the popular enthusiasm for the Sandinistas strengthened the resolve of the anti-Somoza international alliance and weakened the position of the United States. On 22 September Mexico declined to take part in the US-sponsored mediation. During a telephone conversation between Warren Christopher and Roel, Mexico’s foreign minister declared that the United States had wasted precious time and now more than 5000 people had lost their lives; he declared: ‘Mexico did not create the monster in Nicaragua but is now being asked to bury it.’⁶¹ Torrijos clearly stated that he did not believe

⁵⁷‘Nicaraguan situation’, Telegram 06930 from the American Embassy in Panama to the State Department, 22 September 1978, NARA.

⁵⁸‘Message for President Pérez from President Carter’, Telegram 241478 from the Secretary of State to the American Embassy in Caracas, 22 September 1978, NARA.

⁵⁹‘Conversation with general Torrijos’, Telegram 06967 from the American Embassy in Panama to the State Department, 23 September 1978, NARA.

⁶⁰‘Nicaraguan situation’, Telegram 09042 from the American embassy in Caracas to the State Department, 23 September 1978, NARA.

⁶¹‘Acting secretary’s discussion with Mexican foreign minister Roel on Nicaragua’, Telegram 244324 from the State Department to the American embassy in Mexico, 26 September 1978, NARA.

the mediation would work, but he assured the United States that he would not sabotage the efforts through military action. President Perez, in particular, took a very pessimistic approach to the mediation effort and clearly said that the only possible solution to the crisis was the ouster of Somoza.⁶² On October 25 Carter sent a letter to Carazo asking for Costa Rican support for the American backed mediation, but Costa Rica also declined the invitation to support the effort, instead taking a neutral position.⁶³

While both Panama and Venezuela were expressing their newfound confidence in the moderate elements of the FSLN, the Cuban government began to take a serious interest in Nicaragua. During the first half of 1978, the Cuban government had provided some training, political and logistical assistance to the Sandinistas, but insisted on the unification of the three Sandinista factions as a precondition for greater Cuban involvement. After September 1978, with evidence of strong popular support for armed struggle, Cuba stepped up its aid for the *Terceristas*. During the first days of October 1978, Humberto Ortega and Germán Pomares travelled to Cuba where they met with Fidel Castro and other high-ranking members of the Cuban government.⁶⁴

The Sandinistas were outraged by the mediation, but with their military force in tatters, regrouping in safe houses and camps in Honduras and Costa Rica, the Sandinistas could only try to undermine the mediation by political means. On 25 October, the 'group of twelve' denounced the effort as an imperialist ploy and Ramírez pulled out of the talks. However, the meetings between the opposition and Somoza continued uninterrupted.⁶⁵

During the next two months the mediation commission tried without success to come to a compromise between the dictatorship and the opposition. Somoza was manipulating the situation to gain time and strengthen the National Guard—his only real support in the country. The negotiations went on, and when Somoza felt secure, he declared an end to the proceedings, declaring that the mediation and the plebiscite proposal was 'unconstitutional'. The United States was trapped by its own non-interventionism, incapable of pushing Somoza sufficiently hard to get him out of office.

By that point, Venezuela, Costa Rica and Panama had taken a clear turn towards the Sandinistas, and revolution. With the moderate opposition incapable of pressuring Somoza, and the United States unwilling to take an active part in his overthrow, only the Sandinistas were capable of confronting Somoza. However, they still tried to control the course of events. During the next months the anti-Somoza presidents tried to control the ideological course of the Sandinista revolution and to strengthen the moderate elements within the organisation.

There was a strong rapprochement between the Sandinistas and the anti-Somoza countries after the September offensive and the breakdown of the mediation, this new understanding was built on a basic notion that Venezuela, Costa Rica and Panama would support the Sandinistas if they pledged not to put forth a radical communist system once Somoza was ousted.

In public the American Republics took a more radical tone. Costa Rica, the otherwise pacifist country, issued a press statement on 10 October regarding further incursions into its national territory that ended in an ominous warning: '[Due to the border incidents] the

⁶²Jorden-Mission talk with Perez, Telegram 06900 from the American Embassy in Panama to the State Department, 21 September 1978, NARA.

⁶³Letter from Jimmy Carter to Rodrigo Carazo, 25 October 1978', AGN-CR, Presidencial, Signatura 00078.

⁶⁴Ortega, *La epopeya de la insurreccion*, 391.

⁶⁵Pastor, *Condemned to repetition*, 102.

government of Costa Rica will adopt a more radical stance in defending its legitimate interests, its principles and ideals.⁶⁶ With the Panamanian government acting as an intermediary, the Minister of Security, José Echeverría Brealey, agreed to meet with important Sandinista leaders, among them Edén Pastora and Plutarco Elías Hernández, on 12 September 1978.⁶⁷ From that point on, the Sandinistas received increased support from the Costa Rican government in an attempt to limit the influence of militant Marxism in its ranks.

In late September, Pérez consulted with members of the 'group of twelve' to unequivocally ask them if they would implement a Cuban-styled system in Nicaragua, and while they assured him that they would not, he was still sceptical and kept his distance from the more radical elements. He also consulted with Fidel Castro and received a 'categorical pledge that the establishment of a communist government in Nicaragua was not the Cuban leader's goal.'⁶⁸

On October 23, the FSLN announced in a press conference that Edén Pastora would become the head of a new organisation: the Sandinista Army (*Ejército Sandinista de Nicaragua*), following pressure from the governments of Costa Rica and possibly Venezuela, in an attempt to contain more radical elements.⁶⁹ Both Cuban and American sources claimed that Pérez centred his efforts on Edén Pastora because of his reputation as a social democrat.⁷⁰

It became clear to the Cuban government and the other sandinista factions, that despite the military debacle, the September offensive strengthened the position of the *Terceristas*. This led to a significant shift in Cuba's policy towards Nicaragua. While in previous months the meetings between the Sandinista factions, the Cubans and Costa Rican communists had not progressed, in February 1979, during a new round of talks in Havana, the three Sandinista factions managed to reach an agreement establishing a unified National Directorate composed of nine members, three for every faction.⁷¹ However, the *Terceristas* had the upper hand. Cuban advisors travelled to San José to support military operations in the *Tercerista* high command code-named *Palo Alto*, establishing a direct line of communication between them and with Fidel Castro. The flow of arms and supplies coming from Cuba was also coordinated by the *Tercerista* structure in San José, that decided where the arms would be sent.⁷²

The unity of the Sandinistas was a precondition set by the Cubans to support the revolution, and from that point on supplies from Cuba to the Sandinistas were sent in large numbers in preparation for the next big offensive against Somoza. More than 40 flights between Cuba and Costa Rica were arranged by the Sandinistas and their allies.⁷³ Much of the supplies provided by Cuba were sent to northern Costa Rica, with direct cooperation from the Carazo administration. The deputy Minister of Security of Costa Rica, Willy Azofeifa, travelled to Cuba to supervise the arms transfers in direct contact with Manuel

⁶⁶AGN–Costa Rica, Presidencial, signatura 00154, foja 003.

⁶⁷'Telegram from Manuel Noriega to Juan Echeverría Brealey, 12 September 1978'; AGN–Costa Rica, Presidencial, Signatura, 000100.

⁶⁸'Jordan Mission-Talk with Pérez', Telegram 06900 from the American Embassy in Panama to the State Department, 21 September 1978, NARA.

⁶⁹Ramírez, *Adiós muchachos*, 245.

⁷⁰'Nicaragua: conversation with President Pérez', Telegram 09609 from the American Embassy in Caracas to the State Department, 11 October 1979, NARA; Kruijt, 'The mature years...'

⁷¹'Aspectos básicos de los acuerdos de unidad del FSLN', IHNCA–UCA, Frente Sandinista Liberación Nacional, 0050.

⁷²Ortega, *La epopeya de la insurrección*, 392.

⁷³*Ibid.*

Piñeiro.⁷⁴ According to Fidel Castro, Carlos Andrés Pérez also asked the Cuban government to transfer arms to Costa Rica, especially modern anti-aircraft guns to defend Costa Rican airspace from Somoza's aviation. The Cubans, in parallel to the arms transferred to the Sandinistas, sent weapons to arm the government of Costa Rica, including anti-aircraft guns (some later ended up in the hands of the Sandinistas).⁷⁵

With greater Cuban involvement a large number of foreign combatants trained in Cuba entered the country: Chilean, Argentinians, Guatemalans and other internationalists. In southern Nicaragua the *Terceristas* had established the 'Southern Front', a military formation composed of various Sandinista brigades and internationalist fighters, where most of the heavy equipment from Cuba was sent. Cuban advisors and soldiers participated in combat, some under the pretence of being 'Spanish' volunteers with the Costa Rican communist internationalist brigade, others participated as military officers and served as commanders of the large guerrilla army.

A few months before, Venezuela and Costa Rica had tried to overthrow Somoza in order to stop the Sandinistas from taking power. However, Somoza's mulish behaviour and American inaction led to the formation of an unusual alliance of convenience, which was built on the idea that the result of the combined effort of these various countries would not be a Marxist regime nor a liberal democracy, but rather something else altogether.

The involvement of Cuba in the Nicaraguan crisis had an enormous impact in the international configuration of the anti-Somoza alliance and ignited a regional competition between the members of the alliance to support the Sandinistas in order to hold influence over the new government in Nicaragua. The State Department reports of Pérez's support for the Sandinistas underscored this competition:

Pérez wants to have influence with the Sandinistas and a serious commitment to them is the only way of achieving and holding this influence. Whether Pérez has thought through the consequences of such [involvement] is unclear.⁷⁶

Pérez understood that in order to maintain some influence in the future of Nicaragua he had to support the Sandinistas or be overwhelmed by Cuban support. Omar Torrijos also understood this. In private conversations with American officials, he told them that in previous months they had refused to 'buy a share of Sandinista stock [...]' and now they had to come to him to have some influence.⁷⁷ Mexico too stepped up its support for the FSLN, providing significant funds and the permission to use an airstrip in southern Mexico to resupply the guerrillas.⁷⁸ As the dictatorship neared its end Venezuela, Costa Rica, Panama and Mexico cooperated with Cuba against Somoza, but also competed with Cuba in order to maintain their influence with the Sandinistas and guarantee the creation of a moderate social democratic government after Somoza's fall.

⁷⁴David Bermúdez, 'En alas de cucaracha' in *Los amigos venían del sur*, ed. Picado Lagos, 26–7.

⁷⁵Fidel Castro, *La paz en Colombia* (La Habana: Editorial Política, 2008), 128–9; 'Declaración de Fernando Trejos al Organismo de Investigación Judicial', 20 November 1980, AGN-CR, Presidencial, Signatura 2402.

⁷⁶Venezuela's President Pérez and Nicaragua: Background and analysis', Telegram 09689 from the American Embassy in Caracas to the State Department, 14 October 1978, NARA.

⁷⁷Pastor, *Condemned to repetition*, 133.

⁷⁸Kruijt, 'The mature years...'; Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos*, 82.

6. Conclusion

Even though the United States was the great force behind the Nicaraguan crisis, it was by no means driving the process. Latin American countries managed to negotiate, influence, and manipulate the situation to their favour to create an independent political solution to the Nicaraguan crisis despite American opposition, but also thanks to American non-intervention.

Three elements in particular allowed the development of a broad, non-aligned, moderate revolution during the Nicaraguan crisis: American policy, *Tercerista* strategy, and the defeat of the FSLN in September 1978.

The first breakdown of the bipolar order was the transformation of US policy under the Carter Administration rejecting American unilateralism and the promotion of a 'moral' foreign policy, even when many Latin American actors tried to re-establish the previous bipolar and imperialist arrangement, actively calling for US intervention to promote stability in the region, trying to manipulate the American government with threats of Cuban interference.

The *Tercerista* strategic flexibility, and the creation of the 'group of twelve', allowed the formation of a national and international multiclass alliance, breaking the traditional political isolation of Marxist groups in Latin American politics. This strategy was met with mistrust from Latin American countries that entered a 'marriage of convenience' where both groups kept secret and often contradictory objectives in order to further their interests.

The last key moment that allowed the rupture of the bipolar order was the military defeat of the FSLN during the September offensive, and the strengthening of the dictatorship. American rejection of unilateralism had weakened the political groups that relied on American support to face the dictatorship. At this moment Latin American countries that opposed Somoza faced a difficult decision: to withdraw from the conflict or support the Sandinistas. Revolution became the only solution, but in order to receive support from Latin American governments, the business opposition, and the Nicaraguan people, the *Terceristas* had to open their clandestine organisation to other actors interested in fighting the dictatorship. Their revolution, they stated, would not be a Marxist revolution, but a non-aligned, democratic, socially conscious revolution.

In the first months of 1979 the anti-Somoza countries that had warned the United States of a possible expansion of communism in the continent welcomed the intervention by Cuba in the conflict. The actions of the Nicaraguan people, together with Venezuela, Costa Rica, Panama and the Sandinistas, pushed the Cuban government to intervene directly in Central America, despite its reluctance. However, the involvement of Cuba in the conflict was built upon the agreement by all members of the alliance that the Sandinistas would create a social democratic government, and that Cuba would not control the future of Nicaragua. Cuban intervention, in a way, ignited a regional competition to support the Sandinistas and thus gain some influence in the post-Somoza political order.

This paper has tried to show how the alliance between Marxist revolutionaries and moderate countries was the result of a long and turbulent process. The Sandinistas did not trust the moderate governments of Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Panama, and they had good reason not to, as these governments tried by every means possible to limit the Sandinistas' influence on the future of Nicaragua. Ultimately, both groups came to an understanding by agreeing that the future of Nicaragua would not be decided by either the Communists

or the liberal-democrats but rather by a new experiment in non-alignment. Events of the 1980s shattered this hope, but the Sandinista project was a fissure in the Cold War bipolarity that presaged a new age of multilateralism.

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Notes on contributor

Gerardo Sánchez Nateras is currently a PhD candidate at El Colegio de México, where he is studying the crisis in Nicaragua between 1976 and 1979 from an inter-American perspective that seeks to contribute to our understanding of the Latin American Cold War.