Nicaragua: Playing Dirty in Our Own Backyard

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There is at the head of this great continent a very powerful country, very rich, very warlike, and capable of anything. –Simon Bolivar

On February 25, 19990, the world watched as Nicaraguans cast their votes in the country's first-ever democratic election. This monumental event, observed and deemed legitimate by 2,000 international observers, marked the culmination of a decade's worth of acute civil strife and crippling military violence. To the surprise of many, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro of the right-of-center UNO party defeated President Daniel Ortega, the famed Sandinista general. Chamorro then began the arduous process of rebuilding a war-torn nation, beaten down by a six-year U.S. embargo and plagued by poverty, poor health standards, and an economy in shambles. President Ronald Reagan seemingly got his wish of "true democracy" in Nicaragua, albeit at the cost of millions of dollars in military aid, an international arms scandal that plagued a U.S. administration, and the lives of thousands of Nicaraguan countrymen.[1] But, even after a decade, many are left to wonder over the necessity of that cost. Reagan and his hard-line administration still think so. Their logic: that a rigid anti-Sandinista policy invoking the use of force (covert or overt) was necessary to ensure the death of the Marxist-Leninist contingent and propagation of democracy. The need to save Latin America from the reds was so pressing to them that the government was willing to circumvent Congressional authority and clandestinely install democracy using contra force—mercenaries and ex-members of Somoza's national guard—in the absolution of the Sandinistan forces. This was a backyard battle worth fighting to the bitter end, a battle shrouded in all the anti-communist rhetoric of good vs. evil, us vs. them.

Thomas Carothers' *In the Name of Democracy* retells the story of this small Central American nation, a land rich in natural resources and national pride, and its circuitous road to democracy. Carothers frames his account in the context of an ongoing conflict between U.S. hardliners and moderates in Congress and provides the reader with an articulate and complete critique of the historical events that transpired in Nicaragua. He notes the severity of the conflict not only in the jungles of Central America, but within the civilized confines of our own government. Carothers does well in capturing the nuances of a complex situation. While I applaud his ability to remain even-handed in presenting both sides of this debacle and complete in supporting his analytical claims of Reagan's "rhetorical web," I would fault him for one thing, namely a failure to adequately acknowledge the humanitarian good that the Sandinistas were doing for their countrymen as civil servants, not merely as some nefarious guerilla force. He mentions in passing the improved conditions immediately after Somoza's fall. I have taken the liberty of supplementing my own analysis with the thoughts of Noam Chomsky, Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor and expert in Latin American-U.S. relations, as cited by interviews with Heinz Dieterich in *Latin America: From Colonization to Globalization.* This paper consists of two parts: 1) a history from 1970 to 1990 of the pivotal events that catalyzed power shifts from hard-liners to moderates and vice-versa and 2) a thoughtful reflection on the alternative applications of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America.

Nicaragua: A Historical Summary, 1979-1990

Carothers picks up Nicaraguan history from the time of the successful Sandinistan revolution in July of 1979. The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), formed in 1961 as a left-wing group of freedom fighters, garnered popular support throughout much of the 1970s and, to the surprise of Somoza and the Carter administration, began launching successful retaliatory strikes against the right-wing National Guard. Nicaragua's dictator, Anastasio Somoza, had incurred quite a wrap-sheet of human rights abuses and unsavory business practices, even during his father's tenure as an oppressive U.S. puppet. For Somoza, the writing was on the wall by the time Carter's administration turned its back on him; the Sandinistas usurped governmental powers to the cheers of many Nicaraguans. President Carter, well aware of Somoza's overdue dismissal but unsure of how to accept this new leftist regime, issues a $75 million aid package that he hoped would keep Nicaragua from swaying into the arms of the Soviets. Hard-liners opposed the aid package claiming that with the overthrow of the "legitimate" government, Nicaragua had already fallen to communism. Liberals disagreed. Following a compromise in Congress, the aid package was finalized with certain conditions, most notably that Nicaragua was not permitted to "aid, abet, or support acts of terrorism or violence in other countries".[2] One of the hard-liners' main concerns was that the Sandinistas, with financial support and strategic guidance from Cuba and the Soviet Union, would siphon weapons and military aid to similar revolutionary groups in neighboring countries, like the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in El Salvador. The aid package was cut off in 1981 after Washington found out the regime was doing exactly that.

By 1981, with the election of Republican president Ronald Reagan, the hard-liners took the helm in Congress and hastened to formally terminate all economic aid by April. In response to the American people's less-than-enthusiastic support for intervention in Latin America, a small cadre of anti-Sandinista, U.S. hard-liners began working on a covert, joint military operation with Colonel Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, head of the Honduran national police, in the creation of the contra force. Using Honduras as a launching pad and Argentina as a military training facility, the Reagan administration formalized the contra initiative with a preliminary budget of $19 million. The plan was pitched to Congress as "a means of interdicting arms passing from Nicaragua to El Salvador." It passed. But, as the contra aid program evolved from its preliminary phases as a nascent preventative force to an active vehicle for counter-insurgency attacks, moderates became wary and began curtailing funds by setting up barriers like the Boland Act that "stipulates that contra aid be used solely to interdict arms shipments from Nicaragua to El Salvadoran rebels."[3] By 1983, the Democratic House vetoed all covert-operation funding, an act countered by the Republican Senate.

The U.S. invasion of Grenada on October of 1983 served as a warning to Latin American belligerents; the U.S. provide its willingness to utilize its own military resources. President Reagan, gaining the advantage, escalated the fighting in the region by authorizing the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to mine Nicaragua's main harbor. Once word got out about the CIA's involvement, a public outcry ensued—Republican and Democratic Congressmen were infuriated by the administration's unilateral decision-making. Following the incident, the power pendulum took a decisive swing to the left and the moderates began directing U.S. policy in Nicaragua. The State Department was called on to broker a deal with Ortega and the Sandinistan forces—the U.S. agreed to remove the contras in exchange for Nicaragua's promise to cut ties with the Salvadoran rebels and the Soviet bloc. A third condition, a democratization cause to the negotiations, was the main point of contention among moderates and hard-liners. This round of

negotiations failed on two fronts: the Nicaraguan government was unwilling to compromise their internal political system and the hard-liners were unwilling to grant the moderates even an inch of wiggle room, choosing to veto concession after concession on the democracy issue.[4] Democratic elections scheduled for November 1984 were the moderates' final attempt at resolving the Nicaragua dispute. The U.S. government used Arturo Cruz, the main opposition candidate, as the mouthpiece through which they voiced their electoral concerns, namely procedures and conditions. Again, negotiations with Ortega failed. Despite the fact that the opposition chose to boycott the election, the people voted as scheduled and the Sandinistas won by a sizeable margin, approximately 67 percent. The U.S. of course rejected the resulted as illegitimate.[5]

Around this same time, hard-line members of the administration began exploring other funding sources abroad; they realized that the money was being used faster than Congress could supply it. Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, a member of the National Security Council staff, with the help of John Poindexter, National Security Advisor, pieced together a solution: an intricate web of foreign donations from Third World countries, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, South Africa, Israel, in exchange for arms sales. They evaded the Boland act by exploiting a loophole in the wording. This legislation specified that contra funding was prohibited by the CIA, not the NSC, under which the program was run. The "resupply program" worked well from 1984 to 1986 before the information began to leak into the press.[6] North and Poindexter served as scapegoats before any allegations could be brought against Reagan himself. Each man was fired from his position, and the program screeched to a halt. Luckily for the contras, Congress had passed a $70 million military aid budget that kept them fully operational.[7] Despite almost seven years of fighting, the government under Sandinista rule remained intact. The discovery of an arms scandal shattered any common ground between hard-lines and moderates. It served, moreover, to manifest the administration's disdain for Congress and the severity of the battle in Washington.[8]

By 1987, the President of Costa Rica, Oscar Arias, had organized a multilateral regional security accord between him and four other Central American presidents. Following a meeting in Guatemala, the five presidents finalized a peace agreement signed on August 7. Speaker of the House, James Wright, used the peace accord as the impetus for Nicaraguan cooperation in the bilateral Esquipulas II accords banning military assistance to insurgents and calling for elections, while also pushing for this agreement in the U.S. The hard-liners opposed both accords, the multilateral one on the grounds that it cuts the U.S. out of the negotiation process and the bilateral, regional one because it fails to prohibit the supply of Soviet military assistance or to include some type of democratization enforcement mechanism. The moderates disagreed, wanting instead to open diplomatic relations with the Sandinistas. Amidst the bickering in Congress, the Esquipulas II accords fell by the wayside. It was not until the end of 1988 that the Sandinistas actually signed a cease-fire agreement with the bedraggled contras. The induction of a U.S. president, President H. Bush, seemed to breathe new life into this war-ravaged region. The Tesoro Beach accords, in the spirit of the fallen Esquipulas II accords, were signed in February 1988 guaranteeing a national Nicaraguan election by 1990.[9]

Alternative Applications of U.S. Foreign Policy in Latin America

I have included this review of Carother's history for two reasons: 1) to depict Carothers' illustration of power shifts from hard-liners to moderates and back and 2) to provide the backgournd for a historically-sound analysis of U.S. foreign policy during the Reagan years. I

will explain the second point more fully. While I can agree with many of Carothers' criticisms regarding what he calls "Reagan's rhetorical web," I would fault him for leaving out some important points detected by Chomsky. Where Carothers offers an unimpressive critique of Reagan's initiatives, I think he still understates the severity of the situation and, more generally, U.S. foreign policy. Where Carothers' analysis is lacking, Chomsky fills the void with his own, more radical, theory of U.S. foreign policy that purports U.S. control of Latin American resources as its primary concern, not the threat of communism per se. To support this claim, Chomsky contrasts the pro-humanitarian efforts of the Sandinistas with the seemingly anti-democratic behavior of the U.S. While I can also find fault with Chomsky's views, supplementing Carothers' work with Chomsky's provides the reader with a more balanced and accurate description of the contra wars in Nicaragua.

Carothers' blunt analysis of Reagan's rhetorical web reflects his own affinity for the liberal position, which is still not given enough attention in his essay. He mentions the liberal contingent only once in his analysis. While attempting to sell his Latin American policy initiatives to a skeptical U.S. public, Reagan supports his claims with five basic ideas that are actually slight exaggerations of fact: the Sandinistas posed a major security threat to the well-being of the U.S., Nicaragua was acting as a communist proxy nation to Cuba and the Soviet Union, U.S. intervention in Nicaragua was motivated first by a need to interdict arms shipments to the Salvadoran rebels, then by a need to supplant democracy, the presence of the Sandinista forces were incompatible with "real democracy," and the contras were the only possible means to desired U.S. ends.

Carothers responds to each aspect of this contra rhetoric by exposing the cunning distortion of facts. Although members of the administration publicly lambasted Sandanista rule as a "communist reign of terror," internally it was unlikely that any Nicaraguan would have called the efforts to improve health and educational standards "evil" or "terrorist." If anything, by shoring up the human development indicators (HDI), Nicaragua would become more stable and secure, not less. The real "security concern," as we will soon find out when we turn to Chomsky, is the threat of the Sandinistas severing a dependency tie that provides the U.S. with cheap raw materials and natural resources.

Carothers also diminishes the importance of the red scare tactic by calling our attention to the administration's other grievances: the potential influx of refugees, the allegations of Sandinistan drug-trafficking, and the Nicaraguan persecution of the Jews. Third, the different tune syndrome, quickly switching from interdiction to supplanting democracy as a guiding motive, was reason enough to raise an eyebrow at U.S. involvement in Nicaragua. Fourth, Carothers admits that real democracy, as Reagan defines it, is simply a clever rhetorical tool to ensure the disintegration of the Sandinistas. As long as the Sandinistas remain in power, the U.S. has no intentions to negotiate, a point supported historically by a couple of failed moderate-led negotiations with the Nicaraguans.

Finally, the contras were not freedom fighters who had their revolution stolen from them by the left, as Reagan asserts; some of the contras were ex-Somozan National guardsmen, brutal and seasoned killers with a long history of violence. Needing to sell the contras to Congress and the American public, Reagan glorified their cause, exaggerated their gains, and even called himself "a Contra, too."[10] Despite Reagan's claims, the U.S. did have foreign policy options other support of the contras. Peace treaties, like the one led by Arias, and open diplomatic relations were the actions proposed by moderates and supported by liberals.

Perhaps Carothers' greatest criticism of Reagan's Nicaragua policy was its short-sightedness. He mentions that the administration was so concerned with ousting the Sandinistas that they had not considered what type of regime should follow. Washington had only a vague concept of what Nicaraguan democracy should look like.[11] This point flows well from Chomsky's position. Chomsky holds that the U.S. is concerned only with controlling Latin American resources. It therefore follows that no American foreign policy would exist on the Nicaraguan political system. As long as resources continue to flow northward, it does not matter whether a democrat, fascist, or communist is in power.[12]

While the immediate costs of a decade-long war were high, with an estimated 30,000 casualties, Carothers details the truly devastating opportunity costs of the contra war. The loss of time and energy that could have gone into substantive development meant that Nicaragua essentially lost a decade-worth of productivity. The costs for the U.S. were equally as damaging, although of a completely different nature. Reagan's choice to impose democracy on another country violated the principle national sovereignty upheld since the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia. In addition, the U.S. earned a reputation as a unilateralist actor.[13] Carothers ends his argument with a question: "who won Nicaragua?" He concludes that Arias' efforts in reaction to the contra threat imposed by the U.S. led to free and fair elections. It was not one or the other, but the interplay between the two.[14]

For Chomsky, actions in Nicaragua are a flagrant example of U.S. abuses on the foreign policy front. A leftist regime committed to the redistribution of wealth, lands, and resources to its own citizens is simply intolerable to the U.S. In Nicaragua, accepting the Sandinistas as legitimate would mean conceding U.S. material wealth won through a long history of repression. Chomsky does not limit such a scenario to simply Nicaragua—El Salvador, Guatemala, even Vietnam all fall under the hollow pretext of preventing the Soviet threat. Where Carothers simply calls our attention to Reagan's manipulation of facts to further his policy initiatives in Nicaragua, Chomsky takes it one step further in offering an explanation to such actions. He concludes constituents respond better to a benevolent and principled war. Americans do not want to hear that maintaining the low cost of products like bananas, sugar, or coffee beans came at the cost of 30,000 Nicaraguan lives lost—something like that is harder to stomach. Hence, Reagan's "rhetorical web."

In the area of methods and implementation, Chomsky calls the economic embargo a clever and popular foreign policy tool used to force reformist left-wing regimes into the care of the Soviets. Equipped with a reason for justified intervention, the U.S. escalates a forceful, typically militarily-based, response to rectify the socialist transgressors. While I understand the reductionist critique of such a theory, it seems to make sense in this case.

Narrowing Chomsky's critique of U.S. foreign policy to the Nicaraguan case, he highlights some key events that Carothers fails to address. First, he says nothing about the U.S. threatening that, "if the UNO party did not win, the economic embargo, which had already caused $3 billion worth in damage, would continue as would Contra sponsorship." These threats are antithetical to the democratic process the U.S. was ostensibly supporting. Secondly, Chomsky draws our attention to the humanitarian work conducted by the Sandinistas. He says,

> "the earliest programs of the Sandinistas were educational programs which reduced infant mortality and increased life expectancy—in fact, they won an award from the World Health Organization for achievement in this field—and an agrarian reform program that actually worked…The crime of the Sandinistas was to carry out successful development.

> Right after the revolution, they immediately began diverting resources to the poor part of the population. And this, incidentally, is recognized."[15]

It was reported that a pamphlet produced by Oxfam, a U.S. humanitarian aid organization was titled "Nicaragua: The Threat of a Good Example." While I do not agree entirely with Chomsky's extremist theory on U.S. foreign policy, I do think his points concerning Nicaragua and other Central American nations are well taken; juxtaposing Chomsky's assertions against those of Carothers produces a larger, more complete picture of the Nicaraguan debacle.

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[1] Thomas Carothers. *In the Name of Democracy: U.S. Policy Toward Latin America in the Reagan Years.* (Oxford, England: University of California Press, 1991), 97.
[2] Carothers, 81.
[3] Carothers, 85.
[4] Carothers, 88.
[5] Carothers, 89.
[6] Carothers, 90.
[7] Carothers, 90.
[8] Carothers, 91.
[9] Carothers, 94.
[10] Carothers, 99.
[11] Carothers, 103.
[12] Noam Chomsky. "Latin America: From Colonization to Globalization." (Ocean Press: New York, 1999), p. 56
[13] Carothers, 107.
[14] Carothers, 105.
[15] Chomsky, 64.