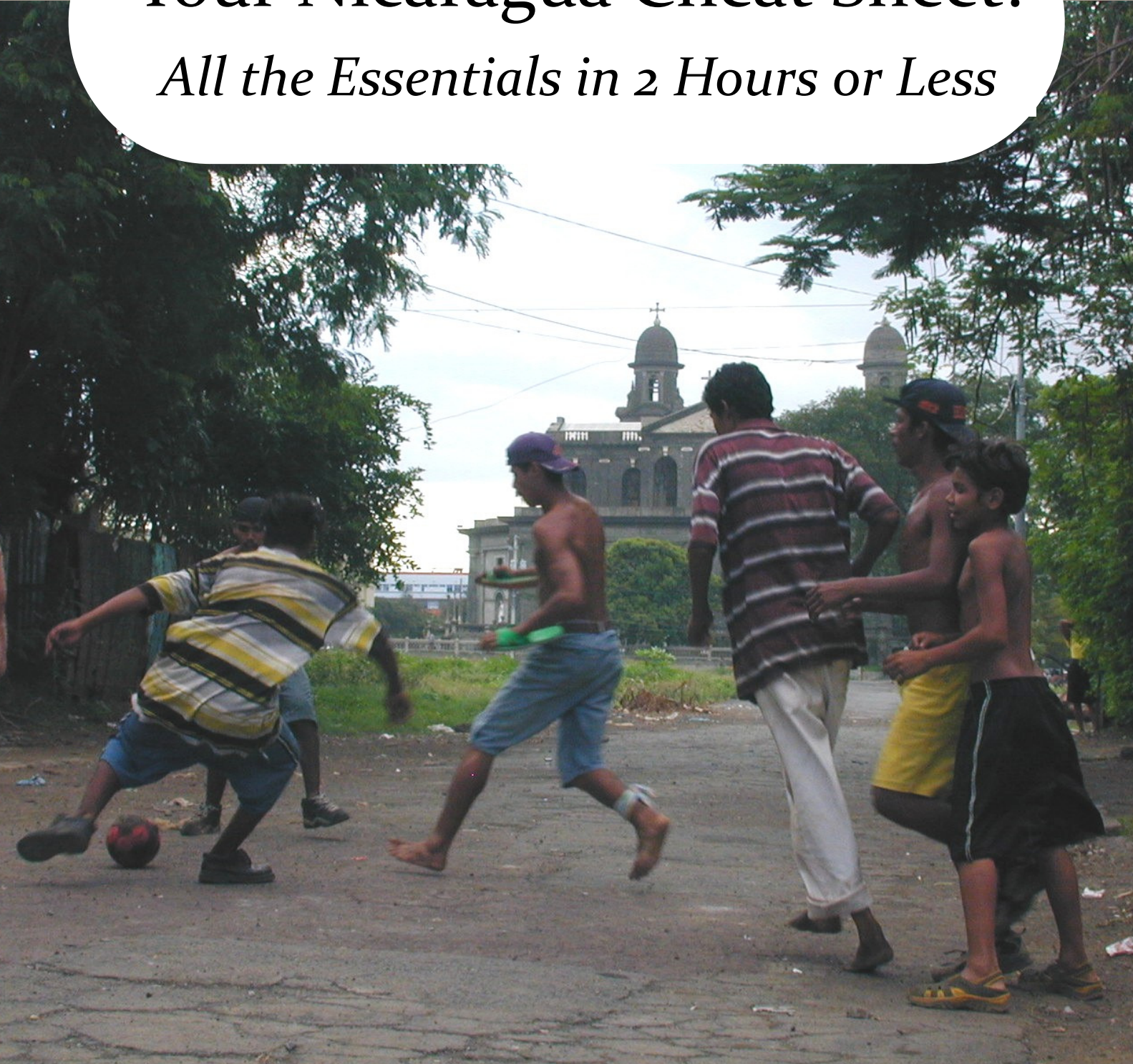


Your Nicaragua Cheat Sheet:

All the Essentials in 2 Hours or Less



Compiled by Jubilee House Community - Center for Development in Central America

Updated June 2012

So you're coming to Nicaragua...

...Here are some things you should know

Nicaragua is a country with an interesting and complex history which has landed it where it is today: the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere where the people have endured many political, social, and economic struggles. Before you arrive, take some time to familiarize yourself with some of these struggles as well as some of the triumphs. By arriving with a little knowledge of the situation, your experience will be enriched.



Photo: Anna Fay

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Jubilee House Community & Center for Development in Central America

The Center for Development in Central America (CDCA) is the project of the non-profit Jubilee House Community (JHC). In addition to being a non-profit organization, the JHC is an intentional community that was founded in North Carolina in 1979. In 1994, JHC moved to Nicaragua and founded the CDCA with the intention of working on projects recommended and prioritized by the local Nicaraguan community. The community also hosts individual volunteers and delegations. The JHC-CDCA focuses its projects in several areas, these include:

SUSTAINBLE AGRICULTURE

Small organic farmers band together to access better prices for their coffee, sesame, peanuts, cotton, cashews and honey. In partnership with the agricultural co-op COPROEXNIC, JHC-CDCA finances planting, post-harvest crop collection and training, finds markets and exports crops. In 2011, COPROEXNIC exported \$1.5 million of organic sesame, becoming Nicaragua's largest sesame exporter.



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Cotton Gin

Since 2008, the COPROEXNIC has been processing organic cotton at a gin located next to the JHC-CDCA. The gin employs 18 people full time for 4 months of the year.

Oil Press

In 2012 JHC-CDCA began experimenting with oil pressing of organic byproducts such as cotton seed and second quality sesame, using the oil to make biodiesel and the leftover cake to make cattle feed. Experimenting also began on pressing neem oil for use in organic pesticides. Hopefully, this project will eventually employ three people full time.

Cattle Feed

Since 2011, the COPROEXNIC has been producing cattle feed for local markets. The feed mill employs 6 people full time during the dry season (six months of the year).



SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Spinning Plant

Since 2003, the JHC-CDCA has been developing a project to create an industrial cooperative that would spin organic cotton fiber into yarn. From February 2007 to April 2012, members of the Genesis co-op worked in the spinning project, building a 15,000 sq ft building by hand, working sweat equity hours as their buy-in to the cooperative. The JHC-CDCA promoted the project, accompanied Genesis and provided low-interest financing for construction through the Vida Fund. In October 2009, the JHC-CDCA took out a loan and made a down payment of \$150,000 for used spinning equipment through Coker International, a broker in South Carolina. To date, Coker has still not delivered machinery and the JHC-CDCA, Genesis, and COPROEXNIC are currently seeking legal recourse in the United States from Coker. In April of 2012 the remaining members of the Genesis co-op left the spinning plant project. The JHC-CDCA still plans to fulfill the dream of setting up a spinning plant, but is currently awaiting outcome of the lawsuits in the U.S.

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Vida Fund

The Vida Fund is a shared risk investment fund that since 2009 has partnered with the poor to build lives through livelihood. The CDCA carefully chooses partner co-ops and invests capital through The Vida Fund, which is financed by donations and investments. Once a partner co-op is approved, The Vida Fund loans funds for initial start-up, capitalization or expansion. The co-op repays its loan to The Vida Fund with income it generates, and The Vida Fund repays loans to investors. Together with partner cooperatives, the JHC-CDCA works

to ensure that their businesses succeed: maintaining a formal yet dynamic partnership with the cooperative groups receiving loans and ensuring that the co-op members have the tools necessary to run their business successfully. The purpose of The Vida Fund is to bring investors interested in promoting economic fairness and opportunity together with the poor, who have no money to invest, but do have their time and labor which becomes their “sweat equity.” In 2011, the Vida Fund lent \$733,000 and \$704,600 of those loans were repaid by December 2011.



HEALTH CLINIC

A general practitioner, a pediatrician, a dentist, a volunteer orthopedist, a nurse, a medic, a community health promotor, a lab technician and a licensed clinical social worker attend the people of Nueva Vida. The clinic keeps charts on over 17,000 patients.

- People's pharmacy- Medicine representing hundreds of thousands of dollars is given out each year, about half of which is donated and half of which is purchased by the CDCA. The medication includes medicine for chronic illnesses such as asthma, hypertension, diabetes, Parkinson's disease and epilepsy; antibiotics; birth control; and anti-parasite medicine.
- Green Pharmacy- provides herbal remedies using traditional medicinal plants to treat patients in a more sustainable method.
- Health Promotion: 25 lay health promoters organize Nueva Vida around health issues with groups for new mothers, parents of children with asthma and groups for teenagers with talks on sexual health, dental hygiene, diabetes and other topics of interest.





APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY

Biodiesel

Creating biodiesel from used cooking oil not only cuts the money spent on diesel, but ensures clean emissions and a healthier relationship with the environment. The CDCA's processor can produce up to 100 gallons a week of biodiesel, but lacks a sufficient supply of used cooking oil. We hope to supplement this supply by pressing surplus organic cotton seed for oil.

Aquaponics

Using the skills of a volunteer who knows about growing fish, the CDCA is working on a pilot project that will give Nicaraguan families access to a better diet. A volunteer has designed and installed a demonstration aquaponics system at the CDCA which combines aquaculture (growing fish) and hydroponics (growing plants in a soil free environment) in a self-sustaining closed system.



EDUCATION

The CDCA seeks to educate the global north about realities in Nicaragua through delegations, brigades, and speaking tours throughout North America and Europe, receiving short term groups and long term volunteers in Nicaragua.



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Nicaragua Fast Facts

Official Name: República de Nicaragua

Capital: Managua

Independence: 15 September 1821 (from Spain and Mexico)

Triumph of the Revolution (overthrow of Somoza dictatorship): 19 July 1979

Population: 5,995,928 (July 2010 est)

Area: 129,494 square km (the size of NY State)

Currency: Cordoba (23 cordobas = 1 US\$)

Population under 17 years old: 60%

Ethnic groups: Mestizo 69%, white 17%, black 9%, Amerindian 5%

Religion: Roman Catholic 58.5%, Evangelical 21.6%, None 15.7%, Other 1.7%, Moravian 1.6%

Language: Spanish 97%, Miskito 1.7%, Other 0.8%

GDP composition by sector: Agriculture: 17.6%, Industry: 26.5%, Services: 56%

Economic growth 2011: 4.8%

Exports: coffee, beef, shrimp and lobster, tobacco, sugar, gold, peanuts, textiles and apparel

Trading partners: U.S. 31%, Central America 23%, Venezuela 13%, Europe 12%

Suffrage: 16 years old, universal

Voter turnout 2011 Presidential elections: 70%

Gross National Income Per Capita: \$1,077.70

Official under- and unemployment rate: 53.3%

Ciudad Sandino under- and unemployment rate (estimate): 80%

Employed in the informal sector: 65%

Minimum wage: Ranges from \$91 - \$207 per month

Cost of living: \$424 a month to feed and clothe a family of four

Nicaraguans living on less than \$2/day: 3 out of 4, jumping to 9 out of 10 in rural areas

Nicaraguans living in extreme poverty (less than \$1 per day): One half, 65% in rural areas

Family Remittances 2011: \$1 billion

Average Daily family remittances: \$6.65 per day for families with someone outside country

Nicaragua's No. 1 source of income: Family remittances, representing 13% of GDP

Nicaraguans who have migrated outside the country: 1/3

Households headed by women: 39% of urban homes and 28% of rural homes.

Women give birth before the age of 18: 28%

Fertility rate: 2.5 children/woman

Population growth rate dropped from 2.7% annually in 1970 to 1.5% annually in 2009

Principle causes of death in Nicaragua are preventable: diarrhea, acute respiratory diseases, accidents and malnutrition

Children suffering from chronic malnutrition: 1 out of 3

Percentages of homes with access to: electricity 71%, potable water 66%, latrines 63%

Population with access to internet (including cyber cafés): 3.3%

Percentage of electrical generation from renewable resources: 48%

1st graders who eventually finish the 6th grade: 29%

Nicaraguans who have never been to school: 20%; **who have finished elementary school:** 27%;

who have finished high school: 10%; **who have graduated from college:** 4%

Literacy: In 2007 it was at 83.5%, by 2010 that had improved to 97%

Number of school children receiving free lunch: 1 million

People in rural areas who moved out of moderate or extreme poverty 2009-2010: 162,100

People in urban areas who moved out of moderate or extreme poverty 2009-2010: 64,000

People you should know, names you will hear



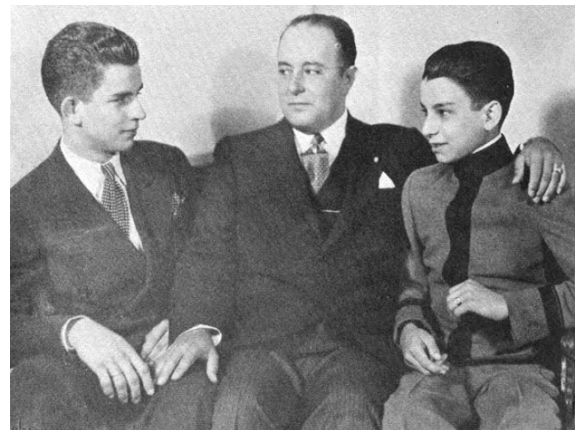
Augusto César Sandino: Known as the “General of Free Men,” in 1927 Sandino led guerillas against the U.S. Marine occupation of Nicaragua, declaring war on the United States, whom he described as the “Colossus of the North” and “the enemy of our race.” Sandino’s emblem showed a U.S. Marine about to be beheaded and in remarks addressed to the U.S. forces in Nicaragua he said “your blood will redden the white dome that crowns the famous White House where you plot your crimes.” Although Sandino abhorred the U.S. presence in Nicaragua, he professed a love of Americans in the same situation as himself. Despite its efforts, the U.S. military never was able to kill him, although at one point Sandino staged a fake funeral for himself while an American plane watched from above. In violation of a safe-conduct agreement, Sandino was assassinated in 1934 on order from Anastasio Somoza Garcia while leaving ceasefire negotiations. He is regarded as Nicaragua’s most heroic

national figure. His picture and cowboy hat became recognized symbols of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN).

My greatest honor is to come from the bosom of the oppressed, who are the heart and soul of our race.

— Sandino

Anastasio Somoza Garcia: As the head of the National Guard (*Guardia*), Somoza murdered Sandino, then sent the *Guardia* to massacre Sandino’s unsuspecting guerrillas and their families. In 1936 he ousted President Sacasa in a coup and had himself elected president by an astonishing vote of 107,201 to 108. Somoza ruled for 20 years of the 43 year Somoza Dynasty before he was assassinated and his two sons took over consecutively.



To say that Somoza had little care for the poor and social programs would be putting it mildly – he was exclusively focused on

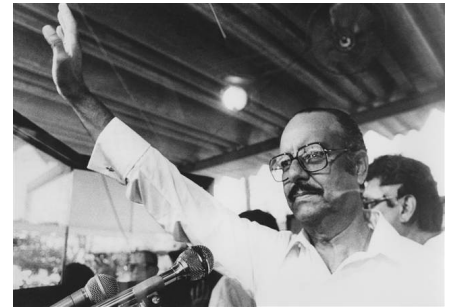
Indeed, you won the elections, but I won the count.

increasing his personal and political power and wealth. Somoza and his inner circle ran virtually every institution in Nicaragua: *Guardia*, police, courts, post office, railway. Somoza was a loyal ally of the United States government and reaped the benefits personally: within a decade of taking power he had 51 cattle ranches, 46 coffee plantations, owned the merchant marine lines, the airline, the cement and

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cardboard factories, and the country's only pasteurized milk facility. By the 1970's, the Somozas controlled 40% of the Nicaraguan economy and 30% of all arable land. After Somoza's assassination in 1956 by Rigoberto López Pérez, power went to his sons Louis, and then Anastasio, known as "Tachito."



Anastasio "Tachito" Somoza Debayle: Educated in the U.S., "Tachito" Somoza graduated from West Point, returned to Nicaragua and was made commander in chief of the brutal *Guardia Nacional*. When this Somoza took the presidency after a fraudulent and violent election in 1967, he remained the commander of the *Guardia*. The Somozas and the *Guardia* took advantage of the 1972 earthquake to further enrich themselves: by the time the Sandinistas triumphed in 1979, the Somoza family owned roughly one half of the country's resources. This mishandling of relief money created widespread resentment of the dictatorship and drove the middle and upper classes into open opposition. Those suspected of training with the Sandinista insurrectionists were imprisoned, tortured, raped, and executed by the *Guardia*. In late 1978 Somoza ordered the aerial bombing the cities of Leon, Masaya, Estelí and Managua.

On July 17, 1979, he fled to Miami where he was denied entry to the U.S. by President Carter. Together with his half-brother and his mistress, he was given refuge by the ruling dictatorship in Paraguay. There, on September 17, 1980, Somoza was assassinated and later buried in Miami. The assassins were Argentinean radicals, and though it remains unclear who backed the group, one of the team members was quoted as saying **"We cannot tolerate the existence of millionaire playboys while thousands of Latin Americans are dying of hunger. We are perfectly willing to give up our lives for this cause."** The assassins fired an anti-tank rocket at Somoza's armored Mercedes Benz, burning his body so unrecognizably that forensics had to identify him through his feet. Of the seven assassins, six escaped. The seventh was recognized by his blond beard and executed.



Arnaldo Aleman: Awarded the dubious distinction of being the **ninth most corrupt leader in recent history** by Transparency International, Alemán is a rare Nicaraguan politician who is *not* generally referred to by his first name: called instead Alemán, El Gordo (Fat Man) or even Gordomán. A friend of the dictatorship, Alemán was an official in the government of "Tachito" Somoza. In 1980 he was arrested by the Sandinista junta on charges of organizing a *Contra* cell, his property was seized and he spent 9 months in prison during which time his father died. In 1989 he was jailed again and his 400 acres of coffee plantations were confiscated while his first wife was dying of cancer.

During the period when Alemán was the mayor of Managua in the 1990's, his personal assets increased from \$20,000 to \$250 million and he owned 8 late-model



Alemán is a very exuberant sort of guy who bubbles forth.
— Jimmy Carter, 1996 Presidential Elections

cars. In 1996 Alemán became President for a term lasting from 1997-2001, and during that time he managed to loot Nicaragua, already an impoverished country, of an estimated \$100 million. The embezzlement schemes principally involved Alemán's family – like his wife's charges on the government's credit cards of \$13,755 at the Ritz Carlton in Bali and \$68,506 for hotels and handicrafts in India. But the true brilliance of Alemán's thievery was his generosity with money that wasn't his – he gave a little bit to everybody, thereby dirtying the hands and buying the eternal loyalty of nearly all top officials in the Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC). When the scandal finally broke after he'd finished his term, ex-ministers and close friends – a total of 14 people – were charged along with Alemán. After unabashedly backing him in the elections and throughout his term of office, the U.S. government froze Alemán's U.S. bank accounts, threatened to confiscate the funds and barred him from entering the U.S.

On Dec 7, 2003 Gordomán was sentenced to a 20-year prison term for money laundering, embezzlement and corruption. Alemán, however, spent only a few weeks in jail before being transferred to the Military Hospital for 3 months for minor finger surgery. From there he was moved to house arrest, which was later extended to the department of Managua and then finally he was allowed free movement throughout the country, inspiring a political mural in Monimbó, Masaya that said "Welcome to Nicaragua, the world's largest jail." In January 2009 the Supreme Court overturned Alemán's sentence allowing him to run for President again in 2011. Upon hearing the verdict Alemán declared "Justice has finally been served."

Carlos Fonseca: Born in 1936, Fonseca's father was part of a rich family, and his mother was a peasant. Fonseca was a prominent student leader who together with Tomás Borge and others founded the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) in 1961. The group campaigned, protested, and waged guerilla war against "Tachito" Somoza, under constant threat of harassment, exile, torture, and death. A teacher and librarian, Fonseca was opposed to excessive emphasis on military actions without corresponding political work. To that end, he concentrated on education and community organizing, creating consciousness-raising classes and campaigning to bring resources to working class neighborhoods in Managua.



Our goal is to bring to an end a society divided into exploiters and exploited, a society divided into oppressors and oppressed...to return...to all working people the riches that have been violently ripped from them.

— Carlos Fonseca

At 6 ft tall with blue eyes and blind without his trademark glasses, Fonseca stood out. In order to elude the *Guardia* he became famous for his disguises as a charcoal seller, a baseball player, a peasant woman, and popular legend says he even attended his mother's funeral dressed as a nun. Toward the end of his life he reportedly used contact lenses and a mouthpiece to give him heavy jowls. Fonseca was captured, tortured, and killed in 1976 and remains a beloved icon in Nicaragua.

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Contras: Consisted of a group of anti-Sandinistas and ex-National Guardsmen who fought against the Sandinistas in the '80's, attacking infrastructure and civilian targets such as health centers and schools from their bases in Honduras and Costa Rica. The Contras were funded by the United States, by both the Reagan and Bush Administrations, which supplied more than \$400 million dollars to the Contras over the course of the Contra War.

Daniel Ortega: Current President as of January 2007. Head of the FSLN, he also headed the ruling junta in 1979, and was democratically elected President in 1984. Referred to by his first name, Daniel was arrested for political activities at the age of 15 and joined the FSLN. He was imprisoned in 1967 for taking part in robbing a branch of the Bank of America while brandishing a machine gun, but was released in 1974 along with other Sandinista prisoners in exchange for Somocista hostages. While he was imprisoned at the El Modelo jail, he wrote a poem titled "*I Never Saw Managua In Miniskirts.*" During his imprisonment, Daniel was severely tortured. Daniel's two brothers were also active in the FSLN: Camilo is a national hero who died in combat in 1978, and Humberto is a General who headed up the Army for many years.



We leave victorious...because we Sandinistas have spilled blood and sweat not to cling to government posts, but to bring Latin America a little dignity, a little social justice.

— Daniel Ortega, 1990

Daniel was defeated by Violeta Barrios de Chamorro in the 1990 presidential election, but the wily power broker remained an important figure in Nicaraguan opposition politics, governing "from below." In 1998, Daniel's stepdaughter Zoilamérica Narváez accused him of sexually abusing her from 1979 to 1990. Daniel and his wife Rosario Murillo denied the allegations and, due to Daniel's immunity from prosecution as a member of parliament and the fact that the 5 years statute of limitations had run out, the case could not proceed in Nicaraguan courts. Zoilamérica took a complaint to the Inter American Human Rights Commission, and in 2002 the Nicaraguan government accepted the Commission's recommendation of a friendly settlement. Zoilamérica has since reconciled with her mother and stepfather.

Daniel was an unsuccessful candidate for president in 1996 (beaten by Alemán) and 2001 (beaten by Enrique Bolaños) before winning the 2006 presidential election with former Contra Jaime Morales as his running mate. Morales made an unlikely ally since Daniel expropriated Morales' home in the 1980's when Morales fled the country and joined the Contra, and Daniel has been living there since. Morales learned his house had been confiscated when his wife returned to Managua, knocked on the door and was answered by Rosario Murillo wearing Morales' daughter's bathrobe.

Daniel's policies became more moderate during his time out of office (1990-2007), and his former Marxist stance has now migrated to a more centrist agenda of democratic socialism, although he still favors revolutionary and anti-imperialist rhetoric. During his current administration, Daniel has reinitiated a less dramatic Sandinista government, which still claims a priority for the poor of Nicaragua. One of his first declarations after taking office in 2007 was to make public education and health care free again. Daniel was re-elected by a landslide 63% majority for a five year term in 2011.

El Pacto: In 2001, Alemán and Daniel Ortega forged an unpopular and secretive power-sharing Pact in which the leaders of the PLC and the FSLN agreed to divvy up power in state institutions, effectively creating a two party system. Since then, the two have played off one another to personally benefit from the alliance. One of the key accords in the pact lowered the percentage needed to win a presidential election to 35%, a change that allowed Daniel to win the 2006 elections in the first round of voting, avoiding a run-off. The Pact has given the two *caudillos* effective control of the Supreme Court, leading to the overturn of Alemán's corruption sentence in 2009 as well as the ruling that permits standing presidents to run for re-election freeing Daniel to run for President in 2011.



Revolución: When you hear someone refer to the Revolution in Nicaragua, they are usually referring to the time period when the Sandinistas governed from 1979 until 1990 and worked to reform the society and economy of the country along socialist lines. The prior opposition to the Somoza dictatorship in the 1960's and 1970's and the campaign led by the FSLN which resulted in the violent ousting of the dictatorship in 1979 is often referred to as the Insurrección, although technically, the *Revolución Nicaragüense* or *Revolución Popular Sandinista*, encompasses all those efforts from the 1960's up to 1990.

Rosario Murillo: Popularly called "La Chayo," Rosario is Nicaragua's First Lady, the Ortega administration's chief of staff, press secretary and a handful of other titles. Although she holds no elected office, she's widely considered to be *the* person in the administration who can resolve problems and since 2007 her popularity has risen from 28% to 61%, making her the second most popular public figure in the country (Police Commissioner Aminta Granera is 1st, Daniel is 3rd). Rosario's constant public appearances, her grueling schedule and her ability to pull strings behind the scenes have led the opposition to refer to them as "the Presidential Couple."



Rosario is also the mastermind behind the pink and blue color scheme and the relentless use of Courier typeface in all FSLN propaganda. Referred to as "the witch" and depicted in cartoons with a cauldron, the poet and feminist makes an easy target with her taste for gaudy sun visors, excess jewelry, penchant for astral charts and Catholic fundamentalism. Though Rosario and Daniel were married in 1978 in a secret ceremony (conducted by a Spanish priest turned guerrilla fighter), they were officially married in the new Cathedral in Managua in 2006 as part of a public reconciliation with the Roman Catholic hierarchy. .

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*The America of Moctezuma and Atahualpa,
the aromatic America of Columbus,
Catholic America, Spanish America,
the America where noble Cuauhtémoc said:
"I am not on a bed of roses" —our America,
trembling with hurricanes, trembling with Love:
O men with Saxon eyes and barbarous souls,
our America lives. And dreams. And loves.
And it is the daughter of the Sun. Be careful.*



Ruben Dario

Songs of Life and Hope To Roosevelt (1905)

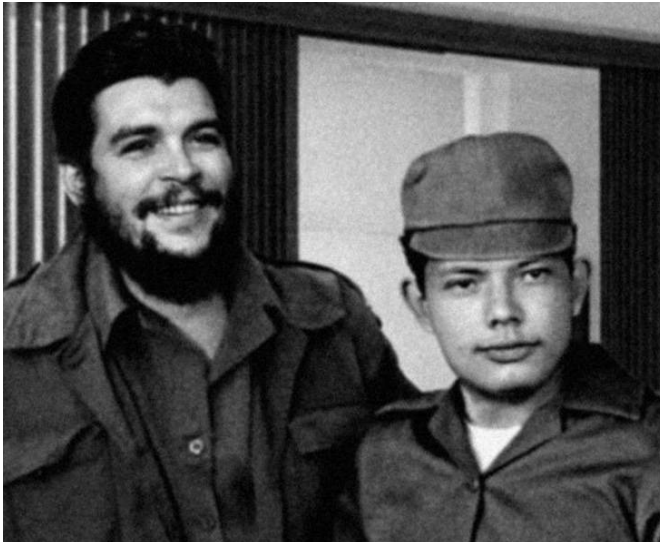
Rubén Darío: The world famous Nicaraguan poet with many festivals, streets, parks, and buildings named after him. Praised as the “prince of Castilian letters” and the “Father of Modernism,” he started the Spanish-American literary movement known as *modernismo* that flourished at the end of the 19th century. Darío is also revered as Nicaragua's greatest diplomat and a leading voice of Central and South America and, like Daniel Ortega, he was also married to a woman named Rosario Murillo. Some of his well known work includes *Salutación del optimista* and *A Roosevelt* in which he extols Hispanic traits in light of the threat of United States imperialism and *Salutación del águila* in which he glorifies the United States.



Sandinistas (FSLN): *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) is a political party named for Augusto Sandino. They overthrew “Tachito” Somoza and declared triumph on July 19, 1979. Members of the FSLN are called *Sandinistas* and sometimes *rojinegros* for the red and black Sandinista colors.

*Let us fight the Yankee, the enemy
of humanity.*

— *Original FSLN Anthem*



Young Tomas Borge with Ernesto "Che" Guevara

Tomás Borge

Together with Silvio Mayorga and Carlos Fonseca, Tomás Borge founded the FSLN in 1961. The only one of the original founders to survive the Insurrection against Somoza, Borge was Minister of the Interior in the 1980's, founded the National Police, reformed the prison system and remained a strong FSLN leader right up until his death from lung cancer in 2012 at the age of 81. Borge was captured by the *Guardia* in the 1970's and when the Sandinista guerillas heard the news, Carlos calmed them by saying "tranquilo, Tomás won't talk." Indeed, he never did talk although he was subjected to torture that included having a hood placed over his head for nine months, being handcuffed for seven months, having one testicle cut off and watching the *Guardia* rape and murder his wife. Borge was among those freed at the time of the Sandinista takeover of the National Palace in August of 1978.

Popular legend says that after the Triumph in 1979, Borge exacted revenge on his torturers. He went to the prison where the *Guardia* were being held, swung the door of the torturer's jail cell open, and said "I have come to have my revenge against you as I vowed. For your punishment, you will have to walk the streets of this country and see the children of this country who you tortured for so long learn to read and write." In 1979 Borge joined in the decision to abolish the death penalty and wrote a poem with Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy about his act of personal forgiveness of his torturers.



My Personal Revenge

*My personal revenge will be the right
of your children to school and to flowers;
My personal revenge will be to offer you
this florid song without fears;
My personal revenge will be to show you
the good there is in the eyes of my people,
always unyielding in combat
and most steadfast and generous in victory.
My personal revenge will be to say to you
good morning, without beggars in the streets,
when instead of jailing you I intend
you shake the sorrow from your eyes;
when you, practitioner of torture,
can no longer so much as lift your gaze,
my personal revenge will be to offer you
these hands you once maltreated
without being able to make them forsake tenderness.
And it was the people who hated you most
when the song was language of violence;
But the people today beneath its skin
of red and black has its heart uplifted.*

— Tomás Borge

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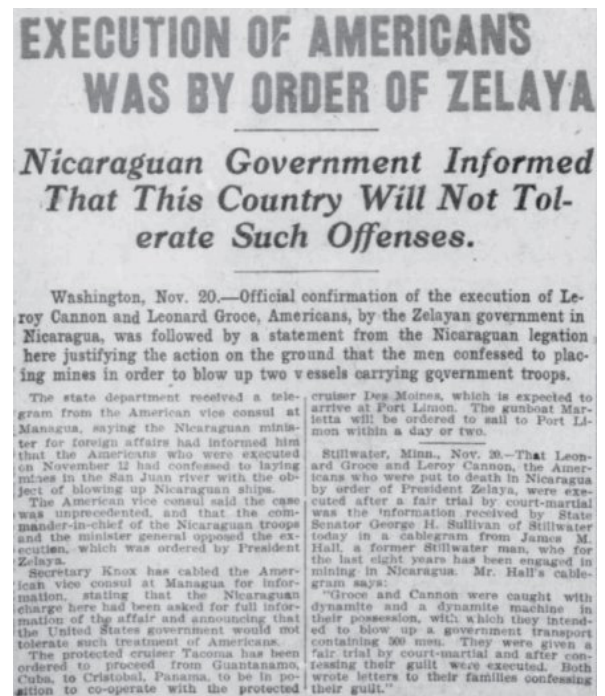
José Santos Zelaya: president of Nicaragua from July 1893–December 1909. A member of the liberal party, Zelaya rose to the presidency through a military coup. He was a progressive who improved public education, built railroads (which were seriously damaged by the 1972 earthquake and later completely torn out under Doña Violeta's government in the early 1990's), and enacted laws to provide for equal rights, compulsory vote, compulsory education, and the separation of state powers. Zelaya dared to chart an independent national course for Nicaragua which put him on the outs with the U.S. and ironically opened the door to U.S. military occupation.



In 1894, Zelaya took the disputed Atlantic Coast back from the British Empire by military force. The United Kingdom chose not to go to war over the small, invaluable area and quickly recognized Nicaraguan sovereignty over the region.

When the United States shifted its interest in a Canal from Nicaragua to Panama, Zelaya began negotiating with Great Britain to build a transcontinental railway through Nicaragua. The U.S. feared he would undermine its hold over the region and labeled Zelaya a tyrant, moving to aid Zelaya's opponents in Nicaragua who broke out in open rebellion in October 1909, led by Liberal General Juan J. Estrada. Nicaragua sent troops into Costa Rica to suppress Estrada's U.S.-backed forces, and U.S. officials attempted to coerce Costa Rica into attacking Nicaragua. Considering the U.S. a more serious threat to regional peace than Zelaya, Costa Rican officials refused to act.

Zelaya's government executed captured rebels including two U.S. mercenaries. The U.S. government declared their execution grounds for a diplomatic break between the countries. U.S. Marines landed in Bluefields and used it as a base of operations for the anti-Zelayan rebels. On 17 December 1909, Zelaya turned over power to José Madriz and fled to Spain. Madriz continued to fight the mercenaries, but in August 1910 withdrew. The U.S. immediately moved to control Nicaragua by filling the presidency with a series of presidents amenable to the U.S. agenda, controlling free trade and loans, and through military occupation. The U.S. Marines remained stationed in Nicaragua until 1932, supervising several Nicaraguan elections during this time.



The History

Colonial Period

For thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans, indigenous tribes, nomads and farmers lived in what is now Nicaragua. The earliest evidence of humans in Nicaragua are the 8,000 year-old deposits of shell fishing from *Los Concheros* on the Caribbean coast.

The famous Acahualinca footprints were made by 15 people walking along the lakeshore in Managua 6,000 years ago and were discovered at a construction site in 1874. Columbus arrived in 1502 claiming the Caribbean Coast for Spain, and in 1522 the land was named Nicaragua, after the Nicaraos, the Nahuatl-speaking tribe that lived on the shores of Lake Nicaragua, and the Spanish word *Agua*, meaning water.

When the *conquistadores* arrived, western Nicaragua was inhabited by several indigenous peoples, among them the Nicaraos and the Chorotegas, farmers who lived in towns and were organized into distinct kingdoms. Eastern Nicaragua was inhabited by tribes originating from Colombia who hunted, fished and practiced slash and burn agriculture. The Spanish settled in the west and highland areas of Nicaragua and quickly wiped out most of the indigenous peoples through disease. The Spanish sold hundreds of thousands of indigenous Nicaraguans into slavery in Panama and in Peru's silver mines, and massacred thousands more. A population of approximately 2 million indigenous people was reduced to 8,000 in only 35 years under Spanish rule.

In 1524, the Spanish conquistador Córdoba established two principal towns in Nicaragua, Granada on Lake Nicaragua and León west of Lake Managua. Nicaragua remained under Spanish rule for over 300 years, until gaining its independence as a part of the United Provinces of Central America in 1821, then as an independent republic in its own right in 1838.



Chief Nicarao



William Walker and his troops at rest

Conservative-Liberal Factions

Throughout the 19th century there was constant conflict between the two main political parties, the Liberals, who claimed León, and the Conservatives, who were centered in Granada. The Liberals took desperate measures in 1855, inviting filibusterer William Walker from Tennessee to help. He brought in troops and quickly took

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Granada, but didn't stop there. He named himself president of Nicaragua, declared English the official language, and initiated slavery to put himself in favor with the southern U.S. states. Soon he announced his plans to conquer the rest of Central America, but he didn't accomplish his goal before he was captured and killed in 1860 in Honduras.

The Conservatives regained power and moved the capital from León to Managua, a neutral city that is the geographical halfway point between León and Granada. Through a coup, Liberal José Santos Zelaya won the presidency, only to be ousted by rebels aided by U.S. Marines in 1910 (*see José Santos Zelaya*). The U.S. reestablished the Conservatives in power until 1912 when Benjamín Zeledón led a rebellion, provoking the return of U.S. Marines who this time stayed until 1925, installing and ousting presidents at will.

Sandino

Only two years later, in 1927, the Marines returned, but this time they were met with resistance from Augusto César Sandino. With support from neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives, Sandino gathered the first guerilla troops in the Americas and fought for six years against the U.S. occupation. Even though Sandino had no outside financing for his forces, the Great Depression made overseas military expeditions too costly for the United States. In January 1931, the U.S. announced that all U.S. soldiers in Nicaragua would be withdrawn; in total, 130 Marines had been killed in their tour of duty to Nicaragua.

Responsibility for dealing with Sandino's forces was handed over to the newly-created Nicaraguan *Guardia Nacional* (National Guard), headed up by Anastasio Somoza García.



Sandino and his "crazy little army"



Somoza and Sandino at peace talks

The U.S. withdrawal convinced Sandino to engage in peace talks instigated by Somoza. After leaving a negotiation meeting with President Sacasa, Sandino was ambushed and murdered on 21 February 1934 and his remains were buried secretly in Managua by the *Guardia*. The following day, the *Guardia* descended on Sandino's mountain cooperatives and massacred their inhabitants, returned the lands to previous owners and hunted down Sandino's fleeing supporters, exiling, imprisoning or killing them. Two years later, Somoza forced Sacasa to resign and declared himself President, establishing a dynasty which would dominate Nicaragua for the next four decades.



*Left: Anastasio Somoza; Below: Bringing home a victim of the National Guard
Photos by Susan Meiselas*



Somoza Dictatorship

During his reign, Somoza appropriated Nicaragua's best property and commercial interests for himself and his family. Meanwhile, his government made no effort to provide the poor majority with health care, clean water, electricity, or education. In 1956, Nicaraguan poet Rigoberto López Pérez disguised himself as a waiter and shot the dictator dead at a diplomatic party, before he himself died in a hail of bullets.

Luis Somoza, the older Somoza son, assumed the presidency until his death in 1957, when Anastasio "Tachito" Somoza, his younger brother, inherited the rule. The youngest Somoza proved to be the most ruthless and made it a habit to harass, capture, exile, torture and kill suspected members of the developing insurrectionist movement.

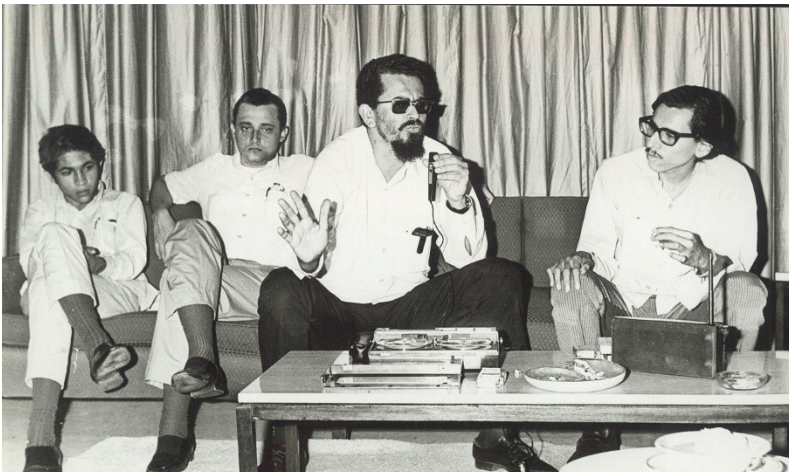
American business strengthened its holdings in the country during the Somoza years. U.S.-owned Nicaraguan Long Leaf Pine Company directly paid the Somoza family millions of dollars in exchange for favorable benefits, such as not having to re-forest clear cut areas. In the 1950's, cotton plantation and cattle ranch expansion forced peasant families off their land to relocate into the rainforest and eastward where they cleared to plant crops. Soil erosion forced them to continually abandon their land and move deeper into the rainforest and cattle ranchers then claimed the abandoned land. By the early 1970's, Nicaragua had become the United States' top beef supplier, supporting fast-food chains and pet food production. "Tachito" Somoza owned the largest slaughterhouse in Nicaragua, as well as six meat-packing plants in Miami.

The Rise of the Sandinistas

Meanwhile, opposition to the Somoza regime had been growing and organizing especially among students and the poor. In 1961, prominent student leaders Carlos Fonseca, Tomás Borge, Silvio Mayorga,

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Carlos Fonseca interview in Cuba

this time with 40 guerillas – including women – near Matagalpa in the Pancasán region. Although many FSLN guerrillas were killed by the *Guardia*, the operation was considered a political victory because it showed the country that the FSLN still existed.

A major turning point for Somoza was the December 1972 Managua earthquake that killed over 10,000 people and left 250,000 homeless. Even the wealthy class began to turn against Somoza when he pocketed the majority of relief money pouring into the country to aid earthquake victims.

With the strengthened opposition, the Sandinistas were able to plan bolder attacks on the regime. On 27 December 1974, a group of FSLN guerrillas invaded a party at the home of the Minister of Agriculture, killing him and taking hostage several leading government officials and Somoza's own mother. They succeeded in negotiating the release of the hostages in exchange for \$1 million in ransom, the government broadcasting an FSLN declaration on the radio and in *La Prensa*, releasing 14 FSLN members from jail – including Daniel Ortega – and flying the operatives and released FSLN members to Cuba. The incident humiliated the government and enhanced the prestige of the FSLN. This moment marked an escalation of the guerilla war against Somoza and his reprisals. In 1975, martial law was declared and the *Guardia* began to raze villages suspected of supporting Sandinistas.

Faustino Ruiz and Santos López founded the National Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN) to organize against and overthrow the Somoza dictatorship. After a several guerillas were killed in a poorly prepared battle with the *Guardia* along the northern border in 1963, the FSLN refocused on educational work and community organizing. In 1967 the group tried an armed operation again,



*Above: Somoza inspects earthquake damage;
Below: National Guard patrol earthquake ruins*





Top: Sandinista rebels launch Molotov cocktails at Somoza's National Guardsmen; Below: Rebels arriving in Managua to celebrate the Triumph

Sandinista Insurrection

Following the January 1978 murder of journalist Pedro Chamorro – a moderate opponent of the Somoza government – the country fell into all-out civil war. 50,000 turned out for Chamorro's funeral and his death sparked a nationwide strike demanding an end to the dictatorship. As a parallel action, the Sandinistas put military pressure on the regime, managing to expel the *Guardia* from several towns.

In August 1978, in a plan masterminded and carried out by Dora María Téllez and Eden Pastora – known as *Comandante Dos* and *Comandante Cero*, respectively – FSLN operatives disguised themselves as *Guardia* and stormed the National Palace, disarming or killing the actual *Guardia* and taking hostage the entire congress, which was in session at the time. During the three day siege, Téllez, who was 22 at the time, personally managed the negotiations that freed FSLN prisoners, and won the guerillas \$1 million in cash and a plane to Cuba. The operation was a huge victory for the FSLN and infuriated Somoza, who countered with increasing violence and repression. When León became the first city in Nicaragua to fall to the Sandinistas, he responded with aerial bombardment, famously ordering the air force to “bomb everything that moves until it stops moving.”

Despite the regime's overt human rights violations, U.S. government officials were still arguing that Somoza must be kept in power to prevent the spread of communism. Then on June 20, 1979, ABC reporter Bill Stewart was executed in Managua by the *Guardia* while carrying a white flag and official press documentation. A graphic film of the killing was widely broadcast on U.S. television, and President Carter finally refused Somoza further U.S. military aid.

Triumph of the Revolution

In May 1979, the FSLN launched a major push to take control of the country. The final insurrection lasted 52 days with the Sandinistas first capturing León, then other major cities. In Managua, most of the fighting took place in neighborhoods where concrete ditches were used as battle trenches and paving stones were pried up to make barricades. By mid July the FSLN had Somoza and the National Guard isolated in Managua. On July 17, Somoza dug up his father's remains and fled to Miami with the coffin, his mistress and the national treasury.



I feel as if I had just been born! Like a little baby with a whole life ahead of me!

— Young woman upon the triumph of the revolution

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On July 20, the FSLN marched into Managua to celebrate the Revolution's triumph in front of the Cathedral in the center of the city with the largest crowd ever assembled in Central America. During the celebrations, FSLN leaders had to appeal to dazed preteen guerillas to please quit firing their AKAs in the dense crowd for fear that people would be injured. The Revolution had triumphed, but at a huge cost: more than 50,000 Nicaraguans were killed, 600,000 were left homeless,

malnutrition and diseases were rampant. The small country had a debt of \$1.6 billion, and the UN estimated material damage from the insurrection at \$480 million.

Four Phases of the Nicaraguan Revolution

- 1) July 1979—Reagan elected Nov. 1980: a time of euphoria and optimism.
- 2) Nov. 1980—spring 1982: period of growing awareness of hostile intentions of the new administration in Washington.
- 3) Spring 1982—Inauguration of Daniel Jan. 1985: the revolutionary system rose to the challenge of withstanding a massive surrogate invasion, direct CIA sabotage, and economic strangulation while at the same time institutionalizing itself and even augmenting its already wide base of grassroots support.
- 4) Jan. 1985—Elections February 1990: the death, destruction and economic collapse brought on primarily by the Contra War and other U.S. orchestrated programs of destabilization eventually caused such desperation among the Nicaraguan people that a majority voted for a U.S.-sponsored opposition coalition capable, it was hoped, of ending the paramilitary and economic torment of Nicaragua.

—Thomas Walker,

Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle



The Sandinista Literacy Campaign

The Revolution

A new government was announced under a provisional junta headed by Daniel Ortega and including Violeta Chamorro, Pedro's widow. The period of Sandinista rule, 1979-1990, is known as the Revolution. The Sandinistas received international recognition for their gains in literacy, health care, education, childcare, unions, and land reform.

One of the initial successes of the revolutionary government was the literacy campaign. The goal was to create a literate electorate able to make informed choices at elections. Over 100,000 Nicaraguan urban youth flooded the countryside and in a period of six months, taught half a million people basic reading skills. This brought the national illiteracy rate down from 50.3% to 12.9% and gave urban youth a first-hand experience of life in the countryside, an experience that helped shape their generation.

Education and health care were made free under the new Constitution and Nicaragua created a national health care system that for the first time reached a majority of its citizens.

Cheap neighborhood childcare was widely available, and the Sandinistas formed a union

base that remains powerful today and was instrumental in passing an extremely progressive labor law – which, among other things, mandates nursing mothers get a 15 minute break every three hours to breastfeed their babies. The Revolution also founded a Ministry of Culture, one of only three in Latin America at the time, with the aim to “democratize art” by making it accessible to all social classes and focusing on the development of working class and *campesino* culture. The ministry collected and published testimonial narrative, a form of poetry that recorded the experiences of revolution, as well as establishing a new press to print cheap editions of basic books rarely seen by Nicaraguans before.



Sandista woman soldiers

On 1 May 1985 in an effort to isolate Sandinista Nicaragua, which he called a communist threat, U.S. President Ronald Reagan imposed an embargo against Nicaragua, prohibiting all trade between the two countries – the U.S. was at the time Nicaragua’s main trading partner. In addition, Nicaragua’s national airline, Aeronica, was stripped of its right to land on U.S. soil and Nicaraguan ships were banned from landing in U.S. ports.

Once the U.S. economic blockade was in place, Nicaragua received a large part of its aid from Cuba and the Soviet Block. Thousands of young Revolutionaries – many of whom had been denied an education by the Somoza regime – flocked to Cuba, Bulgaria, and Russia to study medicine, education, agronomy and engineering. Cuba built roads in Nicaragua, power plants and sugar mills as well as helping Nicaragua get spare parts for machinery that it could no longer import from the U.S. Over 1,500 Cuban doctors worked in Nicaragua and were essential in the success of the Vaccination Campaign, which eliminated polio, decreased whooping cough, rubella, measles, and lowered the infant mortality rate.



Sandista vaccination campaign

Women played a prominent role in both the Insurrection against Somoza and the following Revolution, which brought about major gains for women in legislation, educational opportunities, training programs, childcare, and greatly increased participation and leadership positions in politics: by 1987, women held 31% of the executive positions in the government, 27% of the leadership positions of the FSLN, and 25% of the FSLN’s active membership.

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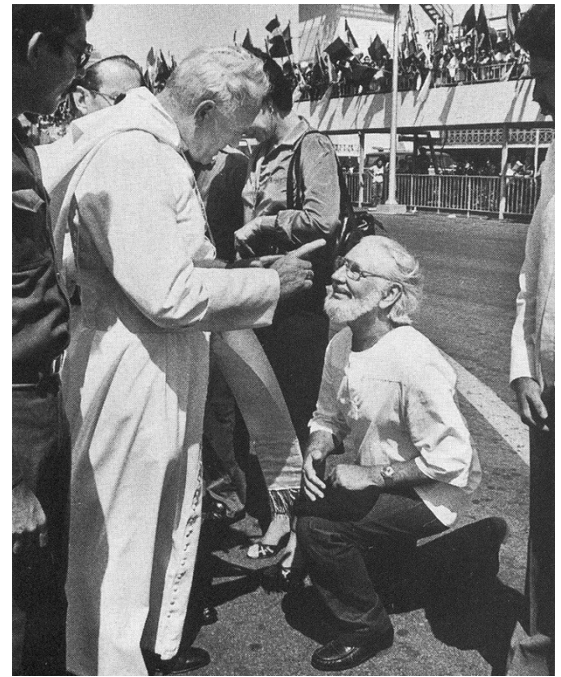
Revolution and the Church

The Revolution further deteriorated the relationship between the Catholic Church hierarchy and its grassroots base. The hierarchy had supported the Somoza dictatorship and only began to speak out against Somoza's corruption and human rights abuses at the end of the 1970's. While the hierarchy opposed the Sandinistas as proponents of "godless communism," much of the clergy supported the FSLN. These priests and lay people, who were dedicated to liberation theology and a preferential option for the poor, used their Christian base communities to educate peasants about the institutionalized violence from which they suffered. Some priests took a more active role in supporting the insurrection, taking up arms and joining the FSLN.

With the Triumph of the Revolution, the hierarchy opposed the Sandinista government, fearing the emergence of the popular church which challenged its centralized authority. During the Contra War, the Church refused to speak out against the Contras and failed to denounce American military aid to the Contras. There were five priests holding cabinet level positions in the Sandinista government, and the Vatican ordered them to either step down from the government, or leave the Church. They refused to do either, and as a result Father Ernesto Cardenal was publicly admonished by Pope John Paul II upon his arrival in Nicaragua in March 1983. The Sandinistas had hoped the Pope would support the peace process during his historic visit, and made an effort to get as many Nicaraguans as possible to the two papal masses, declaring a national holiday and offering free transport. The Pope, however, only made the rift worse when he spoke to the more than 1 million people gathered in the Plaza in Managua. The day before his visit to Managua, a funeral service had been held for 17 Sandinistas killed by Contras and upon the Pope's arrival, the mothers of these fallen requested he pray

for their sons. The pontiff ignored their request, and when the frustrated crowd began chanting "Peace! Peace! Peace!" Pope John Paul II lost control and shouted "Silence!" It was the first time the pontiff was heckled in public.

On November 4, 1984 Nicaragua held its first free democratic elections boasting more than 75% voter turnout. Daniel Ortega won the Presidential race among seven candidates with 67% of the vote.



Pope John Paul II publicly admonishes Fr. Ernesto Cardenal



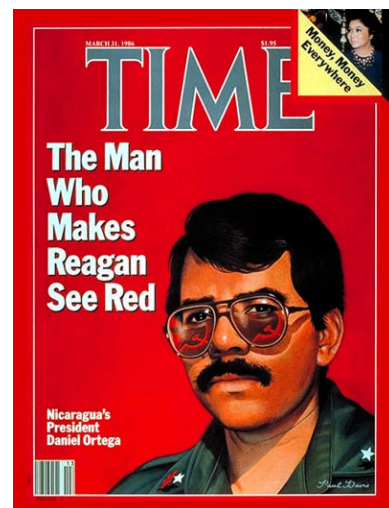
Fidel Castro looks on as Daniel Ortega is sworn in

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Revolutionary Economics

The new government set out to ensure that Nicaragua's new society benefitted workers and peasants and so created institutions designed to redistribute wealth and income.

Economic growth was uneven during the 1980's. While the restructuring of the economy and the rebuilding after the insurrection caused the GDP to jump 5% in 1980-81, the GDP dropped each year from 1984-1990. The drop was caused by lack of new loans being offered by foreign banks, the diversion of funds to fight the Contra war, and the U.S. trade embargo. After 1985, the government filled the gap between lower revenues and rising military expenditures by printing more paper money. Inflation skyrocketed, reaching more than 14,000 percent annually in 1988. That year, the administration established an austerity program, tightening price controls and introducing a new currency. By August, inflation had dropped to an annual rate of 240 percent. The following month, however, Hurricane Joan caused extensive damage in the country and infrastructure repairs cancelled out the anti-inflation measures.



Farmers received title to land with agrarian reform

Agrarian Reform

As an agriculture-based economy, Nicaragua was susceptible to the rise and fall in international markets of its main exports: coffee, cotton and beef. The Revolution faced a rural economy well behind in technology, devastated by the insurrection and the looming civil war against the Contras. The new government began an Agrarian Reform project which would increase the support for the government among the rural poor while guaranteeing sufficient food delivery into the cities. Beginning by confiscating the land of fleeing *Somocistas* (who owned the vast majority of all property), the Nicaraguan Agrarian

Reform developed four types of property ownership:

1. *state property* (confiscated from the Somozas and their fleeing cronies)
2. *cooperative property* (confiscated land to be worked collectively)
3. *communal property* (indigenous Miskito communities on the Atlantic Coast)
4. *individual property* (as long as its owners were present and the land was worked following the national development plan)

In all, 2 million acres of Somoza's holdings alone were redistributed to the peasantry. During 1985, ceremonies were held throughout the country in which Daniel Ortega gave each peasant a title to the land and a rifle to defend it.

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U.S. armed Contra soldiers training in Honduras

The Contra War

After the Triumph of the Revolution in 1979, the upper classes of Nicaragua were quick to follow Somoza's trail to Miami – with the socialist Sandinistas taking over and increasing state control, the “haves” deserted their property and businesses, leaving their top-of-the-line cars abandoned at the airport in their haste. The new government quickly confiscated their holdings, and most of those who fled the country didn't return to Nicaragua until the Sandinistas were out of power after 1990.

Some of those who left Nicaragua joined the organizing and fundraising efforts of the Contras, a group of ex-National Guard and Somoza supporters trained by the CIA and financially backed by the Reagan administration (*read more in Nicaraguan and U.S. relations*). The targets of the Contra attacks were primarily teachers, schools, health care workers, and other sectors in which Sandinista social policy was successful. As Contra attacks intensified, the Nicaraguan government instituted a compulsory draft to defend the Revolution, an unpopular measure that saw thousands of boys as young as 16 sent off to the war zones.

The U.S. increased pressure on the Sandinistas in 1983 and 1984, including attacks on Nicaraguan ports and oil installations and mining Nicaraguan harbors, actions ruled illegal by the International Court of Justice in 1986. Despite the judgment, the U.S. refused to pay the ordered restitution and claimed that the ICJ was not competent to judge the case, calling the Court a “semi-judicial” body.



Photo: Paul Dix

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On May 1, 1985, Reagan issued an executive order that imposed a full economic embargo on Nicaragua, which remained in force until March 1990. As a result of the embargo, there were major food shortages from which everybody suffered, peasants and upper class alike. Instead of money, *campesinos* were paid in food or other goods for their coffee after the Sandinistas nationalized all coffee exportation, an act that turned some rural Nicaraguans against the FSLN to join the Contras.

The Contra War was fought mainly in rural areas close to the northern border with

Honduras, where the Contras were stationed and trained by U.S. military, but there was also a southern front of the Contras, commanded by former Sandinista *Comandante Cero* Eden Pastora, who allegedly was repeatedly lured into giving away all his military secrets to sexy Sandinista spies. The Contras, whom Reagan called “Freedom Fighters” were experts at terrorizing the countryside with their brutal practices of disemboweling, castrating, decapitating and chopping limbs off victims, kidnapping women and girls to be raped and killed, and kidnapping boys and men to force them into service as Contra guerillas. In a 1989 Human Rights Watch report, the organization noted “[the] contras were major and systematic violators of the most basic standards of the laws of armed conflict, including by launching indiscriminate attacks on civilians, selectively murdering non-combatants, and mistreating prisoners.”



Photo: Paul Dix

I guess in a way they are counterrevolutionary and God bless them for being that way. And I guess that makes them Contras and so it makes me a Contra too. — Ronald Reagan 1986



1990 Elections

In 1990 the second set of elections under the FSLN government ended in a shock for the entire country when Violeta Chormorro was elected Nicaragua’s newest president. Doña Violeta, as she is known, was the widow of murdered journalist Pedro Chamorro, a member of the post-Triumph junta and the Presidential candidate for a coalition of groups unified under the banner of the National Opposition Union or UNO.

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Pre-election polls had indicated a sure Sandinista victory, and no one, even the opposition itself, had considered that the Sandinistas might lose. The FSLN had planned a huge celebration party in a hall that was left empty of all but a few shell-shocked supporters after the election results came in. When they went to the polls, however, voters had been faced with a choice made clear by U.S. President George H.W. Bush when doña Violeta visited Washington during her campaign: unless UNO wins the elections, the economic blockade – and by inference, the Contra war – will remain in place indefinitely. Bush’s administration then went on to back up those words with money, pouring \$9 million into UNO’s campaign.

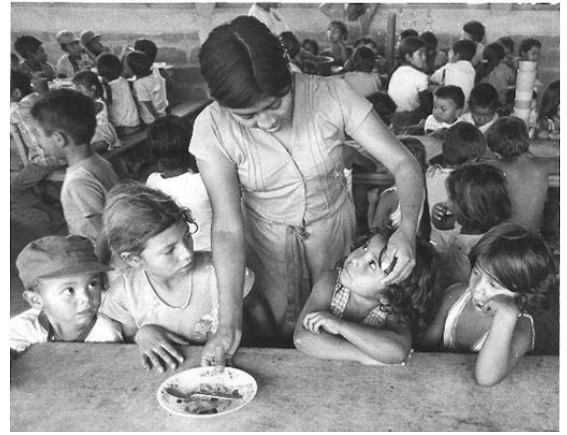


Photo: Paul Dix

Child refugees of the Contra War

Chamorro had promised to end the unpopular military draft, bring about democratic reconciliation, and promote economic growth. For a group that offered the war-torn country peace, UNO certainly wasn’t adverse to using violent means to win the elections. When the Presidential campaign kicked off in August of 1989, the Contras – who had received an injection of \$49.75 million in ‘non-lethal’ funds from Washington – redeployed 8,000 troops into Nicaragua. They carried out a violent campaign of intimidation, assassinating FSLN candidates and distributing thousands of UNO leaflets.



The Contra war had cost Nicaraguan mothers another 50,000 sons and \$12 billion of damages in a country with an annual GNP of \$2 billion. Nicaraguans were tired of war, and when they went to the polls they simply voted to end the war. When the election results were in, doña Violeta had 55% of the popular vote against Daniel’s 41%. Daniel conceded the loss, vowing to “rule from below,” and handed out properties and state-owned businesses to the Sandinista leadership in what is referred to as the “Piñata” before leaving office.

The Neoliberal Era

After her win, doña Violeta ruled the country with her “matronly instinct” and her son-in-law, who was her Chief of Staff and the real decision-maker in the administration. Notable moments in her 6-year Presidency include:

- The end of the Contra war and the U.S. economic embargo
- The reversals of nearly all Sandinista policy and the attempted erasure of the Revolution – no more credits for co-ops, free health care or education — and even the painting-over of Revolutionary murals
- The beginning of a privatization plan that eventually saw every state run enterprise (with the notable exceptions of the water & telecommunications companies) sold off at fire sale prices to foreign corporations.

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Sweatshops began to flourish in neoliberal Nicaragua had been free during the Revolution.

Although Doña Violeta was the first woman President not only in Nicaragua, but in the Americas, her administration has an abysmal record on women's issues. Just a year after her election, more than 16,000 working women had lost their jobs. Because the new neo-liberal administration greatly reduced or ended all Sandinista social programs, Nicaraguan women were once again burdened with the costs of child care, education and health care, all of which

In 1996, former *Somocista* and mayor of Managua *Gordoman* Arnoldo Alemán came to power. Five years later – after selling off most remaining state enterprises, opening Nicaragua up to foreign-owned free trade zones, and building sweat shops to provide cheap labor – he left office, embezzling approximately \$100 million from the people of Nicaragua. Much of this money came from misappropriated Hurricane Mitch relief.

Alemán's vice president, the unremarkable Enrique Bolaños, was elected in 2001 after running on an anticorruption platform. His efforts to clean up the PLC alienated its leadership, and when he was kicked out of the PLC, he formed his own party, called APRE (Alliance for the Republic). Bolaños — who received more support from the outside world and international institutions than from his own party — is remembered as an ineffectual president.

The years from 1990-2006 were characterized by the governance of neo-liberal policies in Nicaragua and the dominance of International Monetary Fund and World Bank poverty-reduction policies which called for slashing social spending and government workers' salaries, privatization of public institutions, and opening up the economy to free trade and international investment by offering tax breaks and turning a blind eye to labor law abuses. As of December 2011, more than 95,000 Nicaraguans were employed in free trade zone sweatshops.

The Second Coming of the Sandinistas

During the neoliberal years, the FSLN went through internal divisions wherein prominent leaders left the party to protest what they saw as Daniel's heavy-handed domination of the party. Former vice president Sergio Ramírez, *Comandante Dos Dora* María Téllez and Monica Baltodano, among others, founded the opposition party, the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS).



Current FLSN opposition includes Eduardo Montealegre and Comandante Dos Dora María Téllez

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The current FSLN government has made education free again

In the 2006 general elections, the MRS ran former Mayor of Managua Herty Lewites as its candidate for president, giving Daniel a run for his money and the Sandinista vote until Herty's sudden death just a few months before the elections. With the liberal vote divided between APRE candidate Eduardo Montealegre and PLC candidate José Rizo, Daniel won the Presidential election with 38% of the vote.

Since taking office, Daniel has instituted policies that some have called "Revolution Lite," softening his socialist agenda and maintaining good relations with the Nicaraguan and international business community. His presidency, however, has brought a jump in government-run social programs and better relations with other Latin American countries, most notably Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA).

Although Daniel's administration has been roundly criticized from many sectors, and politically the nation is divided, the government's poverty-reduction programs have made inroads, and their successes have caught the attention of the country. Meanwhile, leaders of the traditionally conservative business community have expressed frustration with opposition parties for not providing a better alternative, admitting that the Sandinista Party has understood people's needs and has provided free education and health care "while previous governments, stupidly, had charged fees for these services." One leader summed up the feeling in the country by noting that some of the services might be bad but "the poorest citizens in this country are thankful for them."

After widespread accusations of fraud in the 2008 municipal elections – to which the FSLN refused international observation – the Sandinista government lost a significant portion of international aid conditioned on institutionality and transparency.

2011 Presidential Elections

In 2010, just after one of its Liberal judges had died and the Court had a temporary FSLN majority, the Supreme Court ruled on a constitutionality issue related to Presidential re-election. In the Court's finding, the Constitution Article stating that the people have the right to choose their elected representatives overrides the article stating that Presidents can't hold consecutive terms, a decision that freed Daniel up



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to run for President in 2011. His opposition was divided, with convicted embezzler Alemán running on the PLC ticket again and octogenarian Fabio Gadea running on the Independent Liberal Party (PLI) ticket with Edmundo Jarquin of the MRS as vice-presidential candidate ...“*el viejo y el feo*” (the old man and the ugly guy). Leading up to the elections, the opposition fumbled for an attractive platform, finally settling on something that amounted to “we’ll do what the FSLN has been doing, but better;” an alternative that, unsurprisingly, failed to galvanize the opposition vote.

In November 2011, 75% of registered voters went to the polls and re-elected Daniel in a landslide with 62.66% of the vote. Of the five parties on the ballot, the closest opposition was the PLI, trailing behind



Protesting Nov 2011 Presidential elections

with just 31.13% of the vote. The PLI immediately alleged “monstrous fraud,” claiming that they should have gotten more than 50% of the vote. Their supporters caravanned and blocked roads in protests that were mostly confined to the wealthy neighborhoods of Managua. In northern Nicaragua there were three incidences of politically-related violence from both opposition and FLSN, resulting in four deaths and dozens of injuries, including the hospitalization of seven police officers.

The PLI claimed that on election day, their designated poll watchers were not allowed into 20% of the polling places, but had difficulties in saying exactly how the fraud they alleged took place. Election observers who did independent quick counts of the vote – including the Organization of American States (OAS) and the National Council of Universities, which was accredited as a Nicaraguan observer group with 20,000 participants all over the country — reported that their counts matched official numbers. All opinion polls in months, weeks and days before the elections showed very similar results to the official vote tally. Many people who had never voted for the FSLN before voted for Ortega. “This doesn’t mean that these people are no longer *Liberales* or Independents,” said one journalist, “but they are saying ‘I like your programs, I’ll give you another chance.’”

Overall, Nicaraguans feel that the situation has improved since 2007 – just one week before the elections polls showed that 70.4% of the populace thought the country was on the right track. “Things are visibly better,” said one Managuan. “There are new taxis, new buses, transport and electrical subsidies, and fewer people are emigrating.” Additionally, 72.9% said Ortega’s government gives them hope, 70.4% said health care had improved, 71.7% said education had improved, and 45.3% said poverty was down. It’s hard to compete with those numbers.



Daniel Ortega’s 2012 inauguration attended by Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez and Iran’s Ahmadinejad

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Nicaragua-U.S. Relations

Nicaragua conquered

Nicaragua has always been the conquered not the conqueror. It has suffered under foreign control and repressive dictatorships, and has always been used for the benefit of foreign countries or, perhaps more accurately, foreign business. Helped by disgruntled Nicaraguans, the U.S. has influenced the course of Nicaraguan history, beginning just 29 years after Nicaragua finally gained its independence from Spain.



In 1850 the U.S. and Great Britain signed a treaty that granted the two countries access to an inter-oceanic trade through Nicaragua – without Nicaragua’s consent. In 1854, U.S. forces burned and shelled a city in the north of Nicaragua. In 1855, William Walker, a U.S. citizen, came to Nicaragua. Funded mainly by the U.S. Southern States, he captured the capital of Granada, declared himself president, sought U.S. annexation as a state, and sanctioned slavery in Nicaragua.

And that was just the beginning: through 31 U.S. administrations, the United States has been in and out of Nicaragua militarily, economically, politically, and whenever possible exercising out-and-out control.

Military-Business Intervention

The power dynamic that has characterized U.S. – Nicaragua relations for a century and a half was formalized under U.S. President Teddy Roosevelt when the Roosevelt Corollary was added to the Monroe Doctrine in 1904, asserting the right of the United States to intervene in Latin American nations’ internal affairs for the purpose of furthering U.S. commercial interests.

EXECUTION OF AMERICANS WAS BY ORDER OF ZELAYA

Nicaraguan Government Informed That This Country Will Not Tol- erate Such Offenses.

Washington, Nov. 20.—Official confirmation of the execution of Leroy Cannon and Leonard Groce, Americans, by the Zelayan government in Nicaragua, was followed by a statement from the Nicaraguan legation here justifying the action on the ground that the men confessed to placing mines in order to blow up two vessels carrying government troops.

The state department received a telegram from the American vice consul at Managua, saying the Nicaraguan minister for foreign affairs had informed him that the Americans who were executed on November 11 had confessed to laying mines in the San Juan river with the object of blowing up Nicaraguan ships.

The American vice consul said the case was unprecedented, and that the commander-in-chief of the Nicaraguan troops and the minister general opposed the execution, which was ordered by President Zelaya.

Secretary Knox has called the American vice consul at Managua for information, stating that the Nicaraguan charge here had been asked for full information of the affair and announcing that the United States government would not tolerate such treatment of Americans.

The protected cruiser Tacoma has been ordered to proceed from Guantanamo, Cuba, to Cristobal, Panama, to be in position to co-operate with the protected

cruiser Des Moines, which is expected to arrive at Fort Lison. The gunboat Mar- tinez will be ordered to sail to Fort Li- son within a day or two.

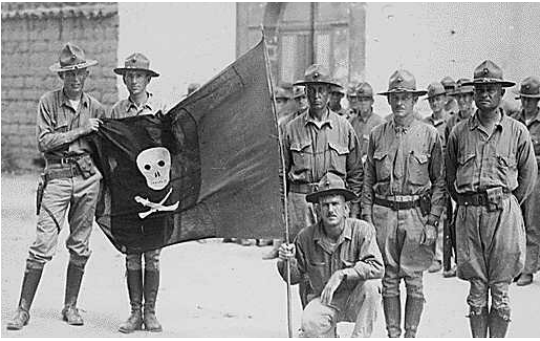
St. Paul, Minn., Nov. 20.—That Leonard Groce and Leroy Cannon, the Amer- icans who were put to death in Nicaragua by order of President Zelaya, were ex- ecuted after a fair trial by court-martial

was the information received by State Senator George H. Sullivan of St. Paul today in a cablegram from James M. Hall, a former Stillwater man, who for the last eight years has been engaged in mining in Nicaragua. Mr. Hall's cable- gram says:

"Groce and Cannon were caught with dynamite and a dynamite machine in their possession, with which they intend- ed to blow up a government transport containing 500 men. They were given a fair trial by court-martial and after con- fessing their guilt were executed. Both wrote letters to their families confessing their guilt."

In Latin America, this dynamic has often resulted in U.S. military interventions coinciding with U.S. businesses financing convenient “rebellions.” For example, while the U.S. military sent troops to aid the uprising against nationalist president Zelaya in 1909, U.S. businesses bankrolled the revolt [see *José Santos Zelaya*]. Rebel leader General Estrada later confessed to the *New York Times* that he’d been given \$200,000 by Joseph Beers, \$150,000 by Samuel Weil and that United Fruit Company ships had carried men and ammunition for the “liberators.” U.S. Secretary of State Philander C. Knox – who severed diplomatic ties with Nicaragua after Zelaya executed two U.S. mercenaries caught in the country – was also a legal adviser to the Fletcher family who owned several mining operations in Nicaragua.

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U.S. Marines holding Sandino's flag

U.S. Marines Birth *La Guardia*

In the 20th century, U.S. marines invaded Nicaragua a total of 14 times. United States Marines occupied Nicaragua from 1912 to 1933, except for a nine-month period in 1925-26 when another violent conflict arose between liberals and conservatives known as the Constitutionalist War, which resulted in a coalition government and the return of U.S.

Marines. By 1933, the Great Depression and long guerilla war with Sandino convinced the U.S. to withdraw military forces definitively, but they left in place a proxy force. Before departing, U.S. Marines set up, trained and equipped the *Guardia Nacional* (National Guard), a combined military and police force designed to be loyal to U.S. interests. General Anastasio Somoza García, a close ally of the U.S. government, was put in charge of the *Guardia*.

Shortly after the Marines left, General Somoza declared a coup and began the 43-year dictatorship which passed from father to son to brother. The Somozas had the support of the U.S. through eight administrations – three Republican and five Democratic – right through disappearances, torture, assassinations and bombing of Nicaragua's cities. As President Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "Somoza is an SOB, but he's **our** SOB."

Supporting Somoza

The Somozas remained in power through a combination of ruthless suppression at home and compliance toward the United States. With 90% of its exports going to the United States, Nicaragua was in some respects an economic appendage of the larger country. Somoza protected U.S. business interests in Nicaragua and was vociferously anti-communist. The United States sent the Somozas military assistance until early 1979, just a few months before the Sandinista Triumph.

As part of the Somoza-U.S. partnership, the U.S. was allowed to use Nicaragua as staging grounds for CIA invasions into Guatemala and Cuba, and Nicaragua contributed small forces to participate in the U.S. occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1965, as well as troops to fight in Korea and Vietnam. In exchange for the support, the U.S. gave millions of dollars of aid to Nicaragua for social and economic projects; however, there is ample evidence that Somoza and accomplices were stealing much of the aid. The U.S. also offered military support to Nicaragua, and by the end of the Somoza era the National Guard was the most heavily U.S.-trained military establishment in Latin America.



Somoza rally 1978

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Reagan and the Contras

When the Sandinistas came to power in 1979, the U.S. offered a timid hand of friendship in the form of diplomatic recognition and emergency relief aid. The CIA, however, sent DC-8 jets disguised with Red Cross stripes to evacuate Somoza's officer corps to Miami. When Ronald Reagan came into office in 1980, relations between the two countries became another front in the Cold War. The Reagan administration claimed the Sandinistas were a "Communist threat" and were arming rebels in El Salvador. These claims furthered the administration's desire to protect U.S. interests in the region, interests which were purportedly threatened by the socialist policies of the Sandinista government. Over the next decade, Reagan and his successor George H.W. Bush remained intensely involved in Nicaragua.



1980: Reagan terminates the remaining balance of a \$75 million loan to Nicaragua



U.S. resupplying Contras 1984

1981: Increasingly unhappy with the FSLN, the U.S. began to harass Nicaragua through indirect military pressure in Honduras and intensive espionage of Nicaragua. Other Central American countries were pressured – through military threats and offers of U.S. aid – to isolate Nicaragua diplomatically.

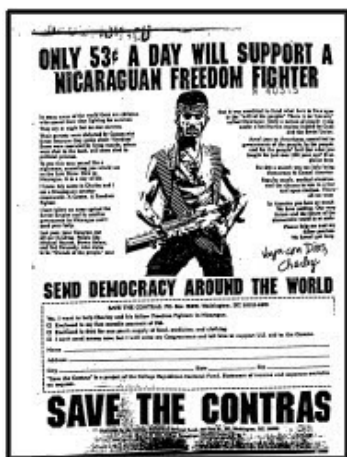
1982: Reagan gave the CIA \$19.8 million to enlarge and support the Contras.

1983: American pressure against the Sandinistas escalated, including attacks on Nicaraguan ports and oil installations and the laying of magnetic mines outside Nicaraguan harbors.

1983: Faith-based peace activists founded Witness for Peace (WFP) in response to the U.S. funding of the Contras. Over the course of the decade, WFP sent thousands of Americans to Nicaragua to witness the devastating effects of U.S.-sponsored "low intensity warfare" and WFP activists across the U.S. contributed to the effort to cut off U.S. military aid to the Contras.

1984: U.S. Congress ordered U.S. intervention in Nicaragua to stop, however it was later shown that the CIA illegally continued. A CIA Contra training manual in psychological operations was leaked to the media. The manual recommended "neutralizing" government officials including judges, police officials, and tax collectors.





1985: On May 1 Reagan issued an executive order imposing a full economic embargo on Nicaragua, which remained in force until March 1990.

1986: The International Court of Justice heard *Nicaragua vs. United States* and found that the U.S. had violated international law by supporting Contra guerrillas which included U.S. agents being directly involved in the fighting, and by mining Nicaragua's harbors and setting fire to its largest oil storage facilities. The U.S. refused to pay restitution and claimed that the ICJ was not competent to judge the case. The U.S. has never paid restitutions.

1986: Eugene Hasenfus is shot down over Nicaragua while delivering supplies to the Contras for the CIA. The Iran-Contra scandal breaks [see *Iran-Contra Affair*].

1987: The Reagan Administration pressed the Contras to intensify their offensive in Nicaragua, bringing the war to a destructive peak.

1988: In March, the Sandinistas and Contras signed the Sapoa ceasefire. Subsequent agreements were designed to reintegrate the Contras and their supporters into Nicaraguan society in preparation for general elections.

1989: The death toll for the Contra war was over 43,000 Nicaraguans and direct U.S. aid to the Contras totaled over \$400 million.

One for the textbooks

Former State Department official William Blum, has written that the Pentagon considered U.S. policy in Nicaragua to be a “blueprint for successful U.S. intervention in the Third World” and it would go “right into the textbooks.” What exactly is this model?

According to Blum and Colombian writer and former diplomat Clara Nieto it involved:

- American pilots flying combat missions against Nicaraguan troops
- Carrying supplies to contras inside Nicaragua. Several operatives were shot down and killed.
- Flying in civilian clothes, after having been told that they would be disavowed by the Pentagon if captured.
- Contras told American congressmen that they were ordered to claim responsibility for a bombing raid organized by the CIA and flown by Agency mercenaries.
- Attacking Puerto Corinto, Nicaragua's largest port, with mortars, rockets and grenades, blowing up five oil storage tanks. The fire burned for 2 days, more than 100 people were injured, and 23,000 were evacuated.



Suggestions for overthrowing the Sandinista government, authored & distributed by the CIA in Nicaragua

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Neoliberal Collusion

Throughout the 1990's the U.S. continued to back corrupt political leaders that led Nicaragua further into debt and away from economic and social stability. More recently, the

instigation of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) has created more strife between the U.S. and Nicaragua. Supporters of CAFTA claim that it opens new markets to U.S. manufacturers, while helping Central American nations modernize their economies, create worker rights protections that will enforce and improve labor laws and improve environmental standards.

The opposition claims that CAFTA causes local businesses to be crowded out and Central American consumers will be forced into U.S. product dependency. Economist Joseph Stiglitz, who supports free trade, argues that CAFTA increases poverty because it prematurely opens markets to the U.S. agriculture goods which are subsidized, making local farmers unable to compete with imports. He also argues that the agreements were made from unbalanced negotiating positions and therefore do not result in free-trade agreements. CAFTA was signed into effect in Nicaragua on April 1, 2006.



2001 election propaganda in Nicaragua equating Ortega with terrorism

“How is it possible for the United States to talk so much about democracy and then try to intimidate the people of Nicaragua to go to the polls with a pistol at their heads?... We did not lose 5,000 people like in New York, we lost 50,000 in a war that was invented, organized, armed and financed by the United States.”

— Father Miguel D’Escoto, November 2001

Free and Fair

Throughout the long history of its involvement in Nicaragua, the U.S. has actively influenced presidential elections. Most recently, in the 2006 and 2011 elections, the U.S. sought to unite Liberal opposition to the Sandinistas because a divided opposition can’t beat Daniel Ortega. In 2010, U.S. ambassador in Nicaragua, Robert Callahan was caught brokering a meeting between the Liberal factions. The Sandinista Youth came out in force, throwing rocks at Callahan’s armored Mercedes and later

protested in front of the embassy, shooting fireworks launchers at the new \$700 million building and breaking out one of the \$6,000-each “bomb proof” windows in the CIA offices. Although the U.S. claimed not to have a preferred candidate in the 2011 elections, representatives began claiming fraud more than 10 months before the election. Post-election, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the U.S. would carefully review all of its cooperation with Nicaragua in light of doubts shed on Nicaragua’s “commitment to democracy” by the 2011 elections. In June 2012 the State Department denied Nicaragua’s transparency waiver, effectively cancelling \$3 million in aid and the U.S.’s vote for World Bank, IMF and IADB cooperation. Immediately Nicaraguan politicians of all stripes began to protest that the U.S. was meddling in Nicaragua’s internal affairs. Former Contra and ex-Vice President Jaime Morales said the announcement amounted to serious outside interference.

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Iran Contra Affair

The Low-Down

Between 1982 and 1984 U.S. legislators passed the Boland Amendment, which prohibited further direct U.S. aid to the Contras, forcing the Reagan administration to find alternative financing for the counterrevolutionary guerrillas in Nicaragua. Senior Reagan officials started a project they called “the Enterprise,” cooking up a scheme to sell arms to Iran – in violation of a U.S. arms embargo – and use the funds to arm and train the Contras.



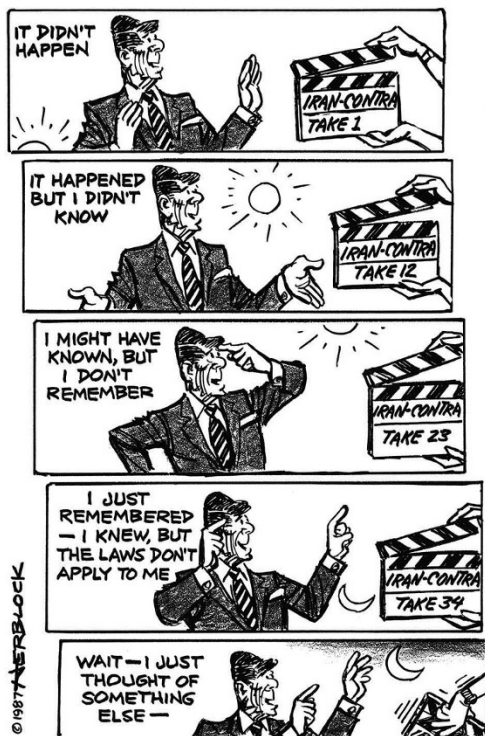
The original idea was to enlist the help of Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres who would ship arms through an intermediary to a “moderate Iranian political group” opposed to the Ayatollah. Once the Iranians had received arms, the U.S. would sell the same weapons to Israel, receive payment and pass it along to the Contras.

Then, while Reagan was recovering from colon cancer surgery, the Iranians approached the U.S. wanting to establish a quiet relationship, and to demonstrate their sincerity they offered to persuade Hezbollah terrorists to release the seven U.S. hostages being held. Reagan agreed, which he later argued was an

attempt to forge a tactical relationship with Iran before the Soviets could beat him to the punch. But – in Reagan’s own words – “what began as a strategic opening to Iran deteriorated, in its implementation, into trading arms for hostages.” Over the next 18 months, “the Enterprise” morphed into the direct sale of arms – without the use of Israel as intermediary – straight to the Iranian government.

The Shake Down

What happened to the hostages? Only five of them were eventually released, though captors promised to release the remaining two. Hezbollah, however, began kidnapping new hostages following the release of the previous ones, exposing another weakness of the arms-for-hostages plan. Additionally, in December 1985 – six months after the first sale of arms – a plane carrying 250 American servicemen crashed in Newfoundland. Responsibility for the crash was claimed by the wing of Hezbollah that had taken credit for the kidnapping of the Americans.



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The Take Down

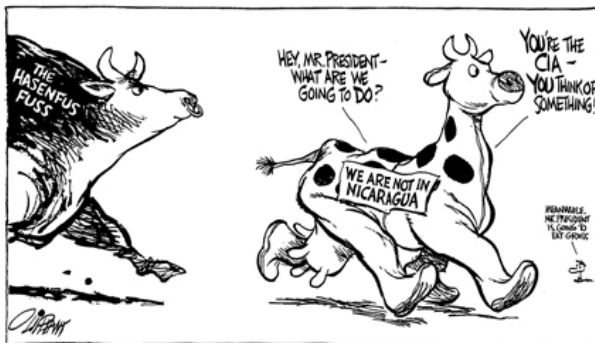
If it hadn't been for a couple of young Nicaraguan soldiers who had a lucky shot with anti-aircraft artillery, the scandal might never have been discovered. On October 5, 1986, Sandinista soldiers shot down a cargo plane flying in Nicaraguan airspace on a resupply mission for the Contras. Two pilots and a radio operator died in the crash, but Eugene Hasenfus parachuted to safety and was captured by the Sandinista Army. Hasenfus was an unemployed construction worker from Wisconsin working as a cargo handler for the CIA. Hasenfus' testimony and evidence found on the plane put investigators on the trail that eventually uncovered the Iran-Contra arms connection. In November 1986, a Lebanese magazine published the first piece exposing the weapons-for-hostages deal, and the scandal erupted.



Capture of CIA cargo handler Eugene Hasenfus

The Break Down

It's been impossible to prove how much President Reagan actually knew about the ins and outs of the arms deals. The two major U.S. government investigations into the scandal could only conclude that the President ought to have better control over his staff and should have been aware of their actions, and ultimately the Teflon President survived the scandal.



Along with National Security Adviser Admiral John Poindexter, Lt. Col. Oliver North, a military aide to the National Security Council, was indicted and subsequently convicted. During the North trial, some of the more colorful testimony came from North's Secretary, Fawn Hall, who not only testified that while facilitating a wire donation from the Sultan of Brunei to the Contras, she transposed the numbers of North's Swiss bank account with those of a Swiss businessman who alerted the authorities when he suddenly found himself \$10 million

richer, but she also admitted to helping her boss shred so many official documents that the government shredder jammed. Both Poindexter and North had their convictions overturned on appeals. At the end of his term in office, George H. W. Bush pardoned six more officials, and George W. Bush recycled many of those same people for high-level posts in his own administration.

Historian Howard Zinn noted that, to date, only one person has been imprisoned as a result of the Iran-Contra affair: Bill Breeden, an

activist who stole the sign for John Poindexter Street in Poindexter's hometown in Indiana and held it for a ransom of \$30 million.

"If the President did not know what his national security advisers were doing, he should have."

– 1987 Congressional Report on Iran Contra Affair

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Current Situation:

...Runner up for the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere...



Photo: Joyce Pulcini

Working in the Managua garbage dump

Economy

Economists wishing to disprove the idea that neoliberal policies are effective in reducing poverty need look no further than the Nicaraguan example. When Violeta Chamorro took office in 1990, the country had just lost 43,000 citizens, endured seven years of economic embargo and suffered \$178 billion in

infrastructure damage from the Contra War (*Stanford University*). Doña Violeta's administration immediately welcomed back the World Bank and International Monetary Fund and began following their prescription for poverty reduction which translated into the absolute reversal of Revolutionary policies implemented by the Sandinista government. Under the direction of these international institutions, fees were implemented for public health care and education services, every state-run enterprise (with the notable exception of the water company) was sold off at fire sale prices to foreign companies, social spending and government workers' salaries were drastically cut, and the economy was opened up to free trade and international investment by offering tax breaks and turning a blind eye to labor law abuses. Sources of credit to cooperatives, farmers and small businesses disappeared almost completely, and they were forced to take out loans at astronomical interest rates from unregulated microfinance institutions; many lost their land through loan default. By the time Nicaragua surfaced from the 16-year neoliberal rule at the end of 2006, it was the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, \$6.5 billion in debt (much of it to those same international institutions), 1/5 of the population had no access to health care, nearly 1/5 of the population was illiterate, more than a quarter of a million children were working, and there were nearly 1 million children not enrolled in school.

Emerging from the Neoliberal Nightmare

2003 Public debt **78% of GDP**
2010 Public debt **62% of GDP**
2003 Education expenditures **3.1% of GDP**
2010 Education expenditures **5.4% of GDP**
2006 **Economic growth 3.7%**
2011 **Economic growth 4.8%**
2007 **literacy: 83.5%**
2009 **literacy: 97%**
2007-2011 **workers in the formal sector** increased by 79% to 572,000
2007-2011 **registered employers** in the country increased by 57% to 22,000
2009-2010 Nicaraguans in **moderate poverty dropped** by 0.2% to 44.5%; in rural areas dropped by 5% to 62.8%
2009-2010 Nicaraguans in **extreme poverty dropped** by 0.7% to 9.0%; in rural areas dropped by 2.3% to 15.9%
2007-2011 **maternal mortality** was reduced by 60%
2010 World Bank *Doing Business*: **Nicaragua is safest country for foreign investors** in the region
2010 Economist Intelligence Unit: **Nicaragua 2nd safest country** in region

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Five years later, Nicaragua is still the second poorest country in the Western hemisphere with depressing social indicators, but many of those indicators have actually crept upwards in the last few years, showing enough progress that even the harshest critics of the Ortega administration's combination of big business-friendly policies and social safety net expansion have to admit that the overall effect has been more positive than anyone predicted.



The Zero Hunger program gives rural families chickens, pigs and cows

After much hoopla over whether or not Ortega would confiscate property and scare off international investment upon taking office, foreign investments have actually grown and in the World Bank's *Doing Business 2010* showed Nicaragua was the safest country in the isthmus for foreign investment. Early on in the "Sandinista Lite" administration, Nicaragua joined the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA), the leftist governments of the South's answer to U.S.-imposed free trade agreements. Petro dollars from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez have allowed for the creation of several privately-owned companies that have bankrolled social investments from electricity generation to oil refinement and have softened the blow of the U.S. and European-centered recession on ALBA countries – in 2011 the Nicaraguan economy experienced a 4.8% growth, the highest in Central America. Additionally, after having left Central America in search of cheaper wages in Asia at mid decade, U.S. textile companies are now returning to the region due to its proximity to U.S. markets, and new companies are opening up attracted by high productivity and low wages. At the end of 2011 there were more than 95,000 people working in the Nicaraguan free trade zones.

New alliances with Venezuela, Cuba, Russia and Iran have kept international aid up even as struggling European countries withdraw their aid under the auspices of questionable electoral transparency, preferring to direct their aid toward African countries where China's increasing influence is worrying

Western governments. In addition to its near-immediate declaration of the removal of fees for public health services and education upon entering office, government social programs – in part funded by ALBA – have been prolific and wide-spread: low-cost housing, low-interest loans, roofs, livestock and food production, food baskets, backpacks and shoes for school children, blankets during a cold wave...the list is long. While many have criticized the government of "Peace, Love and Life" for paternalistic freebie programs that create dependency, government officials argue that you can't have true democracy when people are hungry; you must first make sure people have enough food to eat, then the country can progress. Nicaragua still has a long way to go...but it appears to be inching in the right direction.



Receiving free roofing material through the government's Plan Roof in Matagalpa

Education

Most public schools in Nicaragua are crowded and they run shifts, 7:00 AM-12:00 PM for elementary children and 1-5:00 PM for middle and high schoolers. During the neoliberal years (1990-2006) children had to pay tuition, exam fees and other fees which prevented many children from attending school. With the goal of allowing more children to attend school, the Ortega administration has made it illegal to charge fees for classes, made uniforms optional, distributed hundreds of thousands of backpacks and shoes and feeds nearly 1 million school children one hot meal per day. Parents who once had to decide between sending their child to school and having them go hungry or sending them to work so they could eat now don't have to make that decision – they can send them to school *and* they eat. In recent years the number of elementary age children working has dropped, but during school vacations, thousands of children swarm back to work; the most visible ones you'll see selling water, begging and washing windows at stoplights.



While the majority of school age children do attend school, many repeat grades – on average it takes 11 years to complete the first 6 grades – and 71% don't finish the 6th grade. The government has declared a “Battle for the 6th Grade” based on studies that show those children finishing 6th grade are more likely to go on to high school; in turn, those finishing high school are more likely to go on to college. Currently only 3% of all Nicaraguans have graduated from university. While a lot of effort is being made, there

aren't always budget allocations to match – public schools continue to be overcrowded and deficient in basic equipment – 35,000 desks were lacking at the start of the 2011 school year. Since 2007, school curriculum has been overhauled, updated textbooks are being printed and for the first time ever being written in indigenous languages. Public school teachers are being trained in new methods and every public school teacher in the country spends one day per month at in service trainings.



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Health

During the neo-liberal era, health care was partially privatized – patients who couldn't afford private care were left waiting in agony, the lucky ones scheduled for surgery were required to buy the necessary surgical supplies such as gauze, pain reliever and injections.

Access to emergency care services in Ciudad Sandino has changed dramatically since 2007, where the only 24-hour care emergency care facility is a small public hospital known as the “Hospitalito.” Under the partially privatized health care of the neoliberal era, only one

small area of the Hospitalito was open, while additional buildings remained empty, and the facility was perpetually out of stock of even basic medicines and equipment such as aspirin and gloves to examine patients. More often than not, patients were told there was nothing to be done for them at the



Photo: Greg Ewert

Snapshot of Health

The principle causes of death in Nicaragua are all preventable: diarrhea, acute respiratory diseases, accidents and malnutrition.

- **8.8 hospital beds / 10,000 people**
- Life expectancy: 70/ men;74/women
- **1 out of every 3 children** suffers from chronic malnutrition
- **Infant mortality rate** is 22 per 1,000
- Infant mortality rate **decreased by 42%** in the past 20 years
- **Maternal mortality** is 230/100,000 live births compared to $\leq 10/100,000$ live births in U.S.
- 60% of maternal deaths **occur outside hospitals**
- 2007-11 **maternal mortality reduced by 60%**
- **28% of all women give birth before age 18**
- The total **fertility rate has decreased by 40%** in the past 40 years (1970: 6.9, 1990: 4.8, 2010: 2.6)
- 98% of urban households have access to safe, clean drinking water
- **Only 68% of all rural households have access to safe, clean drinking water**

Hospitalito, and family members of the sick would commonly be outside the hospital gates begging passersby for taxi fare to take their loved ones into a hospital in Managua.

Today, the Hospitalito is a bustling place with not only emergency care but also outpatient care, laboratory services and limited specialty services. One of the buildings which before sat empty now houses Operation Miracle, an ophthalmological initiative funded by Venezuela and staffed with Cuban doctors that has performed more than 90,000 cataract surgeries in five years. Another building is used for regular physical therapy sessions with developmentally and physically disabled children. For those with conditions that can't be treated at the Hospitalito, there is an ambulance to transport patients to hospitals in Managua. As is true around the country, the new emphasis on health since 2007 has improved public care in Ciudad Sandino drastically, but it is still underfunded and inadequate.

The total annual health expenditure is \$254 per capita, with the public health expenditure only able to cover approximately 20% of health care costs. Secondary health care such as dentistry and optometry are virtually non-existent for the majority of Nicaraguans. With the 65% of the population working in the informal sector, health insurance is a luxury that most Nicaraguans will never know.



Photo: Joyce Pulcini



Employment

The minimum wages established by the Nicaraguan government vary by sector and are re-negotiated each year among unions, the private sector and the Ministry of Labor. Current minimum wages vary between \$91 per month plus meals in the agricultural sector and \$210 per month in construction. 65% of the working population is employed in the informal sector, however, and are paid less than minimum wage with no benefits. The basic food basket – the cost of maintaining a family of four for one month – is currently valued at \$445, far out of the reach of most Nicaraguans.

The extreme economic situation has drawn the attention of many companies from the

U.S., Taiwan, Korea and Europe, who set up manufacturing areas known as free trade zones. In August 2011, minimum wage in the free trade zones was set at \$141 per month. However, often these workers are forced to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and are even timed for restroom breaks. Still, those who work in the free trade zones are considered lucky, because those who are left are forced to find jobs in the informal sector of the economy, washing windshields, selling tortillas on the sidewalk, selling water on the street, or working as a day laborer in construction. This means no insurance, no regular salary, and no job security.

Even when jobs are available, a long day's labor might earn \$4.35 a day. Meanwhile a pound of beans costs \$0.55, a pound of rice \$0.48, a cup of cooking oil costs \$0.40, enough firewood to cook a meal costs \$1 and transport to work can cost \$0.60. **For many, after working a long day and feeding their family only one meal, they are left with 30 cents.**

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Getting to know Nicaragua

Managua...where the streets have no name

Described in one (highly unrecommended) guidebook as “grimier than grimy, uglier than ugly, and hotter than hell,” Managua is a city that has done little to sell out to tourism and the business of impressing rich gringos.

The capital city of over one million sprawls out in many directions. After the city center was destroyed in the earthquake in 1972, there was little enthusiasm or money applied toward rebuilding it (Somoza blatantly stole the aid that poured into the country). Therefore, you are left with a city where development proceeded haphazardly without a commercial center, where houses sit in the backyard of a brand new American style shopping center, and horses graze in the grassy areas between the road near the old city center, all without the aid of street names to help navigate the chaos. But before you conjure too many images of livestock on the loose, Managua – the greenest capital in Latin America – has remained the commercial center of Nicaragua and has continued to grow, however irregularly, especially along the southwestern side. There are cyber cafes, several malls, many restaurants, and bars for drinking and clubbing.

To find the charm in Managua it is necessary to do a little exploring. Universities offer a hip insight to Nicaraguan urban youth and culture. Several parks are scattered throughout Managua, including Malécon, which is on the shore of Lake Managua and the Sunday afternoon hangout for many Nicaraguan families. There is also Parque Tiscapa which has a nice view of the city and is the home to the giant silhouette of Sandino visible from many parts of the city.

Ciudad Sandino

Before it was home to over 150,000 people, Ciudad Sandino was just used up cotton fields owned by the Somozas. In 1968, there was a flood and many of the people who lived along the lakeshore in Managua lost their homes. They were moved to those fields and sold the plots of land.

The Managua earthquake of 1972 forced another quarter of a million homeless Managuans to relocate. Thousands were moved to the same cotton fields, the refugee community named OPEN 3 (Permanent National Emergency Operation 3). Here, the refugees tried to rebuild their lives without access to basic services such as water, electricity and transport. They were still expected to make regular payments on





their land, and if they missed just one, they would have to restart their payment from the beginning. In this context, residents of OPEN 3 began to organize themselves to fight for services, beginning with a march on Managua to demand a cemetery when 6 month old baby Carolina Calero died and there was no place to bury her. During the insurrection, OPEN 3 was a hotbed of Sandinista activity. Somoza's National Guard effectively shut down schools run by progressive nuns stationing armed *Guardia* outside the gates; kept from getting an education, many young boys joined the insurrectionists to overthrow the dictator.

In 1979, after the fall of Somoza, the community was renamed Ciudad Sandino. The government continued to move displaced people to the community, and Ciudad Sandino slowly stretched out with the new makeshift homes of the poorest people from Managua.



Then, in 1998, Hurricane Mitch hit the region. In Managua, 15,000 refugees from the lakeshore were moved to a cow pasture on the edge of Ciudad Sandino. Each new family was given a plot of land measuring less than 10 yards by 15 yards, four poles, and a large piece of black plastic to make themselves a home. This refugee camp was called Nueva Vida. In 2001, Ciudad Sandino became its own municipality, separate from Managua. The biggest challenge this brought is providing city services on a miniscule budget: the city collects just \$2.30 per person per year in tax revenue.

What to look forward to...

-No street names...addresses are given as references to the location of well-known landmarks — or where they used to be — and number of blocks in any of four cardinal directions: *sur*, *lago* (toward the lake, north), *arriba* (where the sun comes up, east) or *abajo* (where the sun goes down, west). Ex. *de donde fue la Pepsi una cuadra abajo*.

-Mototaxis...In Ciudad Sandino, if it's not a quick walk then the most efficient way to get there is by mototaxi — they charge C\$10 and are never more than a few steps away.

-Drinking out of plastic baggies...Many vendors sell their *refresco* in plastic bags with a straw. If there's no straw, just tear in with your teeth and suck away.

-No skyscrapers...After the earthquake in 1972, Managua was rebuilt as a sprawling single-story city. It is, however, the greenest capital in Latin America with many trees.

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Simultaneously, a population of more than 150,000 is nestled tightly into an infrastructure designed for no more than 40,000 people. At 7,750 people per square mile, Ciudad Sandino is the most densely populated area in Nicaragua. That is comparable to Detroit, MI, except that Ciudad Sandino has no multistory buildings. 80% of the population is unemployed or lacks a formal job, making Ciudad Sandino also the poorest urban population in Nicaragua.

Still lacking water and electricity on a regular basis, the city is not able to survive on the resources at its own disposal and must search for outside funds and aid. Countries such as Japan have done much to help improve the schools of Ciudad Sandino. The European Union (EU) has provided funds to improve the city's infrastructure, which is susceptible to natural disasters, as well as a sewer project to connect the majority of the city's residents to a sewage system for the first time.

Hurricane Mitch

On October 29, 1998, Hurricane Mitch moved over Nicaragua and Honduras and remained essentially static over the next six days, dumping more than 10 feet of water. Mitch was the second deadliest Atlantic hurricane in history, killing more than 11,000 people and leaving 2.7 million homeless. In Nicaragua, one of the most tragic events during Mitch was a lahar or mudslide in the folds of Las Casitas Volcano that was 10 miles long and 5 miles wide and buried four entire villages alive under several feet of mud. Across the country, 2 million people were affected by Mitch and overall damage topped \$1 billion. Homes, schools, health centers, sewer and electrical systems were destroyed, 70% of the country's roads were impassable, 71 bridges were destroyed. Small farmers were badly hit — 50,000 animals were killed and most crops were completely lost — and arable topsoil was buried under several feet of clay. Many farmers had taken out loans against their crops and were unable to make payments after the hurricane; hundreds lost their farms as banks moved quickly to foreclose. In addition, 75,000 live land mines planted by the Contras in the 1980's that had been identified and were in the process of being destroyed by the Army were uprooted and washed to unknown locations by flooding waters. Although relief aid poured into the country, then-President Alemán took a page from the book of his former boss Somoza and misappropriated much of the aid, hoarding it in government warehouses and later selling it or distributing it to his allies.



Above: Mudslide 10 miles long & 5 miles wide on Las Casitas volcano; Below: Nueva Vida began with a sea of black plastic tents

A Day in the Life

Food

Most Nicaraguans exist on the staple food, *gallo pinto* – red beans and rice – which is often eaten three times a day. Several other foods you will be likely to come across are *maduro*, deep fried plantain, which offers a sticky sweetness as opposed to its greener cousin *platano verde*, which is the less ripe, boiled version and the crunchy *tajada* plantain chips. You will also run across a common version of farmer's cheese, often called *cuajada* and served alongside your *gallo pinto*. Nicaragua, too, has its version of tortilla, corn based and thicker than Mexican style corn tortillas. Because of its cost, meat is a rarity, but don't be shocked to eat the family chicken.



The drinks are likely to impress. Filled with sugar, *refresco* offers a variety of local fruits pulverized into a drinkable fashion, and accompanies most meals. There is also *cacao* which is a cocoa bean based drink. *Pinolillo* is the national drink made of milled corn and cocoa. If all else fails, there is certain to be an ice cream vendor on every corner, ringing his bells and announcing the arrival of ice cream, an international treat.



Family

In Nicaragua the bonds of a family are very strong. But if you try to actually figure out how everyone in a house is related, good luck. It is not unusual to find many generations extended in all directions living under the same roof, or very near each other. It took one volunteer staying with a family in Ciudad Sandino weeks to figure out which of the children that passed in and out of the house were the actual grandchildren of her host mother; every child in the neighborhood called her *abuelita* (grandmother).

Children,
more
specifically

girls, are expected to participate in helping around the house early on, and you'll find them washing, mopping, and caring for younger siblings.

Family loyalty is also obvious in the amount of remittances that are sent back to Nicaragua yearly, totaling over US\$1 billion dollars and supporting 900,000 Nicaraguans annually.



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Women

Women have played a vital role in the shaping of Nicaragua. Prominent members of the revolution, women were the champions of many progressive rights in the 1980's. Despite their accomplishments, women still struggle for their place in today's society.

Women constitute half of the population, produce 40% of the national wealth and perform 50% of the work in the industrial, communication and service sectors. Still, they earn 30% less than men and own less than 10% of the land. Domestic violence is a huge issue in Nicaragua, and after many years of struggle, in January 2012 the National Assembly finally passed the Integrated Law Against Violence Towards Women. As of 2006, however, Nicaragua repealed the therapeutic abortion law that had been on the books for more than 100 years and allowed for abortion in cases that threaten the mother's life. Nicaragua is now one of only five countries in the world to outlaw therapeutic abortion.



Women often work in the informal sector, such as making food or taking in washing



Traditionally, women manage the household and are responsible for the well-being of their children. In times of economic need they are given a double burden. While their partners and husbands are unable to find appropriate work for men, women are forced to supplement the family income by taking in laundry, selling food on the streets, or getting a job at a *maquila*, sweatshop. While many men feel it is socially unacceptable to work in jobs outside of their trained profession, women are forced to fill these roles to feed their families. Women are obliged to work outside the home, while at the same time struggling to care for their family within.

During your stay in Nicaragua, you will have the chance to meet many strong Nicaraguan women who have creatively learned to use what little resources they have.

Communicating

Local Vocabulary:

In addition to all the regular Spanish that comes in handy, here are just a few Nicaraguan words you are likely to hear or use during your stay:

¡A la! General expression of surprise, mild concern or dismay; [non-offensive] short for the offensive *¡A la gran puta!*

Andar: to walk, to go, to be, to have...when in doubt about which verb to use in Nicaragua, go with *andar* every time. Ex. *Rogelio anda en Managua. Josefa anda enferma. Jessenia anda con lapiz y papel. ¿Andas con prisa?* (Are you in a hurry?)

Arrecho: Pissed off [slightly offensive]

Bolo: Drunk

Broder: Friend, brother, man

Chavalo/a and Chigüin/a: kid

Chocho: Cool, wow

Chele/a: a non-offensive way to refer to white foreigners or pale skinned Nicaraguans.

Chinelas: flip flops, sandals

Chunche: Thingamajig – useful for all nouns for which you don't know the Spanish

Dale pues: Okay, I agree, let's do that. Good conversation finisher.

Encachimbado: Really, really *arrecho*. [Offensive]

Guaro: general term for booze or alcoholic beverages

Gringo/a: Another way to remind you that you are foreign. Not offensive here.

Hombre: used as an expression like Americans use "man." *Si hombre!* Yeah man!

Jodido: n. Asshole, dude [non-offensive]; adj. screwed [non-offensive]

Maje: Dude, guy. Ex. *El maje anda bolo.*

No hay falla: No problem

Peso: no, it's not Mexico, but Nicas refer to cords as pesos, ex. *Esto vale cinco pesos.*

Pijudo: great, perfect, excellent

Pinche: cheapskate, stingy Ex. *¡No seas pinche!*

Puchica: Non-profane word to express strong sentiments (general replacement for *puta* in more polite informal settings) often used as in *¡A la gran puchica!*

Raid: Ride Ej. *Dame raid en tu camioneta.*

Tuani: Cool

Va pues: Okay then, see you, I agree.



Photo: Anna Fay

Body Language:

Nicaraguans have a very rich vocabulary of signs and gestures, here are some of the most common:

Nose Scrunch: similar to a face we make when there is a foul smell, signifies, *What? What do you want? Or What do you mean?*

Lip Point: Since its not polite to point with your finger, Nicaraguans point with their lips, puckering them in the direction of what they are referring to. The trick is, most people don't stop talking to point.

Finger Wag: a side to side wagging of index finger increases a simple verbal *no*, to a very serious *no*.

Downward Wave: can sometimes be mistaken as a shadow puppet show, this means *Come here*.

Wrist Snap: Done with the tips of thumb and middle finger joined, the index finger dangles loosely while the wrist is given several quick flicks. The snapping noise serves to emphasize whatever is being said, can also mean "Harsh" or to say "Woowee, that's good!" This is a good one to practice, because even the 2-year-olds are well-honed on their snapping skills.

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Recommended: Reading, Watching, Listening

Reading:

Jennifer Atlee-Loudon, [Red Thread: A Spiritual Journal of Accompaniment, Trauma and Healing](#)

Paul Dix & Pamela Fitzpatrick, [Nicaragua: Surviving the Legacy of U.S. Policy a beautiful photo testimony](#)

Gioconda Belli, [The Country under my Skin](#) or [The Inhabited Woman](#)

Forrest D Colburn, [My Car in Managua](#)

Envio – a Nicaraguan magazine with contributions from Nicaragua’s most astute political and economic analysts. Their website has back issues available online for free, dating back to 1981.

<http://www.envio.org.ni/index.en/>

Illich, Ivan “To Hell with Good Intentions”, 1968.

Joan Kruckewitt, [The Death of Ben Linder: The Story of a North American in Sandinista](#)

Nicanet -- a U.S.-Nicaragua solidarity organization that sends out weekly news updates on Nicaragua

<http://www.nicanet.org/>

Margaret Randall, [Sandino’s Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle](#)

Susan Meiselas, [Nicaragua photos of the Sandinista insurrection and triumph of the revolution](#)

Peter Rosset and John Vandermeer, [The Nicaragua Reader: Documents of a Revolution Under Fire](#)

Thomas Walker, [Nicaragua without Illusions](#)

Thomas Walker, [Living in the Shadow of the Eagle](#)

Howard Zinn & Mike Konopacki & Paul Buhle, [A People’s History of the American Empire](#), Chapter XI: Resurgence of Empire (*in comic book format*)

Watching:

- *Carla’s Song* (1996)
- *La Yuma* (2009) Camila Films, directed by Florence Jaugey
- *Sexto Sentido*, Puntos de Encuentro. an 80 episode teen *telenovela* about a group of young Nicaraguans Episodes with English subtitles:
http://sextosentidotv.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=1&Itemid=20
- *Contra Corriente*, Puntos de Encuentro. TV show life of a working class family
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSgEpnOdAx&feature=relmfu>
- *The World is Watching*, First Run/Icarus Films, directed by Peter Raymont
- *The World Stopped Watching*, (2003) First Run/Icarus Films, directed by Peter Raymont

Listening:

Radio Nicaragua: radionicaragua.com.ni/

Radio La Primerísima: www.rlp.com.ni

Cua4to Poder, weekly analysis of national & international news:

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Cu4rto-Poder/174579282628082>

Welcome to Nicaragua!



Photo: Reynolds Risseuw

¡Dale Pues!

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