

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KAC-23

Aperana 99, Apt. 102  
Leblon, CEP 22450  
Rio de Janeiro, R.J., Brazil  
August 30, 1983

Peter Bird Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
Wheelock House  
4 West Wheelock St.  
Hanover, New Hampshire

Dear Peter,

The last time I was in Nicaragua was in August 1979, less than one month after the revolution's victory. At that time, people - and I mean all the people - were euphoric. A brutal family dynasty had been overthrown after over forty years in power. Everyone I spoke with - in the streets, in the countryside - seemed convinced that the demise of the Somoza family guaranteed justice, freedom, and an improved standard of living for all. I believed it too, like so many other non-Nicaraguans. It was something everyone desperately wanted to believe. How else could the suffering of the Nicaraguan people - 40,000 or more deaths in less than three years - be justified?

As it turned out, we were right in part, but only in part. Returning to Nicaragua now, four years later, was an eye-opening experience - at times moving, but generally depressing. It reminded me of the day I found out that Father Christmas was my father. I mean, Dad was a great guy, but in the end, he was only human.

The nine Sandinist commanders who run Nicaragua, unfortunately, are also only human. They are products of their environment, and products of their past. Most of them have spent the better part of their adult lives being guerrillas, and many of them are Marxist-Leninists. While this dogma may have given them a sense of purpose and direction in the struggle against a powerful, U.S.-supported dictator, I think it has proved one of the main stumbling blocks to the successful reconstruction of their country.

Nicaragua in 1983 is a land where only some of the dreams have come true. Because of the literacy campaign undertaken right after the victory, hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans have learned to read and write. Health care has been extended to a large percentage of the population, as has education. Workers in the government-run factories say they receive many more fringe benefits than before the revolution. And those peasants who have been given land are amongst the first to sing its praise. Yet, in two weeks in Nicaragua, it was never clear to me where the majority of people stood. Many complained to me of the severe shortages of food; of the arbitrariness of the government's decisions; of the scandalously luxurious lifestyle they say the FSLN cadres have adopted. Although there were fewer open critics than open supporters of the Sandinistas, there were others, many others, who seemed afraid to give their opinion. Some of them were well-dressed, well-fed members of the middle class, just as many, however, were poor urban and rural folk.

---

Kim Conroy is a fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs. She is a generalist who is interested in Mexico's and Central America's current economic and political problems, and how they are affected by and affect U.S. foreign policy.

The FSLN has proven to be extremely sectarian in its recollection of what the dreams were all about. A year after the victory, the FSLN built a museum. The museum contains many fascinating relics, like a cannon given by Benito Mussolini to Anastasio Somoza Garcia - the first of the Somoza dictators. Pictures of successive Somozas embracing successive American presidents from Franklin Delano Roosevelt through Richard Nixon, also holds a prominent place in the display. Not far away, a wall is covered with photos of the Marines in Nicaragua, following their multiple incursions into this banana republic. The exhibits include a chest filled with the hundreds of gold medals that Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the last of the dynasty, liked to wear on state occasions. Yet all these wonderful memorabilia do not make up for the items that the FSLN "purged" from the museum, according to one of the men who established it. The collection used to pay tribute to all those who had significantly contributed to the revolution's victory. Not any more. Wandering amongst its many exhibits one gets the impression that the FSLN won single-handedly.

Pedro Joaquin Chamorro was the editor-in-chief of La Prensa, a newspaper that was denouncing the brutality and corruption of the Somoza regime even before the FSLN was formed. Pedro Joaquin Chamorro was imprisoned by the Somozas many times, forced into exile at least once, and finally assassinated on January 10, 1978. When one month later, the National Guard tear gased a mass celebrated in Chamorro's memory, the first popular rebellion began. His death also swung the middle class behind the FSLN's armed struggle. Yet, the museum has only one photo of him on display.

Monsenor Obando y Bravo, the archbishop of Managua, is another casualty of the museum. From his pulpit, Obando y Bravo was openly critical of the Somozas and of the murderous National Guard. On two extremely important occasions - when the FSLN held for ransom a group of Somoza's friends at a Christmas party in 1974, and when the FSLN held 67 Congressmen and 1,000 government officials hostage in the National Palace in 1978 - the guerrillas chose the archbishop to put their demands to the authorities. In the FSLN's Museum of the Revolution, however, I saw only one picture of Monsenor Obando y Bravo. It identifies him solely as "the mediator".

Why this need for "revisionist history"? Is it because the FSLN wants the Nicaraguans to believe that what was in fact a popular insurrection against a ruthless dictator was really a Marxist-Leninist revolution aimed at totally transforming the nation's social order? The middle class, which had been an important FSLN ally in the last years of the struggle, is now recast as the evil, rapacious bourgeoisie. The traditional Catholic Church, led by Monsenor Obando y Bravo, is now portrayed as an accomplice of the U.S.-financed counter-revolutionaries, or "contras".

A mass to celebrate Monsenor Obando y Bravo's twenty-fifth anniversary in the priesthood was said on the last Sunday that I spent in Managua. Coinciding with this "opposition event", the FSLN organized its own attraction. At the same hour that the mass was held, the Minister of Agriculture, Jaime Wheelock, handed out titles for more than 30,000 acres of land to peasants at a large rally.

Being both charismatic and good-looking, Jaime Wheelock put on a good show for those present. But what most struck me about his speech was the hatred with which he spoke of the bourgeoisie, putting them in the same category as the contras and the U.S. imperialists. With rancor, he referred to the nation's horrendous past, when, Nicaragua was in the hands of the "burguesia vende-patria" - literally the bourgeois sellers-of-the-nation.

The following morning on Radio Sandino, one of the government's radio stations, the newscaster explained that Obando y Bravo's mass merited official disapproval because "nowhere in the mass did they mention the heroic companeros who are dying on the Nicaraguan-Honduran border, defending their country, and because the U.S. ambassador was at the mass." Ninety percent of the Nicaraguan people consider themselves Catholics, and it seems most of them regard the archbishop, the highest ranking Catholic in the country, with great respect. In light of this, such puerile remarks on national radio against the archbishop appear to be a gratuitous way of making enemies.

In fact, making enemies gratuitously seems to have become one of the Sandinists' specialties. A highly-connected Nicaraguan leftist told me that more than two years ago, Fidel Castro was urging the nine FSLN commanders to call elections immediately. Obviously the FSLN would win, Fidel argued, and having the elections would guarantee support for the new Nicaraguan system from democratic governments around the world. But, according to my well-placed source, the FSLN commanders were unwilling to call elections, because only one of them could become president - at the expense of the other eight.

The FSLN has gone on to lose even more of its once firm allies by its strict and quite arbitrary censorship of the newspaper La Prensa. Under the stewardship of the eldest son of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, it has remained in opposition - but now against the Sandinistas. Each day, roughly half of its articles are censored by the government, which claims this is necessary for reasons of national security. To anyone who has seen the articles lifted from the paper, the government's arguments seem ludicrous. Articles concerning local crime are censored. Articles about Russia and the Soviet bloc, be they written by UPI, AP, or any other news organization, are automatically snipped. Articles about any foreigner's activities in Nicaragua are censored. And when the government gets exceptionally enraged, it shuts the paper down altogether, as it has on more than fifteen occasions.

The government's temper tantrums, however, do not go unnoticed. When La Prensa was shut down in mid-August, the governments of France, Spain, and Venezuela reportedly all lodged complaints with the FSLN.

But the least acceptable of the FSLN's mistakes has been the hostile mistrust with which it treats the common Nicaraguan. Repeatedly people told me that the government only sees black and white: either you are a revolutionary or you're a counter-revolutionary; either you're with them or you're against them. And anyone who complains about life in Nicaragua is automatically branded a "contra". Yet today, there's a lot to complain about: chronic shortages, food and fuel rationing, high unemployment, and now, two years of mandatory military service for all able-bodied men and women.

The game has become one of complaining out of the earshot of the Sandinist Defense Committee (CDS). The CDSs were set up during the war to provide medical attention and safe-houses for the guerrillas. After the victory, each CDS was supposed to evolve into a neighborhood organization responsible for community projects and liason with the government. While the CDS does provide these services, most of the Nicaraguans that I spoke with attributed other functions to it: provisioner of ration coupons, organizer of the nightly civil watches against the contras, and, dreaded most of all, center of local FSLN intelligence. I heard many whispered complaints about this. Failing to carry out your once-a-week civil watch duty (which usually runs from 9 P.M. to 6 A.M.) could cost your family that week's ration coupons for meat, cooking oil,

flour, and other basic necessities, critics said. If a neighbor reports to the CDS that you've been speaking against the Sandinists, you might not only lose your ration coupons, but it might result in a long interrogation by the Sandinista police. And it is always possible at the community level that a neighbor may maliciously report that his enemy is a contra.

Meanwhile, the real contras, with U.S. financing, are effectively fighting a guerrilla war on Nicaragua's northern border. Because Nicaragua is, by most accounts, in severe economic straits, the FSLN is forced to buy its arms and ammunition only by diminishing its purchases of basic goods for the civilian population. This will cause more shortages, which in turn will require stricter rationing, and inevitably lead to even more disgruntled Nicaraguan people.

If the Sandinists fall from power - as I suspect they may - it will be due, in part, to President Reagan's determination to overthrow them. But, only in part. Just as much blame must be squarely placed on the Sandinists themselves. These astute guerrillas proved much less adept as politicians. Somehow, they failed to learn a basic rule for maintaining popular support: you must deliver at least as many benefits to your people as you do problems.

All my best,

Received in Hanover 10/25/83