CHAPTER IV

SANDINISTA IDEOLOGY AND REVOLUTION:
THE RESPONSE OF THE UNITED STATES

The word ‘revolution’ is employed to denote social, political and economic change in the institutions of a country. The *International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* states “that revolution in its most common sense is an attempt to make a radical change in the system of government.” Revolution as a result brings about changes in existing situations like constitutional arrangements; fundamentally changes the economy, culture and social fabric; and also involves the use of force.\(^1\) However, it will also be difficult to agree upon a definition of revolution acceptable to all. Isaac Kramnick referring to the ambiguity of the term states that “students of revolution have an equally difficult time in describing and defining the phenomenon of revolution.”\(^2\) Revolution in short, is an effort to transform the existing political institutions and form new justifications for political authority in society. The process is accompanied by formal or informal mass mobilization and non-institutionalized actions that seek to change power structures. It is in this context that the peculiar nature of the Nicaraguan revolution has to be analysed.

The United States has always been cautious of revolutions and revolutionary change, particularly those which have brought into power left wing regimes. One of

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the first experiences that it confronted was the violent and bloody revolution in France. While many Americans sympathised with the French Revolution in the abstract, they did not want the revolution’s most radical changes put into effect in the United States. In the twentieth century much of the attention of the leaders and the public of the United States had been devoted to coping and confronting with the revolutions in Russia and China as well as those in many parts of the Third World. Revolutions in Latin America have been of special concern to the United States partly because US vested interests there tend to be greater than in other developing areas and because the United States has long regarded Latin America as vital to its strategic interests.³

The Nicaraguan revolutionaries drew their inspiration from the previous revolutionary attempts and regimes in Latin America. Their role models were governments which existed in Mexico (1911-1940); Guatemala (1945-1954); Bolivia (1952-1964); Cuba (1959 to date); Peru (1968-1975); and Chile (1970-1973). These revolutionary attempts—successful or not— have added to the “technology” of revolution.⁴ The Latin American revolutionaries were well aware of challenges in running a revolutionary system as great as, or greater than, that of seizing power. For many observers, the failure of the Mexican, Guatemalan, Bolivian, Chilean and Peruvian revolutionary experiments was attributable, at least in part, to a relative lack of bold, unified and decisive actions. In some cases, the revolutionary leaders were hindered by obstacles beyond their control.


The revolutionaries also learned that guerrilla warfare could not succeed without mass support. Such backing had been a major key to the success of the guerrillas in Cuba in 1959. The Cuban Revolution, however, added a new dimension to the concept of mass mobilization. In addition to mobilization through specific organizations for rural and urban labour, students, women, and so on, the Cubans created a vast network of grass-roots neighbourhood groupings called the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs). Organised late in 1960, the CDRs initial purpose was to mobilize the Cuban people to guard against mounting counter-revolutionary activities. It was clear that if a “revolution” is indeed to be ‘revolutionary,’ it must immediately embark on a number of social programmes designed to improve human conditions of the previously exploited majority. These would include some variant reforms, projects and legislations designed to advance public health, education, housing; increased emphasis on the rights of rural and urban workers and an effort to resurrect and nourish popular “native” culture.

Growth of Nicaraguan Nationalism

During the early decades of Nicaraguan independence from Spain, the privileged classes of Leon and Granada (who eventually came to call themselves “Liberals” and “Conservatives” respectively) sent rag-tag armies into battle with each other to determine which city and elite was to enjoy the spoils of running the country. The whole process came to a climax in 1855, when the Liberals invited an American soldier-of-fortune, William Walker to help them defeat the Conservatives. The beginning of a

5. ibid., p.4.
modern national consciousness that included the Indian and Mestizo masses emerged only towards the end of the nineteenth century in Nicaragua. This was more than a generation after William Walker carried out the first in a long series of U.S. interventions in Nicaragua. Only then could a few intellectuals begin to look towards their distant indigenous past to rediscover their nation’s historic identity and thus transcend the narrow Hispanicism that had continually constrained national politics, thought and literature.

Even the great Nicaraguan poet Ruben Dario had to break with the stultifying forms of continental Spanish literature before he could discover truly Nicaraguan and Latin American literature. As he wrote, “if there is poetry in our Latin America, it is to be found in the old things: in Palenke and Utatlan, in the legendary Indian and refined Inca; in the great Montezuma on his throne of god.” Dario thus demonstrated how the most remote seeds of the struggle for national liberation and development of a modern national consciousness resided in the indigenous struggle to resist Spanish colonialism. This struggle to create a national historic consciousness and repel foreign intrusion dates from early colonial times, when indigenous leaders like the Cacique Diriangen fought to repel the Spanish invaders.

Dario’s poetic sensibility enabled him to see the continuity of the struggle more clearly than most Nicaraguan politicians of his day. In his famous “Ode to Roosevelt” Dario underlined the glories of “Our America.” Like Simon Bolivar in his “Jamaican

Letter,” he noted the growing power of the United States, which (as manifest in Roosevelt) he saw as “the future invader of our native Indian America”. The modernist poets who followed Dario also contributed to the growth of a historic identity of Nicaragua. They too were affected by the socio-political situation of Nicaragua and were among the first to rediscover an awareness of Nicaragua’s popular history. They also began to disseminate the ideas that they found fertile in a people long denied an awareness of their place in history. This growing nationalist awareness was to become manifest in the struggle of Augusto Cesar Sandino and his Army to Defend National Sovereignty.

Some of Nicaragua’s Liberal politicians also began to realize that the country’s political structures were inadequate. Although the Liberal reform movement did not develop in Nicaragua until the late nineteenth century, it carried a vision of society similar to that of other reform movements in Mexico (under Benito Juares) and elsewhere in Latin America. Jose Santos Zelaya’s Liberal Revolution of 1893 marked the beginning of the modern liberal movement in Nicaragua. Although constrained by bourgeois liberalism, he introduced some progressive ideas and began to challenge the traditional oligarchy and the power of the Catholic Church. His successful drive to recover the Atlantic coast from British colonialism also stimulated the growth of national consciousness. Supported by elements of the national bourgeoisie, Zelaya introduced reforms that soon alarmed the conservative forces and threatened the interests of U.S. capital (which was antagonistic to the growth of a vigorous independent

7. ibid.
national capitalist class in Nicaragua). As Zelaya faced increasing internal and external pressure, his regime degenerated into a dictatorship.

In 1909, Washington forced Zelaya to resign before he could implement his plans to modernize Nicaragua. The national bourgeoisie did not achieve the changes necessary to develop a modern nationalist capitalist system. Using various pretexts, the U.S. Marines intervened in 1909 to reinstate conservative rule and ensure the dominant position of U.S. capital. As U.S. intervention increased over the next years (the Marines again landed in 1912 to prop up the puppet regime of Adolfo Diaz, and did not leave until 1925), anti-interventionist sentiment grew among the Nicaraguan people.

**Sandino and Nationalism**

With the outbreak of a new liberal uprising against a conservative coup in 1925 and the U.S. inspired reinstallation of Adolfo Diaz as president, the struggle began to take on clear nationalist and anti-imperialist overtones. The Marines once again intervened. It was at this point that Augusto Cesar Sandino returned from Mexico and joined the nationalist Liberal struggle. From its inception, Sandino’s struggle inspired and was supported by the lower classes in Nicaragua like the peasants, miners, artisans, workers and Indians. None of the bourgeois leaders supported Sandino. In contrast to the bourgeois politicians, the common people realized that the country could be freed only by the forces of arms, and not by self serving compromises with the forces of imperialism.\(^8\) Sandino and his Army to Defend National Sovereignty were forced to

\(^8\) ibid., p. 44.
rely on little more than their own ingenuity and the support of Nicaragua’s lower classes. This was to become a popular national struggle par excellence.

Like the members of the toiling masses who joined the struggle, Sandino brought the wisdom of his previous life experience. His humble birth (he was the son of a mestiza servant girl) and early life in rural Nicaragua inseparably linked him to the peasants and Indians in the country-side. Being a mechanic and worker in a variety of foreign and domestic corporations, he was prompted with the interests of the proletariat of Latin America and the rest of the world. While working for the U.S. owned Huasteca Petroleum Company in Tampico, Mexico, he was affected by the nationalist radicalism of the Mexican revolution and soon “began to identify himself with a broad nationality, embracing all Americans of Iberian and Indian descent.”9 During the years he stayed in Mexico, Sandino witnessed the militant oil workers struggle in Tampico. He was exposed to the radical notions of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), to militant anarchism, and to Marxist internationalism. Many of these ideas along with his ardent Nicaraguan and Latin American nationalism – would be manifest in his later thought and writings. Sandino realized that Nicaragua’s struggle was part of a larger movement. “At the present historical moment our struggle is national and racial; it will become international as the colonial and semi-colonial peoples unite with the peoples of the imperialistic nations.”10 Without being a Marxist, Sandino enjoyed an internationalist vision of a revolutionary nationalism that was linked to other revolutionary movements throughout the world. Carrying on the glorious liberation traditions of the Latin

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American peoples, Sandino raised the banner of struggle against imperialism and oppression, the banner of unity of workers, peasants, soldiers and students.

In one of his political manifestos in 1927, Sandino wrote “I am a city worker, an artisan, as we say in this country. However, my ideal goes beyond these bounds, to the broad horizon of internationalism. My ideal is to be free and demand justice, even if to attain this aim it will be necessary to shed one’s own or other people’s blood.” Attaching great importance to the organization of an efficient army, Sandino repeatedly stressed that “freedom cannot be won with flowers.” Sandino’s growing army of miners, Indians peasants, artisans and workers finally forced out the U.S. Marines.

The ferocity of the conflict with the Marines continually forced Sandino and his followers to upgrade their struggle. In the course of the war, Sandino’s national revolutionaries had developed into social revolutionaries, in a spontaneous fashion conditioned by their class origin and without much theoretical consciousness of their own development. Late in 1932, he wrote that “our Army is preparing to take reins of national power to proceed with the organization of large co-operatives of Nicaraguan workers and peasants, who will exploit our own natural resources for the benefit to the Nicaraguan family in general.” He began to set up agricultural cooperatives in the Segovias and seemed to favour the type of communal organization that his Indian

13. Harry E. Vanden, n. 6, p. 45.
ancestors had used centuries before. Their ideas on agricultural collectivization undermined the private economy and they came to be regarded as heroes by the workers and peasants. During the liberation war under Sandino, all the subaltern sectors of Nicaraguan society, which had previously acted in isolation from one another, or under the leadership of the fractions of the bourgeoisie, emerged as a single, autonomous historical subject, acting independently of the bourgeoisie for the first time in the country’s history.\textsuperscript{14} Although Sandino’s political support had enabled him to achieve his primary objective namely the departure of all foreign troops, he could not achieve the far reaching political and economic change he was planning. In February 1934, the National Guard, the only armed force in the country, seized Sandino and his commanders and shot them dead. For the Sandinistas the ideological heritage of the national hero became a banner of their struggle.

\textbf{The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)}

In 1936, the then Commander in Chief of the National Guard, Anastasio Somoza Garcia, took direct control of the Nicaraguan government. He had realized that Sandino and his ‘Army to Defend National Sovereignty’ represented the greatest threat to the reestablishment of rule by a U.S. backed elite. Somoza also sensed that Sandino was the symbol of rediscovery of their true history by the people of Nicaragua. By the 1940s the full force of the Somoza dictatorship was being felt. Somoza had proven to be one of the United States’ best neighbours. Both the Communist Party and the trade union movements were crushed by Somoza immediately after the Second World War.

\textsuperscript{14} John Althoff et al., (eds.) n. 12, p.22.
By the 1950s Nicaragua was a fully dependent producer of primary goods mostly of coffee and cotton, and an integral part of the U.S. system of political and economic control in the Western Hemisphere. The guerrilla hero and the popular revolutionary struggle seemed to be slowly disappearing from the popular mind. There were occasional armed attempts by old Sandinistas. Students and workers occasionally demonstrated against the regime, but lacked any clear ideological perspective in which to place their struggle. Opposition to the dictatorship came to be symbolized by the Conservative Party. Even the Nicaraguan Socialist Party (founded as a pro-Moscow Communist Party in 1944) often collaborated with traditional bourgeois politicians and Somoza-controlled unions, at the worker’s expense. Somoza had taken over the Liberal Party and even went so far as to make pacts (1948-1950) with the Conservative Party in an attempt to co-opt the only major focal point of opposition to his regime.\(^\text{15}\)

In the late 1950s the Nicaraguan people were beginning to recover their popular history through the continuation of Sandino’s struggle. During this period, the historic conditions had changed substantially from the time of the first Sandinista struggle. Western style democracy was increasingly being called into question in the Third World. The ardent Mexican nationalism that had so inspired Sandino was in large part discredited among Latin American intellectuals because of the failure of the subsequent Mexican regimes to implement the economic and social transformations promised by the Mexican Revolution. In China and Vietnam, meanwhile, national liberation struggles had grown into socialist revolutions. Cuba was soon to take this road as well. The prestige enjoyed by the Chinese and Vietnamese communist parties under Mao Zedong

\(^{15}\) Somoza converted the Liberal Party into his private party.
and Ho Chi Minh prompted many other leaders of national liberation struggles such as the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Algeria, to try to apply Marxist ideas to their own countries.\textsuperscript{16} Leaders of the anti-colonial upsurge that swept Africa in the 1950s were likewise openly suspicious of capitalist democracy and called for the development of new forms of “African Socialism.” Thus the Third World nationalist movements would increasingly turn to socialism and Marxism to explain their realities and nourish their revolutionary movements. Nicaragua was no exception.

In Nicaragua the emancipation of the agricultural population from the tutelage of the conservative opposition began with the cotton boom of the first half of the 1950s. This led to a pact between the conservative cotton bourgeoisie and Somoza. This further resulted in the extension of cotton-growing, the proletarianization of small peasants, and their eviction from the land. The victims of this process could not but take an opposition stance against its initiators. In the second half of the 1950s the falling cotton and coffee prices led to an economic crisis. This led to a large number of strikes, mass struggles and the refounding of trade unions and workers and peasants associations.\textsuperscript{17} From these peasants, workers and students movement of the late 1950s grew the first mainly student–guerrilla groups which came into existence in 1961.

The chronic repression under the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua eventually gave rise to a revolutionary coalition headed by the Sandinista National Liberation Front

\textsuperscript{16} The Sandinistas had carefully observed the struggle in Vietnam and the convergence of Marxism and nationalism in that country. The example of the people’s war waged in Vietnam was of utmost importance for most Third World wars of national liberation.

\textsuperscript{17} John Althoff et al., n. 12, p.24.
(Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional) better known by its abbreviation FSLN. It was founded in 1961 under the leadership of Carlos Fonseca, Tomas Borge and Silvio Mayorga who had broken with the Communist Party. The FSLN struggled as a small guerrilla force until 1978, when it emerged as the major force in the anti-Somoza movement. The FSLN drew its nationalistic inspiration from the example of the anti-imperialist guerrilla war from 1927 to 1933 waged by Augusto Cesar Sandino against U.S. troops in Nicaragua, and its military inspiration from the Cuban Revolution.

The Cuban Revolution created a watershed in the history of the Left in Latin America. Many revolutionaries including Fonseca and Borge were attracted to Castro’s route to power and his implementation of direct social reform which exposed the sterility of traditional Marxist parties. They also hoped for alternatives for autonomous national revolutions that could incorporate indigenous traditions and currents of rebellion. Above all, the Cuban revolutionary process inspired Fonseca and directed the fortunes of the FSLN throughout the 1960s. Yet the conflict between Fonseca’s vision and the “pure” Marxism of the PSN (Nicaraguan Socialist Party) and Third International remained an important tension in creating the core of the FSLN’s ideology.

The FSLN adopted Sandino as the political and strategic inspiration for its struggle against dictatorship. Sandino’s political intentions and ideological stance embodied a liberal populist nationalism. The new generation of Sandinistas thus began a movement that was the continuation of the popular struggle of Sandino’s guerrilla army. Drawing heavily on the Cuban revolutionary experience and the writings of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, they began to reinterpret Sandino’s original struggle in the light of historic and ideological developments following his death. Even during his guerrilla war, Sandino had concluded that the liberal and conservative politicians were traitors and cowards and must be replaced by workers and peasant leaders. By studying their own fight or for national identity and liberation in light of the similar struggles in Cuba, Vietnam and elsewhere, the Sandinistas were able to build on Sandino’s populist notions and began to infuse their movement with a coherent ideology.

At the urging of Carlos Fonseca, FSLN militants began to study Sandino’s writings and tactics as they prepared for first guerrilla actions in 1963. Stimulated by the Cuban example, the Sandinistas believed that the only road to power was through armed struggle. However, like other young Fidelistas throughout Latin America, they felt that launching rural guerrilla warfare was necessary to convince the popular masses (beginning with the peasantry) to take up arms and join the guerrillas. The FSLN’s first attempts at guerrilla warfare in Rio Coco and Rio Bocay in 1963 met with tragic defeat. The new Sandinistas filed to mobilize the local populace on the side of the guerrillas through well planned political and organizational activity co-ordinated with armed struggle. The FSLN had originally operated on the lines of Che Guevara’s theory.

of the ‘foco’ (rural guerilla warfare), but this came to an end by the mid 1960s. Subsequently it began intensive political work among students and peasants. 22

Furthermore, according to Fonseca’s conception, the resumption of Sandino’s path undertaken by the FSLN had to incorporate a more sophisticated ideological analysis because the struggle against U.S. imperialism had reached a more complex stage than in Sandino’s time. Although Sandino had been successful in his primary “naïve” intent to rid Nicaragua of the U.S. Marines, he could not perceive the subtler mechanisms of domination that imperialist powers held under Somoza and its puppet mediation of U.S. capitalism.

Thus the FSLN felt that a simple revolutionary nationalism was no longer effective. A Marxist framework was required so that “today the revolutionaries of all countries (can) prepare the battle against the imperialism of the dollar.”23 Sandino had contented himself with removing the superficial manifestation of oppression and had subsequently been crushed through the treachery of Somoza. But the FSLN would not be content with mere removal of the dictatorship. The FSLN demanded a change in societal and state structures based on a flexible Marxist analysis that Sandino, due to his historical moment (before the Cuban Revolution), could not yet grasp.24 Using the key symbol of Sandino, Carlos Fonseca succeeded in constructing a philosophy of Nicaraguan history of which the FSLN was the only legitimate inheritor. This ideology established

22. John Althoff et al., n. 12, p.27.
23. Steven Palmer, n.20, p.100.
the cohesive intellectual foundation for the Sandinista revolution.  

However, ideological differences over the proper strategy for defeating Somoza emerged within the FSLN in 1975. After the death of FSLN’s founder, Carlos Fonseca in a combat in November 1976, the Sandinistas split into three factions or “tendencies.” The majority faction the “Tendencia Insurreccional (TI)” or Insurrectional Tendency maintained that the guerrilla struggle had to be brought into cities, mass work intensified in the countryside, and mass organizations built in factories, educational institutions, offices and residential districts, with a view to preparing the population for new insurrection. While the “People War Tendency” (Guerrilla Popular Prolongada) faction stood for the strategy of rural based guerrilla warfare, the “Proletarian Tendency” (Tendencia Proletario) faction advocated a shift and was devoted to the construction of a revolutionary proletarian party.  

The national leadership of the majority faction, the TI, opened up the FSLN to non-Marxist, politically committed Christians, who worked for liberation from the Somoza regime and for a socialism based on co-operatives. In this way it managed to win the support of important sections of the Catholic Church. The traditional church of Nicaragua offered a historical model of church hierarchy to ensure the continuity of the church institutions through its close relations with the ruling classes. On the contrary, the popular church also known as the new church possessed an increasingly well developed theology, the theology of liberation. The objectives of the new church

26. ibid., pp.164-173.
were based on the fundamental affirmation of a people’s right to full economic and social citizenship. The popular church considered any political system which threatened this right as illegitimate. In Nicaragua, the legitimacy of the revolutionary process and of its institutions was determined by the extent to which the revolution provided jobs, food, shelter, health, education, participation, liberty and dignity to ordinary working people. The new Church participated in the revolutionary process but continued to preserve its ecclesiastical identity, an identity which did not depend upon any form of political mediation. The FSLN undoubtedly pursued the goal of a socialist revolution in Nicaragua. Its minimal programme for the post Somoza government accordingly involved the nationalization of the Somoza clan’s property and the dissolution of the National Guard.

**Reasons for Revolution and Insurgency**

From early 1970s onwards, the political crisis came increasingly to the fore. After the devastating Managua earthquake of December 1972, the Somoza clan misappropriated the international aid for its own advantage. While victims of the earthquake were bleeding in Managua, the clan was selling the blood plasma received from international aid organizations at a good price in the United States. This made it clear to all that the Nicaraguan government was in fact nothing but a criminal syndicate. With the build up of the military bourgeoisie after 1972, government corruption and economic crime increased to such an extent that properly conducted business

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transactions become virtually impossible. Further, to make repayments on government backed foreign debts, the regime steadily increased taxes on production and consumption.28 This ever rising tax burden, together with a rate of inflation that had reached almost 35 percent and the spread of criminal “competition” by the military bourgeoisie, brought the marginal and petty bourgeoisie in particular, to the verge of economic collapse.29 A liberal policy on prices, combined with restriction on wages, led from the mid – 1970s to an increasing decline in real purchasing power for wage–earners and nominal wage increases failing to keep pace with inflation.

The extent of corruption, together with the expansion of Somoza’s economic empire into areas of economic activity previously reserved for other members of Nicaragua’s bourgeoisie, alienated large section of both the middle and upper classes. Among Nicaragua’s lower classes, the economic adversity caused by the earthquake stimulated more radical opposition, manifesting in the wave of strikes, demonstrations and land seizures that swept the country in 1972-73. In this background, all the opposition tendencies succeeded from the mid–1970s onwards in gaining support among those sections of the population they represented, on a scale they had not enjoyed for decades. The opposition essentially divided itself into two sections, represented

28. The industrialization of the 1960s was largely financed by government loans from aboard, on account of the low level of local savings. After 1975, the government attempted to stabilize economic development in a similar way.

29. In Managua, for example, officers sold vast quantities of electrical goods that had been smuggled into the country free of duty and at far below their usual market price. Taxi and bus firms were monopolized by National Guard officers, and several large estates were also distributed to officers. See John Althoff et al, n.12, p.26.
on the one hand by the bourgeoisie dominated Democratic Union for Liberation (UDEL) and on the other by the Sandinista National Liberations Front (FSNL).

The FSLN Victory

The FSLN was one of the many guerrilla organizations spawned in Latin America by the example of the Cuban Revolution. It had scant success during its initial periods, being routed by the National Guard. Though it gained strength in the rural north after the earthquake, in 1974 its membership had been fewer than one hundred. On 27 December 1974, 25 FSLN guerrillas invaded a Managua Christmas party, capturing 12 of Nicaragua’s most prominent business and political leaders. The guerrillas exchanged their hostages for 14 political prisoners, $1 million in ransom and a safe passage to Cuba.30 The boldness of the Christmas operation brought national recognition to the FSLN.

Somoza’s embarrassment over the Christmas raid led him to embark upon a war of extermination against the FSLN. He declared a state siege, created an elite counter insurgency force within the National Guard, and obtained an 80 percent increase in U.S. military aid. The National Guard conducted a reign of terror in the northern departments of Zelaya, Matagalpa and Segovia, where the FSLN had been most active. For two years, peasants in those areas were subjected to a systematic campaign of torture and mass executions.

To deprive the FSLN of its support, eighty percent of the rural population was uprooted and sent to resettlement camps. Such gross violations of human rights appalled Nicaragua’s moderates and earned the Somoza government well deserved international condemnation. In January 1977, Nicaraguan Roman Catholic bishops joined in a pastoral letter accusing the National Guard of “humiliating and inhuman treatment ranging from torture and rape to summary executions.” Reports by both Amnesty International and the U.S. Department of State confirmed the bishops’ charges.

After the inauguration of Jimmy Carter as the President of the United States in 1977 and threats by the U.S. Congress to cut off $3.1 million in military aid, Somoza lifted the state of siege. The lifting of the state of siege enabled the insurrectionists to attract the most important alternative to fight against the Somoza dictatorship. The assassination in early 1978 of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, a courageous journalist who had long opposed the Somoza dynasty, was a serious political mistake committed by the Somoza regime. The reaction of the Nicaraguan people was massive and immediate. Angry crowds attacked Somoza-owned business establishments and burned several buildings in Managua. The business community conducted a general strike which lasted for two weeks.

In August 1978, the FSLN seized the National Palace while the U.S. Congress

31. ibid.
33. ibid., p.30.
was in session, taking 1500 hostages.\textsuperscript{34} The Sandinistas’ audacity captured the popular imagination and with it the leadership of the anti-Somoza struggle. The palace assault was followed by the attack on the National Guard in several cities. This time, however, the guerrilla actions sparked mass insurrections in different parts of the country. To “save” the cities from the rebels, the National Guard was forced to destroy them from the air. It took nearly three weeks and over 3,000 dead before the Guard prevailed. When the Sandinistas withdrew, taking thousands of new recruits with them, the Guard made hundreds of summary executions. The spectacle of an army waging war against its own citizens prompted a re-evaluation of U.S. policy by convincing officials that Somoza would never be able to restore political stability. Moreover, the FSLNs unexpected strength and support raised the spectre of an eventual Sandinista victory unless some sort of “political solution” could successfully replace Somoza with a moderate government. From the fall of 1978 onwards, the single goal of U.S. policy was to prevent the succession of an FSLN dominated government.

The success of the attack on the National Palace was crucial in the development of a Sandinista, as opposed to a mere anti-Somoza movement. A Broad Opposition Front (FAO) was founded as an alliance between the old UDEL (Democratic Union for Liberation), the MDN (National Democratic Movement), the Twelve, (a highly respected group of business, professional and religious leaders) and several labour unions. On 17 July, a popular alternative to FAO was formed, into a single block called the United People’s Movement (MPU). Initially, twenty two organizations were integrated into the MPU coalition and its three principal objectives were defined:

\textsuperscript{34} William M. Leo Grande, n. 30, p.34.
(1) to mobilize the population for the popular overthrow of Somoza. (2) to expand the coalition and unify broad popular sectors; and (3) to contribute to the process of unification of the revolutionary forces. On 9 September, an integrated uprising erupted in four cities; Leon, Masaya, Chinandega, and Managua. These cities are located in the western half of Nicaragua, where the great majority of the population lives. With most of its headquarters surrounded by the civilian forces and FSLN combatants, the Guard initially adopted a defensive tactic. Later, however, Somoza’s air force subjected the cities to massive bombing before ground forces retook them.

The FSLN fighters then retreated into the hills accompanied by thousands of youngsters and town people. Finally, tanks and troops went from house to house to subject those who remained, to a genocidal “Operation Cleanup.” The September 1978 death toll was calculated at 5,000. More than 10,000 were injured; 25,000 left homeless and more than 60,000 sought asylum in other Central American countries. The Human Rights Commission of the Organisation of American States was sent to carry out investigations, and its conclusions clearly condemned the Somoza regime. Between September 1978 and February 1979 most of the leading political and labour organizations threw their support behind the FSLN, which had succeeded in unifying the Sandinista factions under a nine-member supreme command called the FSLN National Directorate. The most important effect of the September insurrection on U.S. policy was to convince officials in Washington that Somoza would never be able to restore political stability. This, combined with the popular support demonstrated

35. Ricardo E. Chavarria n. 32, p.32.
by the FSLN, prompted Washington to begin the search for a way to transfer of power
to Somoza’s moderate opponents.

By the fall of 1978, however, when increased violence challenged the Somoza
regime’s ability to ensure a stable government, the United States made a concerted
effort to grant a voice to moderate opposition groups while excluding the more radical
Sandinistas. One component of U.S. policy was the creation of a mediating commission
consisting of representatives from Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and the United
States. In spite of intense U.S. pressure, both moderates and the Sandinistas withdrew
from the negotiations, claiming that the mediation commission was primarily concerned
with maintaining U.S. interests and offered only “Somocismo sin Somoza” (Somozaism
without Somoza). 37

By early 1979, the FSLN had increased its forces to around 2,500 and was ready
to unleash the final offensive. To win a definite victory, it co-ordinated and
simultaneously used three tactics; (1) a national strike, (2) popular insurrection, and
(3) military attacks. The central focus of the FSLN strategy sprang from “the dynamic
unity which had developed between FSLN vanguard and the popular forces.” 38 Two
joint guerrilla operations took place in late March and early April 1979. These were
diversionary in nature, designed to draw the National Guard into the mountain stronghold
of the FSLN in the north. On 4 June, the FSLN joint national leadership called for a

37. Dennis R. Gordon and Margaret M. Munro, “The External Dimension of Civil
Insurrection: International Organizations and the Nicaraguan Revolution,” Journal
of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs (Miami), Vol. 25, No. 1, February
38. Ricardo E. Chavarria n. 32, p.34.
general strike and announced the beginning of the final offensive. This paralyzed the country. The so-called “Internal Front,” composing of the MPU (United People’s Movement) and Civilian Defence Communities (CDCs) or popular insurrection forces in co-ordination with FSLN leadership took on central importance in this last stage of the war because of the fact that only the popular forces could lead the urban insurrection. On 9 June, the “Battle of Managua” began with the original plan of holding the city for three days. As it turned out, however, the Sandinistas held Managua for seventeen days.

By mid–June, the entire FSLN military organization had launched simultaneous operations. The principal roads leading into and out of the most important cities were controlled by the insurgents and most of the Guard units were either confined to their own barracks or forced into merely defensive positions. On 16 June, the Sandinista radio station announced the creation of a Provisional Government, a move which resulted in the decision by the Andean nations to award belligerency status to the FSLN. Later on, Panama granted diplomatic recognition to the provisional government. On 23 June, the United States suffered an unprecedented defeat in the Organisation of American States (OAS) when the Andean proposal was approved by 17-2, demanding Somoza’s unconditional resignation and upholding the principle of nonintervention.39 The Guard began to dissolve and on 17 July Somoza went into exile. The Revolutionary Junta led by the FSLN was proclaimed in Managua on 19 July 1979.

39. ibid., p.36.
The United States Response to the Revolution

U.S. policy towards Nicaragua saw a dramatic shift within a fortnight of the Sandinistas coming to power. In a desperate effort to keep the Sandinista National Liberation Front out of power, Washington finally acceded to the inevitable. Washington resolved that whatever suspicions it might harbour about Sandinista radicalism, the United States would maintain cordial relations with Nicaragua.40 This conciliatory approach was prompted in large measure by memories of the early 1960s. From 1959 to 1961, the open hostility which the United States had shown towards the Cuban Revolution contributed significantly to Cuba’s realignment with the Soviet Union. If this could be avoided in the case of Nicaragua, the Carter administration was determined to do so. The change in Washington’s attitude was forced by circumstances. The willingness of the United States to maintain cordial relations with the revolutionary government in Managua carried the implicit assumption that even radical social change need not contradict vital U.S. interests in the region.41 The Carter administration reacted with equanimity to Nicaragua’s anti-imperialist rhetoric, its non-aligned foreign policy, and its willingness to accept Cuban and Soviet aid. While these developments were all uncomfortable for the United States, none was seen to be as damaging to U.S. interests as an open break with Nicaragua. The Carter administration feared that such a break would leave Nicaragua little choice but to cast its lot with the socialist camp. The


41. ibid.
administration reasoned that a “Second Cuba” might be avoided by not repeating the mistakes made first with Cuba.\textsuperscript{42}

Despite the Carter administration’s pledge to maintain friendly relations with Nicaragua, it was unusually slow in proposing an economic aid package for that nation. The most serious source of strain between the United States and Nicaragua during the first year and half of the revolution was the issue of U.S. economic aid. In the immediate aftermath of the Nicaraguan insurrection, the United States provided between $39 million in emergency relief to help feed and house the thousands of refugees produced by the war. In 1980 Congress appropriated an additional $75 million in emergency economic assistance.\textsuperscript{43} While the United States provided several million dollars in emergency aid, a regular programme of economic assistance was not sent to Congress until late 1980. These delays were motivated largely by domestic politics. Congressional conservatives vocally opposed giving aid to what they called a “Communist Nicaragua.” With an election year about to get underway, both the White House and its congressional supporters feared that a sudden radicalization of the Nicaraguan revolution would leave them politically vulnerable.\textsuperscript{44} By delaying aid for nearly a year, the White House was allowing time for the Nicaraguan political situation to become more clearly defined before a formal aid commitment was adopted.


\textsuperscript{43} Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran/Contra Affair (Darby: Diane, 1995) p.27.

\textsuperscript{44} William M. Leo Grande, n. 37, p. 377.
Nicaragua: Aftermath of the Revolution

The Nicaraguan Revolution was the triumph of a tiny vanguard, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). The FSLN had fought the Somoza dynasty for nearly twenty years, while the bourgeoisie coexisted well enough with the dictatorship. The Sandinista National Directorate (Direccion Nacional Conjunta -DNC) came into existence in early 1979 with the reunification of the FSLN. It succeeded in dictating the institutional structure of the new government of national reconstruction and defining the authority and composition of its organizational units. The new government’s executive was a five member junta appointed on 16 June 1979 by the FSLN and the National Patriotic Front. With two radicals, two moderates and one left wing social democrat, the junta was created after negotiations within the anti-Somoza camp. It included only one Sandinista, Daniel Ortega Savedra, a veteran member of the FSLN. The other radical, was Moises Hassan Morales, head the United People’s Movement (MPU), a grass-root community organization of students, workers and urban poor. The junta’s moderates were Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, the widow of the martyred editor, and Alfonso Robelo Callehas, former head of the Supreme Council of Private Enterprise, Nicaragua’s largest umbrella organization for the business community. The 18 member cabinet appointed by the junta was more moderate in composition than the junta itself. Most of its members were well known professionals and business leaders.


Legislative authority was vested in a 33 member council composed of representative activities from all the political, and social and civic groups which participated in the anti-Somoza struggle. The junta issued a programme of government that outlined policy objectives, and proposed the formation of a 33 member quasi-legislative Council of State in which the legislative authority was vested. It included members of all political groups which had opposed the dictatorship. After assuming power, the DNC formed an 18 member ministerial cabinet in which moderate and conservative members greatly outnumbered leftist members.

Both the composition and programme of Nicaragua’s Provisional Government of National Reconstruction led to a multi-class cooperative effort to rebuild a nation devastated by war. The anti-Somoza coalition which formed the basis of the new government was held together only by its opposition to the dictatorship. Although the junta was nominally the highest decision making authority, real power was vested in the Sandinista Party and its National Directorate. The authority of the FSLN and its directorate was based on the former’s role as the revolutionary vanguard and on its control over the army and police. 47 During the first year of the revolution, in the absence of a national legislature, the governing junta had legislative authority. Thus, from a formal democratic perspective, the new political system had important limitations. Popular participation was limited to the role of the emerging Sandinista mass organizations in representing their constituent’s interests. This improved with

the inauguration of the Council of State, Nicaragua’s corporatist co-legislative assembly, in May 1980. It consisted of forty-seven delegates from twenty-nine political, professional, and grass-roots organizations and shared legislative functions with the governing junta.

Influenced only by Marxism and perhaps with the Cuban experience in mind, the FSLN was careful to avoid centralist and bureaucratic political models. Instead, the new political system attempted to combine participation with representation. Mass organization was the key element of the new political system. Unlike the “democracy” as a game of various political parties and periodic elections, the Sandinistas saw democracy as the intervention of the masses in all aspects of social life. The mass organizations were formed precisely to assure an effective participation of the people in all matters that affected them, be they in the neighbourhood, the workplace, or the school. The leaders of the Revolution knew that democracy could not be created by decree, certainly not in a country steeped in a long tradition of corrupt dictatorship.

The main instrument of mass participation and popular democracy in the subsequent years of the revolution were the Sandinista mass organisation which served in different degrees to link the state, controlled by the FSLN, to society. The main organizations were the Central Sandinista de Trabajadores (Union of Sandinista Workers – CST), the Association de Trabajadores del Campo (Association of Rural Workers – ATC), the Union National de Agricultores Ganaderos (National Union of Farmers and Agricultores - UNAG), Association of Nicaraguan Women (AMNLANE) and the

Comités de Defensa Sandinista (Sandinista Defence Committees – CDS). In this way, the Sandinistas played a fundamental role in constructing a broad and open political space after the revolution where none had been allowed to form earlier.

Within a few months of the fall of Somoza, the DNC had nationalized the export sector, natural resources and domestic banking. It also expropriated over 180 industrial and commercial companies and nearly 50 percent of the arable land, and initiated a number of social services designed to improve health and welfare among the masses. One of the Sandinista’s primary goals was a restructuring of Nicaragua’s agriculture. In Nicaragua, Castle and Cooke’s Standard Fruit had been the nation’s largest foreign owned enterprise before the revolutionary victory of 1979. In 1982, Standard Fruit pulled out of Nicaragua, and its lands were taken over by the state. The Sandinistas launched the most far-reaching agrarian reform programme in Central America. As a result, the Sandinistas found themselves in control of more than 20 percent of Nicaragua’s farmland, most of which was abandoned by Somoza and his ‘cronies’ who fled the country after the revolution. The Agrarian Reform Law which was passed in 1981 was carefully crafted to support the landless who had been the base of grass root support for the Sandinistas in much of the countryside, or the large landowners, many of whom had made an alliance with the Sandinistas as part of an anti-Somoza coalition.

50. Stephen M. Gorman, n. 19, p.139.
During the first year of the Revolution, the Sandinistas were cautious in their approach towards the bourgeoisie. It established new rules of the game in alliance with the bourgeoisie. The expropriation of Somoza and the Somocista property placed approximately 40 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the hands of the state. The bourgeoisie, thus, controlled 60 percent of the GDP. Moreover and more importantly, 80 percent of agricultural production and 75 percent of manufacturing were still privately generated. The economic weight of the bourgeoisie in the new Nicaragua was self-evident. It was equally clear that the implementation of radial economic measures would result in economic chaos. The Sandinista leadership proved to be unwilling to bring upon the Nicaraguan people the additional misery that such chaos would have entailed.

The key to the new economic policy was the mixed economy. The FSLN adopted this strategy because ideologically, the Sandinistas rejected the idea of a monolithic centralizing state.\textsuperscript{52} For practical reasons, it appeared to offer the best guarantees for increasing production with a minimum of disruption through reorganization. The role envisaged for the state was two-fold: to restructure the economy so as to reduce dependence on exporting primary goods, and to redistribute income in favour of low income groups. By the early 1980s the state sector accounted for 18 percent of total agricultural production and 100 percent of mining, banking and insurance. In 1982 transport and distribution of basic goods were brought into the state sector.

\textsuperscript{52} Jean Grugel, n.49, p.212.
The Nicaraguan Revolution had been an evolutionary process. The violence of the guerrillas, commencing in 1975 and climaxing in 1979, was abetted by over forty years of institutionalized violence on the part of the regime of the Somozas. The struggle was against the exploitation of the masses and the repression of the middle and upper sectors by the Somozas from 1936 to 1979. It also had an anti-American aspect, because of the widespread belief that the Somoza dynasty was “made in the U.S.A.”

In the wake of Somoza’s defeat, U.S. policy toward Nicaragua shifted from an attitude of outright hostility towards the FSLN to an attitude of cautious cordiality towards the new revolutionary government. For the United States, maintaining cordial relations with Nicaragua was a means of salvaging something from the failure to keep the FSLN out of power. Policy makers in the United States set out, quite consciously, to avoid repeating the errors of 1959-1960, when U.S. hostility drove the Cuban revolution to the left and into the arms of the Soviet Union.