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# Better a Familiar Evil than an Unfamiliar Blessing: Contra Peasantry in Nicaragua 1979-90

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Better a Familiar Evil than an Unfamiliar Blessing: Contra Peasantry in Nicaragua 1979-90

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Honors Thesis: University of Wyoming Honors Programs

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## Introduction

Rubén Darío, the prolific Nicaraguan-born poet, exclaimed in his poem, “To Roosevelt”, “Roosevelt, you must become, by God’s own will, the deadly Rifleman and the dreadful Hunter before you can clutch us in your iron claws.”<sup>1</sup> Written in response to U.S. involvement with the Panama Canal in 1904, Darío and his poem remarkably came to define a century of U.S.-Latin American relations filled with military intervention and economic manipulation. In particular, Nicaragua stands out in regard to receiving abundant financial assistance from the U.S. while attempting to resist multiple American occupations.<sup>2</sup> As will be discussed in this paper, Nicaragua has had a turbulent yet advantageous relationship to some with the U.S. throughout the twentieth century. However, this relationship was dismantled with the overthrow of the U.S.-backed dictator, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, in 1979. The succeeding government, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), quickly established a revolutionary government with Marxist propensities and cut off relations with Washington once President Reagan took office in 1981. In the next decade, the U.S. would provide well over \$100 million to a counter-revolutionary group called the Commandos.<sup>3</sup> The Commandos, also referred to as the Contras, were composed of a conglomerate of different groups including foreign governments, Ex-Somoza National Guardsmen, Miskito Indians, and peasants. Despite contrasting interests, these factions worked together to reach an uneasy coexistence by 1981.

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<sup>1</sup> Darío, Rubén, “To Roosevelt” (1904), in *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Robert Holden & Eric Zolov (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1: 92.

<sup>2</sup> Héctor Perla Jr., “Heirs of Sandino: The Nicaraguan Revolution and the U.S.-Nicaragua Solidarity Movement,” *Latin American Perspectives* 36, no. 169 (November 2009): 80, accessed September 28, 2017, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0094582X09350765#articleShareContainer>

<sup>3</sup> Timothy C. Brown, *The Real Contra War: Highlander Peasant Resistance in Nicaragua* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 7.

## Thesis

Since the Contras of Nicaragua were heavily funded and backed by the U.S. CIA and State Department, much discourse by Latin American historians have prematurely made assumptions of the Contra's dependency on foreign enterprises. In addition, much of the literature on the Contras has attributed their failure to drive change in Nicaragua solely on inconsistent American support. In essence, the Contras were entirely reliant on the U.S. and others which led to their demobilization in 1990. Historians and the general public have written the Contras off as murderous "vandals" and brainless "puppets" of the U.S. government. This has necessitated new exploration on *who* the Contras really were, as well as a deeper interpretation into why they were not able to stem mass change in Nicaragua. In regards to the typical Contra soldier, conservative estimates have put the percentage of peasants who joined the ranks of the Contras at eighty percent out of a total of 50,000 known fighters. Going against previous presumptions, the Contras exhibited a sizable base of peasants!

In the first section, agrarian reform, Sandinista repression, and an unpopular national draft, will be presented as central aspects for why individuals and then families of peasants either picked up an M-16 rifle or fed and housed Contra fighters. It will also be noted how the Contras were not entirely self-sufficient from outside support or free from human rights violations. It has been historically easy to bracket the peasants into larger and more understandable terms like "Contras," that were in deep association with the U.S., the ex-Somoza *Guardias*, and other governments that provided funding or guerrilla training. Through this association, peasants are ignored entirely. The peasant Contras exerted unique goals and reasons for fighting that must be viewed independently of the U.S. and other actors, even within the Contras itself. My aim is to illustrate that the Contra's base of support was much more complex than originally understood

by professionals. For sources, an array of de-classified documents, newspaper articles, and secondary sources with interviews formulate my primary source research. From there, I supplement particular details with scholarly articles, books, and anthologies.

Secondly, with such a large peasant base of support in Nicaragua, why were the Contras unable to translate their message into long-term change in Nicaragua? By 1990, U.S. support for the Contras had dwindled and the Bush administration was seeking alternative routes to increase their hegemonic stance in Nicaragua. With the election of a conservative and U.S.-backed president, Violeta Chamorro, the Contras were now unpalatable to the U.S. and Nicaragua, and recoiled from national attention. Many historians have accredited the inability of the Contras to make any dramatic political impact on either poor leadership or the U.S. cutting off aid. My contribution will attempt to offer an alternative explanation for their failure. The Contras rural base of support disconnected themselves from the rest of the country. Unlike the Sandinista revolution, the Contras were unable to hold onto any territory long-term. If they were able to, it was heavily concentrated away from cities where the majority of the population lived. Urban residents did not have a clear understanding of the Contras' motives. Any information gathered was deeply vetted by the Sandinista government. Additionally, negative stereotypes ranging from illiteracy to lack of culture did not legitimize their cause. In all, the Contra Conflict relied heavily on its regional *campesinos*; an underrated yet contributing factor in their demise. Through the use of interviews, economic data, polling, and newspaper articles, I offer an alternative explanation that is briefly noted in several books (Brown, Eich and Rincón, Horton, Garvin, and Langlois). Although much research still needs to be carried out, this interpretation is an attempt to reinvigorate discussion into the peasantry and regionalism in Nicaragua.

## **Historiography**

Besides Michael Gobat's *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua under U.S. Imperial Rule* (2005), the majority of recent scholarship on Nicaragua has focused on the Nicaraguan revolution and the subsequent Sandinista-Contra Conflict from 1979-1990.<sup>4</sup> Even as the conflict was still materializing during the 1980s, Latin American discourse was heavily dominated by U.S. Central American foreign policy. Mark T. Berger, who attempts to document North American historiography of Latin America, writes in *Under Northern Eyes* (1995), "between 1981 and 1988 Ronald Reagan made more speeches on Nicaragua than on any other country except the USSR."<sup>5</sup> Much of the literature from both the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, varies in quality and amount of archival research.<sup>6</sup> There is an overwhelming amount of literature on the Sandinista movement, its specific nationalistic ideology and the positive international response they received.<sup>7</sup> Gender, politics of culture, testimonies and memoirs, race and ethnicity, along with religion are themes that have been explored through the eyes of the Sandinistas by North American historians. The tendency for North American scholars to favor literature on the Sandinistas is a natural response for good reason. For forty-three years, Anastasio Somoza and his two sons gripped Nicaragua through a chilling U.S.-sponsored dictatorship. After the revolutionary overthrow of the Somoza dynasty in 1979, the Sandinista movement reinvigorated discourse into Central America. On the other hand, the Contra counterrevolution has received a far more negative interpretation by North American historians. The Contras have not been able

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua Under U.S. Imperial Rule* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 264.

<sup>5</sup> Mark T. Berger, *Under Northern Eyes: Latin American Studies and US Hegemony in the Americas 1898-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 155.

<sup>6</sup> "Obo." Revolution and Reaction in Central America - Latin American Studies - Oxford Bibliographies. March 23, 2018. Accessed March 29, 2018

<sup>7</sup> Perla Jr., "Heirs of Sandino", 80.

Margaret Randall, *Sandino's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995.

to escape the shackles of association with the Reagan administration, being named “Washington’s creation”, “U.S. surrogates,” with a foundationless base of ex-Somoza *Guardias*.<sup>8</sup> However, even the Reagan administration failed to understand who the Contras were as an organization. De-classified documents between the U.S. State Department, National Security Advisor, Central Intelligence Agency, and the President reveal the Contras as being an “instrument for restraining the Sandinistas”.<sup>9</sup> They attributed the somewhat successful Contra insurgency campaign to the direction and manipulation of the U.S.<sup>10</sup>

These widely held viewpoints by both scholars and the Reagan administration are not groundless by any means. As will be made abundantly clear, Washington sent millions of dollars in the direction of the C.I.A. and State Department to provide guerilla-type training, logistical support, and management of the Contra’s organization. Human rights violations were another issue that dogged the Contras throughout the decade. One of the most chronicled instances was the execution of an American engineer named Benjamin Linder, working in Nicaragua. Linder was working on a small hydroelectric project outside of Managua when he was ambushed by Contras and assassinated at point blank range.<sup>11</sup> Sensationalized by the American press, Linder’s death spurred critical analysis by U.S. citizens as to who exactly, their government was funding. Horrific occurrences such as these sensibly draw negative conclusions to most. Linder was not the only person to be murdered by the Contras. As will be discussed, human rights violations

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<sup>8</sup> Robert P. Hager, Jr., “The Origins of the ‘Contra War’ in Nicaragua: The Results of a Failed Development Model,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 134.

<sup>9</sup> Robert C. McFarlane to the President, “Central American Legislative Strategy—Additional funding for Anti-Sandinista Forces,” February 21, 1984, Memorandum, IC00340, Digital National Security Archives, Understanding the Iran-Contra Affairs: Brown University, accessed November 20, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> TC to BG, “Overall Perspective,” March 17, 1986, classified Report, Digital National Security Archives.

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Walsh, “Contras Executed Engineer,” *The Guardian*, May 7, 1987, accessed December 1, 2017, <http://libproxy.uwyo.edu/login/?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.uwyo.edu/docview/186741170?accountid=14793>.

were an unfortunate, yet common series of actions that were carried out on both sides. The premature conclusions of the Contras as violent and mercenary has left a considerable gap in the research, however.

Timothy Brown attempted to draw attention to this gap in the literature with an in-depth analysis of the Contra organization in *The Real Contra War* (2001).<sup>12</sup> Brown attempts to reinterpret “the black legend”—a common held narrative between academics, policy experts, and Reaganites that establishes the Contras as foundationless “vandals”—by taking a bottoms up approach to the organization.<sup>13</sup> Brown asserts that the Contras were a “spontaneous grassroots rebellion” instead of being just ex-Somoza National Guard officers.<sup>14</sup> Building off of Brown, *Peasants in Arms: War and Peace in the Mountains of Nicaragua, 1979-1994* (1998) by Lynn Horton is an excellent case study into Contra fighters from the town of Quilalí.<sup>15</sup> Horton writes of the complexity of Nicaraguan rural peasants joining the Contras, conducting over 100 interviews in two years.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, scholars have taken note of Horton and Brown’s work and begun to reassess the actors of the Contra War through a more considerate lens. Colburn (1989), Langlois (1997), and Cupples (2006) all build off of the peasant framework of the Contras. When combined, they provide the starting point for studying the, often forgotten, narrative of the Contra peasants. The objective of this paper is to utilize and, thereupon, build off these sources to establish that the Contras were in fact a predominantly peasant-led

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<sup>12</sup> Brown, *The Real Contra War*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, *The Real Contra War*, 5.

Lynn Horton, *Hispanic American Historical Review* 84. 1 (2004): 163-165.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, *The Real Contra War*, 92.

<sup>15</sup> Lynn Horton, *Peasants in Arms: War and Peace in the Mountains of Nicaragua, 1979-1994* (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Adam Jones, review of, *Peasants in Arms: War and Peace in the Mountains of Nicaragua, 1979-1994* by Lynn Horton, *Mesoamerica* 2 (June 2001): 241-45.

counterrevolution, and their rural base of support was ultimately a contributing factor in their demise.

### **Theoretical Approaches:**

The underlying paper will rest upon two key assumptions in regards to Central America: imperial state theory in relation to hegemony and the rural peasant populous exerting a communal determination to join the Contras, which was mostly independent of dominant actors (U.S., *Guardias*). Foremost, and in association with imperial state theory, the U.S. hegemonic relationship with Central America has commonly been represented by the mixture of consent and coercion since 1898.<sup>17</sup> According to Moris Morley and James Petras, imperial state theory rests on the idea of both economic and non-economic objectives in preserving U.S. hegemony.<sup>18</sup> In this paper, hegemony is presumed to be at the core of U.S. interests.

In this study, significant hegemonic interference into Central America will be traced to the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine in 1904.<sup>19</sup> Standing before Congress, President Roosevelt declared “Chronic wrong-doing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation.”<sup>20</sup> Roosevelt’s statement to Congress and his grandiose policy of “Big Stick” diplomacy opened the door for intervention into Latin American countries if they were not meeting the U.S. standard as “stable, orderly, and prosperous” nations.<sup>21</sup> Roosevelt’s presidency

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<sup>17</sup>Berger, *Under Northern Eyes*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Berger, *Under Northern Eyes*, 5

<sup>19</sup> Carolyne R. Larson, “Filibusters” (lecture, University of Wyoming, Laramie, February 23, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “The Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine” (1904), in *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Robert H. Holden and Eric Zolov (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 96-98.

<sup>21</sup> Roosevelt, “Roosevelt Corollary,” 97.

quickly shifted into President Taft's "dollar diplomacy" and the "requirement" for the U.S. to involve itself with Nicaragua.

The liberal and anti-imperialist President of Nicaragua, José Santos Zelaya, presented a challenge to the U.S. starting in 1893. His nationalistic and liberal agenda did not coincide with U.S. intentions. By 1909, the U.S. had substantial economic ventures including coffee production, that were in need of protection from Zelaya's government. Furthermore, Zelaya had deep interest in pursuing a canal that rivaled the U.S. trans-isthmian canal in Panama. The U.S. had invested heavily in the canal, where it took ten years to construct, cost the U.S. \$350 million, and took the lives of 10,000 workers.<sup>22</sup> To deepen the agitation, Zelaya was negotiating the deal with U.S. rivals Germany and Japan.<sup>23</sup> Coupled with Zelaya's brutality towards his own citizens, the U.S. provided military support on top of financially funding a conservative rebellion by Emiliano Chamorro and Juan Estrada.<sup>24</sup> Zelaya quickly resigned from office and was replaced with several U.S.-sponsored candidates before settling on Adolfo Díaz, a U.S. mining company employee. U.S. economic interests had been preserved for the time being. Additionally, the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty was signed between the U.S. and Nicaraguan governments in 1914, giving the exclusive proprietary rights to build a Nicaraguan canal to the U.S.<sup>25</sup> More importantly, it capped a possible crisis of a German-Japanese canal diminishing U.S. interests in

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<sup>22</sup> Panama Canal, directed by Stephen Ives (PBS: American Experience, 2011) Accessed December 1, 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/panama>.

<sup>23</sup> John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade, and Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion, and Change* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2015), 98.

<sup>24</sup> Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), 47.

<sup>25</sup> Governments of the United States and Nicaragua, "The Bryan-Chamorro Treaty" (1914), in *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Robert H. Holden & Eric Zolov, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 107.

Central America. Nicaragua had climbed aboard with the U.S., ensuring the status quo of American hegemony.

In 1920, the U.S. emerged as the dominant power in Nicaragua with the financial backing of the conservative rebellion (1910) and the presence of 2,600 U.S. Marines (1912-33) to uphold Díaz's deteriorating political base. The late Walter LaFeber, a historian and professor at Cornell University who specialized in U.S. foreign relations, asserted in *Inevitable Revolutions*, "The very structure of Nicaragua was shaped and controlled by North American bankers and soldiers. [President] Díaz's power was determined more in Washington than in Managua."<sup>26</sup> Díaz's ability to play the dutiful and dedicated puppet is more than evident in speeches to U.S. dignitaries and Nicaraguans alike:

The name of your worthy President, William H. Taft, and your own name are pronounced by all Nicaraguans, from the statesman to the humblest countryman, as though they were names of personages of our fatherland, due to the fact that every day the bonds are becoming closer between your great and happy country and my own small country...<sup>27</sup>

Although the U.S. was able to stretch its military and diplomatic presence in Nicaragua, the attachment to U.S. economic and foreign interests would come at a price to Nicaraguans. The strong bonds that Díaz references convinced some Nicaraguans to buy into U.S. motives. To others, there was a need for an internal recourse. Better yet, a cry for challenge.

Augusto C. Sandino, the charismatic and impassioned General, was one of these Nicaraguan countryman who responded to the challenge against the Nicaraguan government and U.S. Marines in what became known as the Sandino Rebellion. Although his military presence

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<sup>26</sup> LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 49.

<sup>27</sup> Adolfo Díaz, "Speech of His Excellency Don Adolfo Díaz, President of Nicaragua, Welcoming Mr. Knox, Managua" (March 6, 1912), in *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. by Robert Holden & Eric Zolov, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 100.

did not come for another twenty years, Sandino was able to win over hearts and minds of Nicaraguan peasants and even skeptical U.S. journalists starting in 1927. Carleton Beals, the prominent U.S. journalist who was able to gain a rare interview with Sandino, quoted him as saying, “I am fully capable of gaining a livelihood for myself and my wife in some humble happy pursuit. By trade I am a mechanic...We have taken up arms from the love of our country because all other leaders have betrayed it and have sold themselves out to the foreigner.”<sup>28</sup>

Although Beals had a tendency to write excessive and monumental tales that bordered on fiction to his U.S. based audience, it is no doubt vital to understand the importance of Sandino’s message of anti-imperialism. Sandino’s requests of immediate removal of U.S. Marines and the selection of an independent president appealed to a broad global audience that included adventurers, smugglers, communists, syndicalists, socialists, Europeans, and Asians.<sup>29</sup> Many of his messages and revolutionary ideas would be incorporated into future revolutionary groups such as the FSLN. Sandino was able to successfully conduct guerilla warfare in the mountainous region of Nicaragua for over seven years. Because of Sandino’s efforts and the American depression at home, the U.S. removed its Marines in 1933. However, on February 1934, Sandino was executed by the Nicaraguan National Guard after securing peace with President Sacasa, ending any attempt to liberate Nicaragua from the U.S.<sup>30</sup> While the political and economic landscape shifted in early 20<sup>th</sup>- century Nicaragua, the U.S.’s virtual control of Nicaragua was an impermeable fixture that transcended both impassioned leaders like Sandino and U.S.-sponsored pawns such as Estrada, Díaz, Vargas, Chamorro, Martínez, Solórzano, Moncada...<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Augusto Sandino, interview by Carleton Beals, *New York Herald Tribune*, March 8, 1928, accessed December 1, 2017, <http://libproxy.uwyo.edu/login/?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.uwyo.edu>

<sup>29</sup> Gregorio Selser, *Sandino*, trans, Cedric Belfrage (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981), 90.

<sup>30</sup> Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream*, 264.

<sup>31</sup> Revolvy, "List of Presidents of Nicaragua on Revolvy.com," <https://www.revolvy.com/main/index.php?s=List of Presidents of Nicaragua>.

After emerging as the global capitalist power at the end of World War Two, American dominance only expanded in Nicaragua for the next fifty years. The general who had issued the order for his Guardsmen to shoot Sandino, Anastasio Somoza, controlled Nicaragua by 1936 and quickly established a dictatorship or “private fiefdom” as LaFeber claims.<sup>32</sup> Somoza and his two sons would ultimately go on to rule Nicaragua for forty-three years and accumulate a personal wealth in excess of \$500 million through mutual cooperation with the U.S.<sup>33</sup> Relying on the U.S. and National Guard as pillars, the Somoza’s were able to effectively cultivate relationships with U.S. businesses, support U.S. foreign policies, and successfully eliminate opposition forces while impoverishing their citizens. In 1962 alone, Nicaraguans shipped forty percent of its overall coffee and cotton exports to the U.S.<sup>34</sup> Starting in 1946, Nicaragua sent hundreds of officers to the U.S.-sponsored School of the Americas in Panama.<sup>35</sup> This mutual relationship benefited the U.S. government, private capital ventures, and Nicaraguan elite like the Somozas. Although the U.S. had a mutual and beneficial relationship with the Somoza’s, their hegemonic presence in Nicaragua and elsewhere began to be questioned through resistance and revolution.

The U.S. entered a state of hegemonic crisis starting in the 1970s. Although the Somoza’s were able to sniff out twenty-seven revolts within a quarter of a century, the FSLN or Sandinistas were able to start secretly operating in 1961.<sup>36</sup> The Sandinista government or FSLN had a cohesive and coherent ideology that had a substantial backing from the Nicaraguan people. Leading up to the overthrow of Somoza in 1979, the new Sandinista movement was able to

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<sup>32</sup> LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 160.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas W. Walker, ed., *Revolution & Counterrevolution in Nicaragua* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991) 6.

<sup>34</sup> LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolution*, 161.

<sup>35</sup> Robert H. Holden and Eric Zolov, ed., *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 372.

<sup>36</sup> Glenn Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo: The CIA & the Contras* (McLean, VA: Brassey’s Inc., 1992) 13.

capture the spirit of Augusto Sandino and his rebellion through slogans like “We are Sandino’s children”.<sup>37</sup> The Sandinista revolution effectively broadcasted a message of Sandinista principles, visions of future justice, and anti-imperialism to the Nicaraguan people.<sup>38</sup>

Further discontent occurred in Nicaragua when Managua, its capital of 325,000 people in 1972, was devastated by an earthquake that left 18,000 people dead and 200,000 homeless. U.S. aid poured into the country.<sup>39</sup> However, Somoza pocketed \$16 million of the \$32 million that was received, crippling Nicaraguans across the country.<sup>40</sup> After the earthquake, resistance efforts began to pick up considerably, marking the beginning of the end for the Somozas. In 1978, a newspaper editor by the name of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro was murdered by a team of professional assassins after he took an oppositional stance against the Somoza dictatorship.<sup>41</sup> With an abrupt cover-up, citizens pushed onto the streets, burning Somoza-owned buildings while shouting for the them to leave. By 1979, the FSLN grew to 5,000 fighters strong, with many more joining the ranks as they pushed towards Nicaragua’s capital, Managua.<sup>42</sup> On July 17, 1979, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the last son of the Somoza Dynasty, was forced out of the country. The incoming FSLN government quickly established rule over a wore-torn and beaten up Nicaragua. This direct challenge to the U.S. position of dominance in Nicaragua led, thereafter, to a decade of U.S. resistance, and efforts to sponsor the Contras in regaining access to the hegemonic past the U.S. had long enjoyed.

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<sup>37</sup> Fred Judson, “Sandinista Revolutionary Morale,” *Latin American Perspectives* 14, no. 52 (Winter 1987): 24, accessed November 20, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Judson, “Sandinista Revolutionary Morale,” 23.

<sup>39</sup> United Press International, “Thousands Dead as Quakes Strike Nicaraguan City,” *New York Times*, December 24, 1972, accessed December 6, 2017, <http://libproxy.uwyo.edu/login/?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.uwyo.edu/docview/119482117?accountid=14793>

<sup>40</sup> LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 228.

<sup>41</sup> Booth, Wade, and Walker, *Understanding Central America*, 105.

<sup>42</sup> Booth, Wade, and Walker, *Understanding Central America*, 104.

Even with the surprising political defeat of the FSLN by a new conservative government in 1990, Nicaragua has still not been able to release itself from the hands of the U.S. The Chamorro government, which was highly sponsored by the U.S., saw some positive progression in terms of democratic elections and the peaceful transition of governments. To this day, though, Nicaragua is the poorest country in Central America and the second poorest in all of the Western Hemisphere.<sup>43</sup> As of 2012, GDP per capita trails the rest of Central America with a negative fifteen percent change from 1960-2012.<sup>44</sup> Proponents of U.S. intervention regarding its southern neighbors rely on the issue of promoting prosperity and democratic values while protecting national security.<sup>45</sup> Similar to Roosevelt's 1904 Corollary, supporting "stable, orderly, and prosperous" nations is still the means through which the U.S. maintains a primary undertaking in Nicaragua. Contemporaries do not argue about the unfortunate struggles that have plagued Nicaragua for the past one-hundred and fifty years. To them, the means of U.S. intervention have outweighed any irregularities. Yet, policy makers do not realize that the U.S. has been the watchman over a conservative rebellion (1910), U.S. occupation (1912-33), support and funding of the Somoza dictatorship (1936-79), and millions of dollars in support of the Contras (1979-89). They have traditionally written through the eyes of Washington to help construct and solidify the conventional discourse of the U.S. hegemonic presence in Central America. Thus, North American history has historically served to perpetuate the status quo or American hegemony in Nicaragua.

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<sup>43</sup> "CIA World Factbook, Nicaragua," CIA. <https://www.cia.gov/Library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/nu.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Inter-American Development Bank, "Economic and Social Progress in Latin America: Natural Resources," 1983 Report, (Washington D.C., 1983), In *Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion, and Change*.

<sup>45</sup> Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream*, 278.

The United States' informal empire, in essence, has "reaped what is sowed" in Nicaragua.<sup>46</sup> Although U.S. support and democratic values have been the guiding principle of U.S. involvement, Nicaragua has been left worse off by their overwhelming presence. Coaching from the sidelines, the U.S. has allowed Nicaragua to play the game without an opportunity to ever win. Although the U.S. is not the primary character being analyzed in this paper, the study of Contra peasantry must be understood under the underlying U.S.-hegemonic conditions that existed at the heart of Nicaragua in 1979-90.

The second assumption to be derived from this study involves the rural peasant population of Nicaragua exerting a communal determination to join the Contras. Peasants were not merely puppets, easily coerced actors of the U.S., or Ex-Somoza *Guardias*. Peasants' decisions to side with either the Contras or Sandinistas were highly diverse and specific. At the center of the decision-making process lay deep-rooted family kinships and social networks.<sup>47</sup> Family relationships for rural peasants can be broken up into three tiers: blood, marriage, and community (godparents, family friends).<sup>48</sup> These multi-tiered relationships tied together otherwise relatively independent *campesinos*. Although some peasants were unwillingly brought into the organization through coercion or kidnappings, peasant Contras did not join because of the ideological reasons endorsed by the *Guardias*. In his study of Contra peasants, Robert Langlois documents that close to seventy percent of his interviewees joined because they or a family member had been exposed to some sort of repression from the Sandinistas.<sup>49</sup> Contra

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<sup>46</sup> Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream*, 279.

<sup>47</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Brown, *The Real Contra War*, 102.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Langlois, "Becoming a Contra: The Dilemma of Peasants during the Revolution in Nicaragua," *International Journal* 52, no. 4 (Fall 1997): accessed September 7, 2017, 699.

participation was truly a family affair. This is a particularly important trait and a bedrock assumption when trying to understand why peasants joined in such vast numbers.

The two theories or assumptions, when applied, are the fundamental frameworks for this paper. U.S. hegemony is the macro assumption that overlays the entirety of the Contra organization. Although the Contras enjoyed a largely peasant base of support with community-driven motives, the U.S. was the overarching benefactor. Consistent with its history of intervention in Nicaragua, the U.S. leveraged the Contras as a tool to regain hegemony.

On the other hand, communal relations with the peasantry entails a micro supposition when analyzing the rural fighters. An assumption if you suppose, tightly connected family dynamics led peasants to resist as well as to join the Contras in large numbers. Paraphrasing a former Contra soldier, when one *campesino* joined the counterrevolution, the whole family or even the community partook directly or indirectly.<sup>50</sup> Whereas if one or two members of a family left their village for the Nicaraguan-Honduran border, others in the family or community would follow suit.

### **More than Puppets**

Now that a brief historiography and two theoretical approaches (American hegemony and peasant communalism) have been established, I will now explore *who* were the Contras. Overall, three Contra military fronts were operating simultaneously throughout 1979-1990: The Fuerzas Democráticas Nicaragüenses (FDN) on the northern Nicaraguan-Honduran border, the Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática (ARDE) on the southern Nicaraguan-Costa Rican border, and two Miskito Indian groups who operated in Nicaragua's Atlantic coast.<sup>51</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the FDN will be the principal group evaluated when discussing Contra peasantry for

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<sup>50</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 186.

<sup>51</sup> Booth, Wade, & Walker, *Understanding Central America*, 107.

multiple reasons. By far, the FDN was the largest of the three groups and attracted a high number of peasants into the ranks of the organization. Far surpassing the other two groups, the FDN demobilized, at a minimum, 22,597 Contras by the end of the conflict in 1990.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, the ARDE was plagued with corruption and ineffective leadership while the Miskito Indians had several sporadic fighting battalions that were in close association with the FDN. Throughout its tenure, the Miskito Indians and the ARDE were unable to assemble more than 3,000 soldiers in each respective group.<sup>53</sup> The majority of the Contra peasantry were naturally attracted to the FDN out of a close geographic setting. The FDN had the majority of its recruits come from the Departments of Jinotega (4,117), Matagalpa (3,808), Nueva Segovia (2,692), Chontales (2,653), and Estelí (602), all in the Northern Highlands of Nicaragua.<sup>54</sup>

In this study, the term peasant is a commonly frequented word that requires a definition. Who is considered a peasant? A peasant is considered any person, regardless of sex, age, land ownership, or economic status, that is rurally-attached to the social and economic sector of agriculture or ranching in Nicaragua. The agrarian class structure of the Nicaraguan peasantry was broken down into poor peasants (33.1%), middle peasants (32.6%), rich peasants or *Finqueros* (19.0%), and the large landowners or *terratienientes* (1.3%).<sup>55</sup> *Finqueros* were longstanding peasants of the region in which they held between 200-1,000 Manzanas (MZ) of land with multiple employees.<sup>56</sup> Middle class peasants owned between 10-199MZ of land while

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<sup>52</sup> Comisión Internacional de Apoyo y Verificación, Organization of American States (CIAV/OAS), “Cuadros estadísticos del proceso de Desmovilización y repatriación en Nicaragua,” January 27, 1991, trans. Timothy Brown, *The Real Contra War* 117.

<sup>53</sup> Louis R. Mortimer, “Nicaragua,” country Data on Nicaragua, December 1993. <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-9306.html>

<sup>54</sup> CIAV/OAS, “Cuadros estadísticos del proceso de Desmovilización”, 117.

<sup>55</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 45-48.

<sup>56</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 49.

poor peasants owned under 10MZ of land.<sup>57</sup> The rural peasant population made up around 37-50% of the population with many fleeing the conflict to other countries or Nicaraguan cities throughout the decade.<sup>58</sup> By 1996, an “urban flight” had taken over the country with 74% of the population living in the cities.<sup>59</sup> More importantly, the peasant population was heavily independent and withdrawn politically from the rest of Nicaragua. Years of neglect from the Somoza dictatorship as well as Nicaragua’s underdevelopment of transportation, communication, literacy, and infrastructure alienated the rural sector from the urban centers. Peasants exercised strong familial bonds in all aspects of life.

### The Rise of the MILPAS

One of the biggest misconceptions of the Contra conflict regards its origination. The commonly held narrative alleges the Contras were born and coddled by the U.S., where “U.S. operatives airlifted remnants of Anastasio Somoza’s praetorian army to Miami from where they could reorganize to renew their fight against the Sandinistas in the future.”<sup>60</sup> Historians trace the roots of the conflict to 1981, when a group of Ex-Somoza *Guardias* and the U.S. agreed on terms to help eradicate the Sandinista government, similar in nature to a proxy force used twenty years earlier in Cuba. Simultaneously, “The Project” was approved on March 9, 1981 in Washington, providing \$19.5 million to the CIA in aiding the newly formed group of *Guardias*.<sup>61</sup> Clearly, the Contras were born out of Washington instead of Nicaragua, or so it seemed.

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<sup>57</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 52-54.

<sup>58</sup> Brown, *The Real Contra War*, whole book.

<sup>59</sup> Table A.2 Selected Social Data for Central America, by country, 1960-2013 in *Understanding Central America*, 345.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Kornbluh, “The Covert War,” in *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas*, ed. Thomas W. Walker (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 21.

<sup>61</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 62.

As the peasant legend goes, a man by the name of Joaquín Pedro González entered a tobacco shed in September 1980 to wait for 250 new recruits. A friend of González, Mamerto, would be coming with the recruits. As a peasant Contra named Mendoza related in one version,

Dimas [González] waited all night long and the men never arrived. At two or three in the morning... he was very sleepy and a little drunk... Mamerto said to him, 'What a beautiful pistol you have. Let me see it.' Dimas took off the gun and handed it to Mamerto. Then one of Mamerto's bodyguards sent a bullet into Dimas's back, below his left rib, and it pierced his heart.<sup>62</sup>

González, also known as Dimas, rapidly was exalted by all as "Dimas, Father of the Contras".<sup>63</sup>

Although this story of Dimas rests on several fictional literary images, Dimas was a larger than life figure in the countryside, providing an outlet to encourage resistance in a voiceless, forgotten corner of Nicaragua.

Known as the People's Anti-Somoza Militias (MILPAS), the MILPAS were a group of Sandinista peasants who had fought for the Revolution in 1979. The term MILPAS also engages in wordplay since *milpas* translates into, "corn patch" in Spanish.<sup>64</sup> Proud of their peasant heritage, the MILPAS began to be disgruntled with the new Sandinista government in the first few months of taking power. Dimas, who had begun fighting for the Sandinistas in 1972, had achieved a regional command in the town of Quilalí after the war. He was the leading spokesman of the MILPAS and of frustration in the abrupt changes that challenged the status quo of the region. Personally, Dimas was irritated with an urban proletariat leadership imposing new laws and changes without the input or consideration of rural peasants. In essence, a counteraction struck

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<sup>62</sup> Mendoza, interview by Horton, Nicaragua (1992-94): quoted in Lynn Horton, *Peasants in Arms: War and Peace in the Mountains of Nicaragua, 1979-1994* (Athens: Ohio University, Center for International Studies, 1998), 115.

<sup>63</sup> Brown, *The Real Contra War*, 20.

<sup>64</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 18.

some of the rural population strongly. The region has historically been sensitive to abrupt and innovative change. An old peasant adage states, “better a familiar evil than an unfamiliar blessing”<sup>65</sup> Already armed, the MILPAS left their posts in Quilalí under the leadership of Dimas and raced to the rural countryside. The first real battle to be waged against the Sandinista military was on November 1979, on the slopes of El Chipote. Close to seventy peasants attacked a Sandinista military camp.<sup>66</sup> Angry peasants took the lead in expressing their discontent with the new government. With the expert leadership style of Dimas and deep familial connections, the MILPAS had reached upwards to 3,000 fighters before his death in 1980.<sup>67</sup> The original MILPAS were not supported by outside groups. Instead, they relied on captured Sandinista weapons, hunting rifles, shotguns, pistols, or machetes.<sup>68</sup> Their message was clear and had no propensity towards the U.S. or democratic ideals. Nothing speaks better to this than when a group of MILPAS surprised two Sandinista soldiers near Agua Fresca. The MILPAS took their weapons and wrote a message to their commander, “We’re not *Guardia*, just very angry peasants. If you leave us alone, we won’t fight you.”<sup>69</sup> Whether the message was received is lost to history. Regardless, the Sandinista military was not listening.

In and around the countryside, other MILPAS-type groups began confronting the Sandinista military. The MILPAS of Irene Calderón, Tigrillo, El Grupo Pirata, Farolín, Paloma, Las Culebras, and Pocoyo all used the MILPAS as a reference to fight in autonomous, independent bands of men and women of the same community.<sup>70</sup> Marina, a woman who lived in the town of Quilalí, gave this testament after she was brutally tortured by the Sandinistas, “It was

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<sup>65</sup> Colburn, “Foot Dragging,” 189.

<sup>66</sup> Brown, *The Real Contra War*, 14.

<sup>67</sup> Brown *The Real Contra War*, 32.

<sup>68</sup> Brown, *The Real Contra War*, 32.

<sup>69</sup> Brown, *The Real Contra War*, 18.

<sup>70</sup> Brown, *The Real Contra War*, 38-68.

the Sandinistas who created the MILPAS. In the beginning, everyone in Quilalí was pro-Sandinista. A few important Sandinistas, but no *Guardias*, were even from here. But they turned the people against them by their own actions.”<sup>71</sup> Marina was a pro-Sandinista before the revolution. Yet her connections to the *Guardias* posed a significant threat to them. Her ex-husband and two children were brutally beaten with a baseball bat and died while in custody. Marina had been detained and abused herself.<sup>72</sup> No longer an ally of the Sandinista government, she turned to Dimas and his band of MILPAS for support and as a means to express her anguish. As will be studied more, grievances from peasants was met with Sandinista violence, providing further alienation.

Quickly, the MILPAS found themselves with little to no resources and had reverted to robbing banks.<sup>73</sup> The MILPAS and other peasant-led groups had to find foreign sponsors if they wished to continue operations in the region. Sometime between 1980 and 1981, Dimas and a few other MILPAS leaders sat down with former National Guardsmen. Glenn Garvin recalls the event as, “A tense silence enveloped the room as the men... sat down around a circle of conference tables. It didn’t last long. ‘Where did you fight during the war?’ one of the Guardsmen asked one of the *Milpas*. ‘Around Pantasma,’ the guerrilla replied. The Guard officer jumped to his feet, ‘You shit-eater!’ he screamed. ‘My brother was killed at Pantasma!’”<sup>74</sup> After several hours of uncomfortable negotiations, Dimas’ MILPAS arranged to band with the *Guardias*. Although Dimas’ knew of the foreseeable consequences of submitting to the

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<sup>71</sup> Marina, interview by Brown, Nicaragua (1992): quoted in Timothy Brown, *The Real Contra War* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 24-25.

<sup>72</sup> Brown, *The Real Contra War*, 25.

<sup>73</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 19.

<sup>74</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 20.

guardsmen, he understood that this conflict of theirs could only be won through having the necessary resources.

The story of the MILPAS is important for several reasons. First, the MILPAS and others were born out of the countryside of Quilalí rather than Miami. They were not recruited by outside governments and had personal motives that related to the community and family relationships. For this very reason, the MILPAS have been brushed over by journalists, professionals, and the U.S. government, both, during and after the conflict. As the FDN had consolidated power on the Nicaraguan-Honduran border, journalists rushed to the area to report on the situation. The target audience for journalists was the *Guardias*, who held key leadership positions in the first few years. Accounts of who the FDN Contras were featured the militarized and visible *Guardias* while excluding less tasteful stories by the Contra foot-soldiers. Only through targeted interviews by professions in the 1990s and 2000s did the peasants begin to gain the recognition that had long been silenced.

Second, the MILPAS and company provided sufficient man-power to a much smaller *Guardia* force. From the establishment of the convergence of the groups, the *Guardias* had been highly outnumbered in relation to the MILPAS and others. In a FDN archive dated August 12, 1982, the *Guardias* had 247 soldiers (3%) to the peasants 9,871 (97%).<sup>75</sup> Without the fundamental base of support that the peasants held, the *Guardias* and U.S. would be left sitting on the sidelines. Worse yet, another Bays of Pigs fiasco could have been a result without the backing of the MILPAS while factoring in the Reagan administration's hardline stance against the Nicaraguan government.

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<sup>75</sup> "Estado de Fuerza local y general, porcentaje ex-G.N. en las bases, e informe de bajas a la fecha," Cuartel General Fuerza Democratica Nicaraguense, 12 Agosto 1982, ACRN archives, tran. Timothy Brown, 90.

Both the peasants and the *Guardias* brought separate yet dynamic aspects to the FDN. The Contras were the base of the FDN while the *Guardias* offered military professionalism and training. Indeed, most of the key leadership roles were handed out to *Guardias* and sometimes controlled by the U.S. Yet, Garvin wrote of Mike Lima, a *Guardia* himself, how,

As he studied his troops, it occurred to Lima that the equipment wasn't the only thing that was new. So were the men. Here he saw that son of one of his first soldiers, there a cousin or a nephew. But Lima didn't see a single one of the fifty-nine men who marched to Nicaragua with him in 1982. Five years later they were all burned out, shot up, or dead. *The only one left*, Lima realized, *is me*.<sup>76</sup>

By 1987, most of the FDN key leadership had, as Garvin writes, been injured or had died. With the limited amount of *Guardia* soldiers to begin with (287), the Contra organization provided considerable room for talented and ambitious peasants to obtain leadership positions. By 1986, 27% of Senior FDN military leaders had a *Guardia* background while the rest of the positions were held by peasants or small farmers, students, urban employees, or prior Sandinista officers and soldiers.<sup>77</sup> Clearly, the *Guardia* were being pushed out of the old system in lieu of a more peasant background.

### Why They Joined

Since the FDN was primarily based on the participation of peasants, it is significant to understand in more detail why exactly thousands of men, women, and children gave up their relatively safe lifestyle in favor of unimaginable living conditions with a high likelihood of imprisonment, jail, or death. The MILPAS began the peasant struggle but by no means did they

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<sup>76</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 196.

<sup>77</sup> U.S. State Department, "Documents on the Nicaraguan Resistance: Leaders, Military Personnel, and Program," Special Report No. 142. U.S. State Department *Bureau of Public Affairs* Washington D.C. 1986, Digital National Security Archives.

fully represent peasants' entire motives. In the following paragraphs, three primary reasons will be examined for why peasants risked their own lives as well as the lives of their loved ones.

From the beginning stages of the FSLN revolution, peasants were skeptical and weary of dramatic agrarian reform and other mandatory programs. From there, responses given include feeling voiceless, scared, or threatened by a much more urban Nicaragua. Secondly, once the Sandinista military had experienced pockets of resistance with the MILPAS and company, they met force on force that sometimes targeted civilians. The resulting outcome was drawing more Contras into the MILPAS or the newly formed FDN. Finally, the Nicaraguan military draft split apart the rural countryside. Peasants and young men in particular had no choice but to choose a side: Sandinista or Contra. By no means a comprehensive list, these reasons stand out for their encompassing range.

### *Agrarian Reform*

After the FSLN revolution, the majority of peasants were open and euthanistic to the new government. Although there was a natural disconnect between the actual revolution and the countryside, peasants had no issue with the FSLN. The end of a forty-year old dictatorship and the promise of economic and social change ripped through small villages in Northern Nicaragua. Indeed, the FSLN began to implement successful literary programs, investment into new healthcare facilities, social security and welfare programs, and more bank loans for small landowners.<sup>78</sup> Other programs such as government run co-operatives, mandatory participation in community associations, and a restriction of free-trade severely counter-acted any hope the Sandinista government had in rural Nicaragua. These programs were seen by peasants as an encroachment from a removed outsider who did represent their interests. Langlois points out how

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<sup>78</sup> Harvey Williams, "The Social Programs," in *Revolution & Counter Revolution in Nicaragua*, ed. Thomas W. Walker (Westview Press Inc., 1991), 191.

“Where listening was required, deafness was the response; where flexibility was needed, rigidity and control were exercised; where patience was necessary, brutality was meted out”<sup>79</sup> These three reforms (co-operatives, participation into FSLN organizations, and restriction of free trade) will be highlighted and often blend together as initial motives for the peasants joining the Contras.

In the beginning, peasants were weary of working on co-operatives. Carlos Sánchez, a peasant who briefly fought for the FSLN revolution, said, “They [the Sandinistas] promised so many things. That everyone would be equal, that they would take land from the rich to give to the poor. But they didn’t fulfill their promises.”<sup>80</sup> Although 30% of the land in northern Nicaragua was distributed among peasants, the only way to receive any of it was through government run co-operatives.<sup>81</sup> Peasants, who were naturally attuned to working freely without government intervention, did not adjust quickly to the division of work and distribution of benefits that co-operatives required.<sup>82</sup> In order for peasants to receive credit, they had to fully accept co-operatives system of rigidity. Sánchez goes on to explain co-operatives in more detail,

Why should I spend two weeks arguing about how to carry out one little job? You can’t work in your own way. I saw that in the agricultural collectives some worked and others didn’t. With so many people on the land, how was there going to be a profit? I didn’t see much future in that, working in masses.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Langlois, “Becoming a Contra”, 709.

<sup>80</sup> Carlos Sánchez, interview by Horton, Nicaragua (1992-94): quoted in Lynn Horton, *Peasants in Arms War and Peace in the Mountains of Nicaragua, 1979-1994* (Athens: Ohio University, Center for International Studies, 1998), 153.

<sup>81</sup> Forrest D. Colburn, “Foot Dragging and Other Peasant Responses to the Nicaraguan Revolution,” In *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, ed. Forrest D. Colburn (New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1989), 184.

<sup>82</sup> Colburn, “Foot Dragging,” 184.

<sup>83</sup> Sánchez, interview by Horton, 153.

Sánchez provides a great example of how peasants perceived progressive government reforms as infringements on their daily life. Although popular and useful for some, government collectives triggered initial agitation and worry for many peasants.

Government initiatives like co-operatives were not the only restriction placed on peasants. Constraint on free trade severely limited peasants' daily economic routines while worsening their overall situations. At the onslaught of the Revolution in 1979, the National Enterprise for Basic Foodstuffs (ENABAS) was formed to hand out basic consumer goods to citizens.<sup>84</sup> Many of these basic foodstuffs, that were easily available on the free market, were now becoming increasingly difficult to produce and sell to everyone. Carlos, who was a middle-class peasant, explained this horror, "I did not like this system which controlled everything and subordinated everybody. Everything was rationed. We had to line up and present our card.... they were keeping control over everything. It was not a life."<sup>85</sup> A system of free trade transcended into ration cards and long wait lines, without the full guarantee of having those basic commodities on hand. Sensitive to the new changes, Carlos was not merely speaking about his sole situation. Luz Marina, a mother and wife of Contra fighters, also explained this new system.

At first, when it started, it seemed really nice, because there were going to be schools for children, for the elderly there was going to be... yes, it started well. But when the FSLN began to interfere, the thing was they rationed everything. You had to queue to buy a pound of sugar. It was difficult for the poor people who lived in Nicaragua. Because you couldn't buy more than your ration, we had to mend our clothes with sack thread. Because everything was rationed. You had to make a bar of soap last for fifteen days, sugar was rationed, how the poor mothers suffered because of rationing.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Colburn, "Foot Dragging," 186.

<sup>85</sup> Carlos, Interview by Langlois, Nicaragua (1991): quoted in Robert Langlois, "Becoming a Contra," *International Journal* 52, no. 4 (Fall 1997): 707, accessed September 7, 2017.

<sup>86</sup> Luz Marina, interview by Cupples, Nicaragua (1999, 2001): quoted in Julie Cupples, "Between Maternalism and Feminism," *Bulletin of Latin America Research* 25, no. 1 (2006) 89, accessed September 8, 2017 <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.uwyo.edu/stable/2773382291>.

Driven to the brink of poverty, Marina fled to Honduras in 1986 to escape the Sandinistas, while trying to put an end to this system. Voiceless and underrepresented by the Sandinista government, peasants across Nicaragua felt armed resistance was the only means through which they could voice their concerns. Progressive programs triggered a “lack of freedom” which had detrimental consequences for the government in Managua.

One of the many ways the FSLN garnered support was through participation in community organizations. For example, in order to receive any kind of credit, peasants had to join co-operatives and partake in programs throughout the week. Peasants were reluctant to join any sort of political committee as one young laborer explained, “It is better not to get involved in politics because if there is another change those that are now in politics will be killed.”<sup>87</sup> Stretched to their limits, peasants had very little free will to opt out of the local militias and defense committees.<sup>88</sup> The result was further alienation between the government and peasants. The middle ground for peasants quickly evaporated into fixed positions: Sandinista or counterrevolutionary.

### *Sandinista Repression*

Initial agrarian reforms caused ignitable flares of resistance in the countryside. As mentioned above, peasants had little maneuvering power other than to fully embrace the new revolution and their values and reforms placed on them. An inability to fully accept agrarian reforms was seen as counterrevolutionary to the new FSLN government. Although sporadic, Sandinista repression helped solidify peasants’ internal conundrum.

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<sup>87</sup> Unknown peasant, interview by Colburn, quoted in Forrest Colburn, “Foot Dragging and Other Peasant Responses to the Nicaraguan Revolution,” 193.

<sup>88</sup> Colburn, “Foot Dragging,” 192.

With the rise of the MILPAS and other groups, the Sandinista government had essentially placed a zero-tolerance policy on the Contras and possible sympathizers. The government wanted full participation out of the peasants and acted with extreme suspicious to root out any pockets of resistance. Oswald, a peasant turned Contra, avowed that the Sandinista government went out of their way to persecute and break-up Contra networks.

The Sandinistas persecuted the peasants, they put them in jail, that is why I decided to hide in the mountains and fight for them. For most of us, we went to the Contra because of the repression, not because of ideology... Once, the Sandinistas came to the village of El Cañonero to look for us, and they assassinated the head of a family. They believed we were there. They interrogated him, hit him, dragged him in front of his house, of his family and of the whole village, and they killed him. When people saw these things, they were afraid, they were fleeing and joining us. From 1982 on, we had a massive increase because of the repression. 100 per week were coming into our base. It was a reaction to the repression, persecution, and the murders by the Sandinistas.<sup>89</sup>

Oswald's account is important for several reasons. Peasants were joining the Contra ranks out of persecution rather than coercion, U.S. manipulation, or ideology. Acts of violence by Sandinista soldiers invoked fear into everyday citizens. The randomness of Sandinista violence provoked a state of helplessness. Trying to restore some sort of control back into their lives, peasants naturally clustered into the Contra's ranks. In many cases, if one member of a family joined, others in the family would follow, women included. As one ex-Contra noted, "When the first one goes, all the rest follow."<sup>90</sup> They had no other option than to meet violence with violence. Finally, Oswald points out how this conflict was truly a counter action to Sandinista policies.

Repression was known to be a fundamental tactic by the Sandinista military. A high ranking Sandinista military officer confirmed this, "We acted mainly from denunciations that

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<sup>89</sup> Oswald, interview by Langlois, Nicaragua (1991): quoted in Robert Langlois, "Becoming a Contra: The dilemma of peasants during the revolution in Nicaragua," *International Journal* 52, no. 4 (Fall 1997), 703.

<sup>90</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 186.

were not always justified and that were not verified.”<sup>91</sup> Although many cases were justified to investigate, reckless violence in some cases thwarted any attempts to form legitimacy in the community. Violence held no limitations between age, sex, or status. Marcelle, a middle-aged woman, said, “Then they started to interrogate me and to persecute me... They crushed my foot, I lost the nail of my big toe; they beat me up, I lost two teeth, they broke my arm; they burnt me with electric current.”<sup>92</sup> Marcelle was left in jail for a year while she watched her husband die by the hands of the Sandinista government. She goes on to say, “For all of these barbarities, and because they killed my husband, I joined the Contra.”<sup>93</sup> Marcelle did not naturally lean on the Contras for support and a way to seek retribution. Rather, negative and brutal actions taken by her government left her in a helpless and unnerving state. Labeled as counterrevolutionary, sustaining long-term injuries, and without a husband in a primarily patriarchal society, what other choices did she have?

### *Mandatory Military Draft*

One of the biggest mishaps by the Sandinista government was the implementation of a national draft system, called the Patriotic Military Service (SMP) in late 1983.<sup>94</sup>

Transcending the urban and rural landscape, the SMP was widely unpopular throughout the entire country. Men, aged 17-22 years, were eligible for a two-year service in one of the dozen *batallones de lucha irregular* (BLI).<sup>95</sup> In all, around 170,000 young men would serve in the SMP

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<sup>91</sup> Marcelle, interview by Langlois, Nicaragua (1991): quoted in Robert Langlois, “Becoming a Contra.” *International Journal* 52, no. 4 (Fall 1997): 702.

<sup>92</sup> Marcelle, interview by Langlois, 708.

<sup>93</sup> Marcelle, interview by Langlois, 708.

<sup>94</sup> Thomas W. Walker, ed *Revolution & Counter Revolution in Nicaragua*, (Boulder: Westview Press Inc., 1991), 88.

<sup>95</sup> “Isolated Resistance to Nicaraguan draft; Patriotic Mothers to Lobby Congress,” *LatinNews*, March 22, 1985.

by the programs end in 1989.<sup>96</sup> The growing number of peasants leaving farms and towns was equally met with raising a national army to subdue the Contras. This program, however, pushed peasants away from passivity to violence. Young males, especially, had limited options other than picking up a rifle, regardless of which uniform. Peace, after 1983, was no longer an option for the majority of the peasantry.

Unlike other Latin American countries, Nicaragua, historically, had never had any assemblage of a nation-wide draft. Many citizens saw the draft as an infringement on their liberty and freedoms, regardless of the region.<sup>97</sup> In one instance, a group of seventeen youths who had received draft notices barricaded themselves and their mothers into a church.<sup>98</sup> Earlier in that year, unconfirmed reports that eleven dead bodies of soldiers suggested to the public how there was a heavy price to pay for deserters.<sup>99</sup> Opposition to the draft gained national attention when “The Movement of Patriotic Mothers with Sons in Military Service” took to Washington to lobby against aid to the Contras.<sup>100</sup> Altogether, the SMP was an unpopular political decision that cost the Sandinista government the elections of 1990.

The SMP program turned out to be a major blow and incentive for peasants to join the Contras from 1983 onwards. The primary tactic used by military officials was to select a town or village and send representatives door to door, searching for eligible youths.<sup>101</sup> Domingo Delgado, a coordinator for the SMP, explained the process. “They [the draftees] wanted to make fools out of the authorities here [in Quilalí]... We would forget to act as professionals and act in another way. A lot of people resisted when we took their son away and shouted insults and

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<sup>96</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*.

<sup>97</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 175.

<sup>98</sup> “Isolated Resistance to Nicaraguan Draft,” *LatinNews*.

<sup>99</sup> “Isolated Resistance to Nicaraguan Draft,” *LatinNews*.

<sup>100</sup> “Isolated Resistance to Nicaraguan Draft,” *LatinNews*.

<sup>101</sup> “Isolated Resistance to Nicaraguan Draft,” *LatinNews*.

curses at us.”<sup>102</sup> By 1983, families wanted to simply forget about the revolution and carry on with their daily lives. Families protected their sons vigorously, stashing them out of sight, lying to military personnel, and even encouraging them to take up arms with the Contras. Leo, a small producer, recalled how the army came for his son which eventually led to him joining the Contras:

I joined on my own because of the repression and the persecution to which I was subjected. The final straw was when the Sandinista soldiers killed my 17 year old son as he was working on the land. They killed him because he did not want to join the EPS. He tried to escape and they killed him in the corn plot where he was working. They put me in jail for three months in El Chipote. When I got out of jail, they continued to harass me; it was only then that I decided to join the Contra.<sup>103</sup>

A combination of the SMP and Sandinista repression forced Leo into the ranks of the Contras. Further, a close connectedness to family was ever present in the lives of peasants across the countryside. As Domingo Delgado pointed out, forgetting “to act as professionals” implied the use of violent and deadly means to achieve military quotas. Indeed, the year the SMP was emplaced, the Contras grew from 8,500 to 14,464.<sup>104</sup> Joining the Contras was the lesser of two evils for many peasants. In their opinion, if they were forced to serve in the military, they might as well participate in an army who fought against these policies; alongside fathers, brothers, friends, and other peasants who shared similar values and lifestyles as them. Several witnesses explained, “They called us National Guard when we were just a group of boys fleeing from the draft.”<sup>105</sup> The Contras were being fueled through a legitimate reaction to Sandinista policies.

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<sup>102</sup> Domingo Delgado, interview by Horton. Nicaragua (1992-94): quoted in *Peasants in Arms: War and Peace in the Mountains of Nicaragua, 1979-1994*. (Athens: Ohio University, Center for International Studies, 1998), 174-75.

<sup>103</sup> Leo, interview by Langlois, Nicaragua (1991): quoted in Robert Langlois, “Becoming a Contra.,” 706.

<sup>104</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 178.

<sup>105</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 178.

Altogether, unpopular Sandinista policies contributed heavily to the recruitment of peasants. Their label as being Somoza aligned *guardias* was farther from the truth. Initially, the allure of the revolution wore off and traditional lifestyles resumed in the countryside. Unpopular agrarian reforms like co-operatives and restrictions on economic necessities created initial agitation. The Sandinista government reverted to violence as a way to suppress any pockets of resistance that challenged their position, causing more agitation and personal grievances. Finally, the SMP program in 1983 pushed peasants past a point of no-return. Young males chose to freely join the Contras in lieu of what they saw as an encroaching and repressive government. The Contras were not merely puppets or subordinates of the U.S. government. They held independent motives that rested on their relationship with families and the community.

#### The Contras Under U.S. Hegemony

By no means were the Contras a spotless and fully independent organization from outside support. Being a landless and detached political sector in Nicaragua, peasants found themselves relying heavily on outside support from the U.S., Argentina, private factions, and many others. From a peasant's perspective, the U.S. was an extremely important benefactor for the simplest of items like combat boots, new uniforms, and weapons. When asked where a Contra had gotten his Russian AK rifle that was standing by his bed, he responded, "I don't know. I think the Israelis or the Americans sent them to us. In any event, suddenly they were here."<sup>106</sup> Besides when U.S. funding slowly stopped altogether, peasants fighting with the Contras had little to no knowledge of who their patrons were exactly. This was their fight, or so it seemed. Again, we must

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<sup>106</sup> Pecos Bill, interview by Eich and Rincón, Nicaragua (1985): quoted in Dieter Eich & Carlos Rincón, *The Contras: Interviews with Anti-Sandinistas*, (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1985.), 189.

understand the complexity of diverging interests in the confined, Nicaraguan-Honduran border region.

*The García Family and Others*

In a televised speech to the American people in 1984, Ronald Reagan announced the Sandinista government as trying to “export their terror to every other country in the region.”<sup>107</sup> His administration fully believed the Sandinista government was a threat to all of Central America. Well before 1984, however, the U.S. had started to provide \$19.5 million in aid to the Contras by the end of 1981. Although this amount will vary from source-to-source, some estimate financial aid into Nicaragua at well over \$400 million by the end of the conflict in 1989.<sup>108</sup> In a 1985 National Security Center intelligence document, it outlined the funds to be used for the purchase of arms, ammunition, ordnance items, and two small transport aircraft.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, the funds were used for the upkeep and relocation of base camps on the Honduran-Nicaragua border (\$300,000 per month), major ground operations, the opening of a southern front along the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan border, and guerilla training by CIA officers.<sup>110</sup> In a declassified document regarding the scope of CIA activities, it is made abundantly clear the three prongs used to force the Sandinista government to enter into negotiations with the Contras: political action, paramilitary action, and propoganda action.<sup>111</sup> The CIA, or better known as The

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<sup>107</sup> Ronald Reagan, “The Fear of Communism in Central America” (1984), in *Latin America and the United States*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Robert H. Holden and Eric Zolov (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 304-06.

<sup>108</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 117.

<sup>109</sup> Oliver L. North to Robert C. McFarlane, “FDN [Nicaraguan Democratic Force] Military Operations,” April 11, 1985, Top Secret Memorandum, NI02434, Digital National Security Archives, Understanding the Iran-Contra Affairs: Brown University, accessed November 20, 2017.

<sup>110</sup> FDN Military Operations, April 11, 1985.

<sup>111</sup> “CIA covert operations in Nicaragua,” September 19, 1983, Presidential Finding, N101824, Digital National Security Archives, Understanding the Iran-Contra Affairs: Brown University, accessed November 20, 2017.

García Family by the Contras (in respect to the last three letters in García), began training the soldiers in guerilla tactics while constructing clever ways for the dissemination of propaganda in 1982.<sup>112</sup>

The CIA drew heavily on propaganda dissemination to bolster its efforts in the region. A CIA contract employee named Kirkpatrick wrote a manual for the Contras titled “Psychological Operations in Guerilla Warfare”.<sup>113</sup> The manual drew upon multiple U.S. Army tactical manuals while also describing a step-by-step process on how to recruit Nicaraguan peasants, women, and children.<sup>114</sup> A second manual was also written by the CIA, named the “Freedom Fighter’s Manual”. Portrayed as a cartoon, the manual recommended performing simple sabotage acts such as cutting telephone cables, leaving lights on, and putting dirt into gasoline tanks “with simple household tools such as scissors, empty bottles, screwdrivers, matches, etc.”<sup>115</sup> These two manuals received considerable media attention and have been used as evidence by professionals to highlight the U.S. power to coerce peasants. Although it is not the primary agenda of this thesis, it is important to note that the power of these two manuals have been overstretched. Through examination of literacy rates of peasants during this time, the majority of peasants were illiterate and would not be able to effectively read or even comprehend the complex military jargon of the manuals. In one paragraph, the manual states, “The support of local contacts who know reality down to its roots is achieved through the exploitation of the social and political

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<sup>112</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 111.

<sup>113</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 129.

<sup>114</sup> Tayacan, “Psychological Operations in Guerilla Warfare,” CIA, last modified May 28, 2010, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP86M00886R001300010029-9.pdf>.

<sup>115</sup> U.S Central Intelligence Agency, “Teaching Sabotage” (1984), In *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Robert H. Holden and Eric Zolov (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 307-09.

weaknesses of the target society.”<sup>116</sup> The widely-held belief behind these manuals had, in actuality, a limited effect on peasant Contra fighters. Complex terminology and military jargon most likely did not reach its target audience effectively. Garvin briefly describes how the manuals sat in the FDN’s Tegucigalpa offices without ever being disseminated to the Contras in mass. In essence, they were free gifts for anyone who stopped by the office.

The CIA continually acted as front-men in the Contra camps, relaying information to the Argentinean Intelligence Officers who would then pass along the information to the Contras.<sup>117</sup> After the Argentineans left Nicaragua in 1984, an excess of CIA Foreign intelligence officers, paramilitary specialists, and technical officers arrived in Honduras in what was dubbed the “Anti-Sandinista activities” directorate.<sup>118</sup> CIA officers successfully established Contra camps, started training programs, and began efficiently moving supplies into Honduras from the U.S. The amount of resources allocated to the Contras was staggering. It is clear that the Reagan administration had little to no confidence in the rag-tag group of Nicaraguans’ success without U.S. support as seen through correspondences between CIA director Casey and the Deputy Director for Intelligence.<sup>119</sup>

The CIA utilized radio and television in their propaganda efforts against the Sandinista government. The CIA routinely bribed newspapers and journalists alike to provide sympathetic news coverage in favor of the Contras while denouncing the Sandinista government. *La Prensa*, in particular, is a newspaper in Nicaragua that was heavily targeted by the CIA. Deeply in favor

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<sup>116</sup> Tayacan, CIA manual.

<sup>117</sup> Brown, *The Real Contra War*, 85.

<sup>118</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 114.

<sup>119</sup> Director of Central Intelligence to Deputy Director for Intelligence, “Nicaragua,” December 14, 1984, Secret Memorandum, IC00656, Digital National Security Archives, Understanding the Iran-Contra Affairs, Brown University, accessed November 20, 2017, [https://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding\\_the\\_Iran\\_Contra\\_Affair/about.php](https://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding_the_Iran_Contra_Affair/about.php)

of the overthrow of Somoza in 1979, *La Prensa* switched from a stance of support of the new revolution towards opposition.<sup>120</sup> The CIA was able to successfully use third parties to send printing material and supplies to the paper in the beginning years.<sup>121</sup> The CIA embedded themselves into Costa Rica and Honduras, doubling a local journalists' salary to provide "press stories, commentaries, or editorials attacking Nicaragua."<sup>122</sup> The CIA also took advantage of radio channels, funding a Contra radio station called Radio Liberación.<sup>123</sup> In all, the CIA provided an assortment of support to include training Contras in guerrilla tactics, paying off journalists and newspapers, and supporting radio stations.

When the U.S. Congress ceased support for the Contras in 1984, the U.S. was able to secure funding through private enterprises and foreign governments. The National Security Agency was able to influence the Honduran government into loaning the Contras munitions after they had expressed "increasing anxiety over the presence of large number of FDN Freedom Fighters."<sup>124</sup> At the same time, they secured a \$20 million contribution from Saudi Arabia in 1985 alone.<sup>125</sup> In total, Saudi Arabia would provide \$32 million while Taiwan gave \$2 million.<sup>126</sup> The Guatemalan government provided the Contras with \$8 million in munitions, and in return, the U.S. provided the Guatemalan military with a "wish list" of items to include aircraft, ground

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<sup>120</sup> Angharad N. Valdivia, "The U.S. Intervention in Nicaraguan and Other Latin American Media," In *Revolution & Counter Revolution in Nicaragua*, ed. Thomas W. Walker, (Westview Press Inc., 1991), 358.

<sup>121</sup> Valdivia, "The U.S. Intervention in Nicaragua," 362.

<sup>122</sup> Valdivia, "The U.S. Intervention in Nicaragua," 353.

<sup>123</sup> Howard H. Frederick, "Electronic Penetration," in *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas*, ed. Thomas W. Walker (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 124.

<sup>124</sup> Robert C. McFarlane to President, "Approach to the Hondurans regarding the Nicaraguan Resistance," February 19, 1985, Secret Memorandum, IC00855, Digital National Security Archives, Understanding the Iran-Contra Affairs: Brown University, Accessed November 20, 2017.

<sup>125</sup> Steelhammer to Adolfo Calero, "Letter to Adolfo Calero reporting on Honduran agreement to help Contras, Saudi contribution of \$20 million and other components of resupply operation," February 20, 1985, Secret letter, IC00858, Digital National Security Archives, Understanding the Iran-Contra Affairs: Brown University, accessed November 20, 2017.

<sup>126</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 161.

forces equipment, and non-tactical military equipment.<sup>127</sup> The U.S. also contacted the governments of China, South Korea, and private military contractors in Britain for financial support, munitions, and manpower.<sup>128</sup> A National Security Advisor staffer by the name of Lieutenant-Colonel Oliver North was able to overcharge the Iranians for weapons sold to them and use the profit to support the Contras.<sup>129</sup> Ultimately, the U.S. CIA and State Department were important in keeping the Contra conflict intact and fully operational when U.S. Financial assistance was removed.

Private contributions from wealthy Americans also contributed heavily to the Contras.<sup>130</sup> A political group called the Young Republicans posted an advertisement in the U.S. that read, “Only 53 Cents A Day Will Support a Nicaraguan Freedom Fighter”.<sup>131</sup> U.S.- supported campaigns by the Young Republicans and others generated a combined \$3.2 million for the Contras.<sup>132</sup>

Under this context, The FDN became increasingly reliant on the U.S. in nearly all aspects of operations. Wide-scale support of the FDN should not come to a surprise at this point. The U.S. hegemonic presence in Nicaragua was a continuation from past support of a conservative rebellion (1910), U.S. military occupation (1912-33), and economic and military funding of the Somoza dictatorship (1936-79). The rise of the FSLN government was a challenge to that

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<sup>127</sup> Oliver L. North to Robert C. McFarlane, “Guatemalan aid to the Nicaraguan Resistance,” March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1985, Memorandum, IC00918, Digital National Security Archives, Understanding the Iran-Contra Affairs: Brown University, accessed November 20, 2017.

<sup>128</sup> North to McFarlane, “Assistance to the Nicaraguan resistance,” December 4, 1984, Memorandum, Iran-Contra Affair Collection, Digital National Security Archives, accessed on October 10, 2017, <http://libproxy.uwyo.edu/login/?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.uwyo.edu/docview/1679149507?accountid=14793>

<sup>129</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 163.

<sup>130</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 161.

<sup>131</sup> George Washington University, “Public Diplomacy and Covert Propaganda,” GWU The National Security Archive, accessed December 10, 2017, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB40/>

<sup>132</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*.

hegemony. Like in previous instances, regaining control was vital and almost inevitable under the lens of preventing the spread of communist attitudes. Support for the FDN was the most direct route the U.S. took to get back into the preexisting state they had long enjoyed and profited from. The FDN, however, was not the only means by which the U.S. attempted to regain control. As any successful investor would adhere to, the U.S. did not attempt to put all their eggs in one basket. As a well-versed agent of intervention into Latin American countries (Brazil, Bolivia, Cuba, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Granada, Guatemala, Honduras, Haiti, Mexico, and Panama ), the U.S. poured funds into destroying Nicaragua's economy and infiltrating the Central-American news media.<sup>133</sup> Altogether, U.S. support for the FSLN and others need to be considered under a hegemonic lens. Without any aid, the peasants would merely be regional, self-autonomous cells living off of the land.

### Human Rights Violations

Human rights violations severely plagued the Contras' image to Nicaraguans and the outside world as being a capable and moral fighting force that would institute a democratic government after gaining power. The autarchical nature of the Contras provided soldiers the ability to partake in unruly behavior without the threat of repercussions. In one instance, a band of 200 Contras set up an ambush on a road for Sandinista soldiers to pass through. After several successful attacks, a blue jeep appeared with thirteen people inside. Eduardo López Valenzuela, a peasant foot-soldier recalls,

All 13 got out and stood in a line before us. There were three nurses among them. Jimmy Leo, Polo, and Rubén immediately began to rape the three women. The women implored them to stop but nobody cared. After the rape, they fired a volley of 20 shots with an FAL into the head and chest of each woman. Then Jimmy Leo marched up to a man who looked like a foreigner. The man said, 'Stop shooting! We are civilians. I am a physician

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<sup>133</sup> "U.S. Interventions in Latin America," Bob's Comics Reviews, accessed May 11, 2018, <https://www.zompist.com/latam.html>.

from Germany. Don't kill us!" Jimmy didn't let this bother him. And as the foreigner cried out again, 'Don't kill us!' Jimmy Leo began firing at him, from the head down to the chest.<sup>134</sup>

The rural, lawless landscape clearly sparked a cultural norm for atrocities like above to occur within Contra battalions. At the very least, a precedent was set where Contra soldiers would not be held accountable for their crimes.

Contra soldiers also used "selective repression" as a way to intimidate Sandinista sympathizers or would be Sandinistas.<sup>135</sup> Any individuals who were thought to be in collaboration with the Sandinista government were harassed, beaten up, or even killed. In a conversation with Pedro Javier Núñez Cabezas on Contra interrogation, he harshly explained the method as, "You would be beaten until you talked. Also, an interrogation is carried out intensively only when it can be determined that the subject can give information of interest. No time is wasted interrogating people who can't give any information. So they aren't interrogated. They're eliminated right away."<sup>136</sup> Asked on what would happen to prisoners if they did not talk, he responded, "Then you're liquidated".<sup>137</sup> Such behavior such surely distanced the Contras from the general Nicaraguan public. Instead of promoting the Contra organization as a group of merciful champions of the rural populous, they instigated further resentment in the direction of themselves. As portrayed in the national media, Contra human rights violations have been well documented. Hundreds of civilians were murdered throughout the 1980s. Human rights violations were a persistent and common occurrence along the Nicaraguan-Honduran Border.

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<sup>134</sup> Eduardo Lopez Valenzuela, interview by Eich and Rincón, Nicaragua (1985): quoted in Dieter Eich & Carlos Rincón, *The Contras: Interviews with Anti-Sandinistas*, (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1985), 64.

<sup>135</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 15.

<sup>136</sup> Pedro Javier Núñez Cabezas, Interview by Eich and Rincón (1985): quoted in Dieter Eich and Carlos Rincón, *The Contras: Interviews with Anti-Sandinistas* (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1985) 54.

<sup>137</sup> Pedro Javier Cabezas, interview by Eich and Rincón, *the Contras*, 54.

The goal was simple: eliminate opposing peasants from participating with the Sandinista government. This goal had massive repercussions that limited the Contras ability to win hearts and minds.

### **The End is Near**

Although the Sandinista government attempted to discount Contra success, their operations had a dramatic impact on the economy and country as a whole. Altogether, the death toll in the entire Contra conflict stood at 30,865 with many more permanently disabled.<sup>138</sup> The U.S. equivalent for this time period would be 2.25 million, over thirty-eight times the U.S. death toll in the Vietnam War.<sup>139</sup> By 1985, 250,000 people had been displaced, many fleeing to neighboring countries.<sup>140</sup> The number of orphans surpassed 7,000 in the same year.<sup>141</sup> Many Nicaraguans were drafted into the SMP program. They either had to give up educational goals or were prevented from aiding families in need. Being a very community driven society, this had a dramatic effect on national cohesiveness by 1990. Through its completion, over 170,000 young men served, with no less than 60,000 personnel serving in the Army at any given time after 1983.<sup>142</sup>

The Sandinista government was severely limited in what exactly they could devote their national budget towards. Social programs in healthcare, education, social security, and housing were being thwarted by Contra insurgency. In 1985 alone, defense expenditures had reached 50% of the national budget.<sup>143</sup> Nicaragua's economy was slashed from the inside out by the United States' destabilization campaign. GDP growth shrunk from 10% in 1980 to -4% (1985)

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<sup>138</sup> Thomas W. Walker, *Nicaragua: The Land of Sandino*, (Boulder: Westview Press Inc., 1991), 53.

<sup>139</sup> Walker, "Nicaragua," 53.

<sup>140</sup> Williams, "The Social Programs," 258.

<sup>141</sup> Williams, "The Social Programs," 258.

<sup>142</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*.

<sup>143</sup> Williams, "The Social Programs," 256.

and -8% (1988). All the hopes of an innovative society were quickly becoming endangered. President Ortega announced in 1988 how inflation had reached 21,742% while wages had staggered to 6.3% less than the previous year.<sup>144</sup> Bartering in the “informal economy” presided as the primary method of trade while begging, prostitution, and petty crime infiltrated the streets.<sup>145</sup>

While the cities suffered, the Contras were able to effectively reign free in the countryside, living off of the land from generous *campesinos*. Contra collaborators purchased supplies, carried messages, nursed wounded combatants, and acted as guides for Contra units in unfamiliar territories.<sup>146</sup> Most collaborators were fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, as well as close friends of Contra fighters. Contra units controlled the treacherous terrain regularly. Rodrigo Sosa, a Sandinista soldier remembers how “At that time Quilalí was a no man’s land... The MILPAs had full authority and control over the outlying zones.”<sup>147</sup> Turmoil erupted in all of Nicaragua. Peasants and the remaining public were exhausted from a decade of conflict and the lives that were lost. Furthermore, Nicaragua’s economy was in ruin and many saw themselves in a worse condition than before the revolution. The Contras did not exhibit any signs of retreating, regardless of discontinued U.S. aid. Political change in hindsight, was eminent. This change the Contras had wished for, however, was not felt by the rest of Nicaragua.

By June 15, 1990, 14,200 Contras had been disarmed at UN demobilization stations in Nicaragua and Honduras, while thousands of more were making the journey to turn in their

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<sup>144</sup> “Yankees blamed for economic disaster; Ortega Announces Drastic Cuts; Currency Again Devalued.” *LatinNews*, February 16, 1989.

<sup>145</sup> Walker, “Nicaragua,” 85.

<sup>146</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 140.

<sup>147</sup> Rodrigo Sosa. Interview by Horton, Nicaragua (1992-94): quoted in Lynn Horton, *Peasants in Arms War and Peace in the Mountains of Nicaragua, 1979-1994*. (Athens: Ohio University, Center for International Studies, 1998), 127.

weapons.<sup>148</sup> With the surprise upset election of the FSLN government by Violeta Chamorro in 1990, peaceful negotiations between the Contras and the new government ensued, resulting in the mass disarmament of peasants. American aid had ceased well before 1990. The Reagan administration had come under much controversy with the Iran-Contra affair, and had received a backlash from Senators, academia, and private organizations. Without consistent military aid, the Contras were left stranded, unable to conduct military operations to the scale it had in previous years. The Bush administration had no intention of continuing its support for the Contras in 1989. Instead, it relied on a policy of support for Chamorro and the Nicaraguan Internal Opposition (UNO).<sup>149</sup> Millions of dollars went to support her election in lieu of the Contras. Yet to many, the Contras had slipped into the abyss of Nicaragua, unrepresented by the new government. Miguel Obando y Bravo, a Catholic Cardinal, later said, “All the promises made to [the Contras] were broken. As a result, frustration and fear among the *campesinos* in the countryside is greater than ever, and growing.”<sup>150</sup> Chamorro made no attempt to honor land titles, tools, and material to build roads and improve drinking water.<sup>151</sup> Within the first six months of 1991, more than fifty ex-Contras had been murdered in Nicaragua.<sup>152</sup> Feeling threatened and with a taste to rearm, ex-Contras formed small bands of soldiers, similar to that of the MILPAS in 1979. Once a threatening force to the Sandinista government, how did the peasants fall back into such an anti-climactic, unaltered lifestyle with very little political representation?

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<sup>148</sup> “Chamorro reveals size of cutback; No more than 41,000 Troops, as 77% of Contras de-mobilise,” *Latinnews*, June 28, 1990.

<sup>149</sup> “Aiding Nicaragua’s Internal Opposition,” excerpted from a report by Hemisphere Initiatives. *Chicago Tribune* (pre-1997 Fulltext), October 26, 1989.

<sup>150</sup> Miguel Obando, interview by Brown, Nicaragua (1992): quoted in Timothy Brown, *The Real Contra War*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 175.

<sup>151</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 262.

<sup>152</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 264.

## **An Alternative Explanation for Failure**

Historians and policy experts have held differing interpretations as to why the Contras were unable to make any significant change or to institute a full-scale revolution. Some experts have attributed the Contras' weak and divided leadership and lack of strategic planning as the chief reason.<sup>153</sup> They conclude how the blending of disparate groups of peasants, *guardias*, and foreign governments had contrasting intentions that worked against one another. Others argue that the Contra's cause was too deeply dependent on U.S. resources which prevented them from ever forming a well-defined ideology.<sup>154</sup> Taking a more extreme stance, they insist the Contra's exhibited very little sovereignty, being easily manipulated and coerced pawns in a geopolitical backdrop. Although a few professionals mention the rural regionalism of the conflict in a handful of paragraphs, historians for the most part, have ignored the effect of the peasants' rural roots. Urban and rural Nicaraguans held deep, negative stereotypes of each other. Disconnectedness prevailed in Nicaragua; the Contra image was unable to unify the country. Unlike the Sandinista revolution, the Contra conflict failed to penetrate the municipalities for support. The majority of Contras were, indeed, rural *campesinos*. Few battles or saboteur acts ever extended into cities. Citizens in Managua, Granada, and León were left without any knowledge of who these Contras really were. Any knowledge that reached these people was carefully sifted through by the Sandinista government in newspapers, radio, and rumors. By the end of the conflict, the majority of Nicaraguans wholeheartedly held negative views of the Contras. In the final segment, I will offer an alternative interpretation for why the Contras' decade long conflict was unable to successfully implement the slightest of changes into Nicaraguan society.

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<sup>153</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 253.

<sup>154</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 254.

During the Sandinista revolution, many *campesinos* did not associate themselves or their community with the revolution. For the most part, the revolution and its associated violence took place in metropolitan places like Managua.<sup>155</sup> In all, estimates put the death toll at 35,000 while 600,000 people were left without homes.<sup>156</sup> Rural areas were spared the horrific violence against the Somoza government. This initial disconnect played heavily into nationality and what it meant to be a *Nicaraguan*. For those who participated in the revolution and witnessed brutal acts by the Somoza *guardias*, the revolution was a triumphant and perseverant victory. An air of connectedness and achievement filled the hearts of many who lived in urban areas. They wholeheartedly believed in the new Sandinista government. On the other hand, rural Nicaraguans were left waiting as spectators to what the new government may offer them. They were highly supportive of the revolution, but it was not necessarily *their revolution*. Many peasants learned of the revolution through second-hand sources as communication was limited.<sup>157</sup> Mario Aguero from La Vigía explained, “We didn’t know about the war [against Somoza] until the moment of liberation. It was an urban war.”<sup>158</sup> Even before the revolution, many peasants had little to no grievances with the Somoza government. Somoza and his *guardia* left rural zones unscathed from abuse and harassment. *Campesinos* have historically been disconnected from the rest of Nicaragua. The blood and violence was not their own. They held a different sense of nationality; one based on community and agrarian values. They were a different type of *Nicaraguan*.

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<sup>155</sup> Horton *Peasants in Arms*, 74.

<sup>156</sup> "El Final (The End)," The Nicaraguan Revolution, accessed May 11, 2018.  
<https://thenicaraguanrevolution.weebly.com/el-final-the-end.html>

<sup>157</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 76.

<sup>158</sup> Mario Aguero, interview by Horton. Nicaragua (1992-94): quoted in *Peasants in Arms: War and Peace in the Mountains of Nicaragua, 1979-1994*. (Athens: Ohio University, Center for International Studies, 1998), 141.

The whole of Nicaragua is divided into multiple areas: The pacific lowlands, the urban coastal regions of Managua, Granada, and León, and the mountainous highlands of Northern Nicaragua. Physical and cultural disparities have prevented each area from being fully integrated. In the rural areas of the pacific lowlands and Northern highlands, development has been consistently behind the rest of Nicaragua. Literacy, healthcare, functioning infrastructure, and adequate drinking water were rare or limited in these regions. Early on, much of national reconstruction and social programs were catered to urban needs, leaving the mountainous areas untouched.<sup>159</sup> Thus, these areas have been left stranded and disconnected from the rest of the country. Additionally, the Contra conflict did not help better the rural population's overall living conditions.

In the eyes of the urban population, rural Nicaragua has been traditionally viewed by Nicaraguans as backwards and primitive. A Sandinista officer noted,

The peasant from the south is very different from the peasant of the north. His social, political, and technological evolution is far ahead of the later. In many cases, we used peasants from the south, those having a natural leadership, and sent them to the north to organize similar systems, thinking of bringing progress to this part of the country. It was a social and political shock.<sup>160</sup>

The officer, like many others, viewed northern peasants with distaste and contempt. In their opinion, the peasants' view of evolution more limited than those with government or urban professions in their opinion. They were incapable of comprehending the complexities of reform, enlightenment thought, or what was best suited for them. Not only did the officer share his feelings towards peasants, but he differentiated the northern peasant from the southern peasant.

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<sup>159</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 163.

<sup>160</sup> EPS Officer. Interview by Langlois. Nicaragua (1991): 706. Quoted in Robert Langlois, "Becoming A Contra" *International Journal* 52, no. 4 (Fall 1997).

This abrupt categorization further alienated northern peasants from southern peasants and the urban population. Horton states how “Some FSLN policy makers and analysts characterize Nicaragua’s mountain peasantry as a traditional, backward, conservative sector resistant to revolutionary change often implicitly assumed to be in their best interests.”<sup>161</sup> The FSLN did not understand or fully consider the *campesinos* or their political wishes. They were a subordinate, loosely-tied group of provincials whose existence was in need of government-sponsored initiatives to promote revolutionary ideals.

The lack of education in Northern Nicaragua proved to be a justification to negatively stereotype the peasantry. A Sandinista Lieutenant named Rodrigo Sosa said, “The majority [of Sandinista soldiers] were from the cities- Managua, León, Chinandega... The people here in the north have a different mentality. The soldiers say this northern *campesino* is an Indian. These are true campesinos, who have never even been to a school. They’ve never even been to Managua!”<sup>162</sup> Another former officer remarked, “Because of their [low] cultural level, their inability to understand, it’s easier to trick them than to convince them. We all speak the same Spanish, but not with the same meaning.”<sup>163</sup> Since very few peasants held a third-grade education, they were classified as inferior without any political motivations. They fell into a common, rather naïve narrative. They were understood as the hillbillies of Nicaragua, who could not govern their communities yet alone a national government. Inferiority was strongly correlated with the Contras failure to make a major difference in the conflict. Their way of life was dissimilar at best, in that their revolution could never bridge the negative stereotypes that

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<sup>161</sup> Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 140.

<sup>162</sup> Sosa, interview by Horton, 210.

<sup>163</sup> Eps Officer, Interview by Horton. Nicaragua (1992-94): quoted in Lynn Horton, *Peasants in Arms: War and Peace in the Mountains of Nicaragua, 1979-1994*. (Athens: Ohio University, Center for International Studies, 1998), 210.

existed before and during the revolution. Furthermore, they simply could not connect to the feelings of urban Nicaragua. The Contra image was not able to capture Nicaraguans in the manner they understood.

Physically, the Contras were unable to conduct any sizable offensive that stretched into the cities. Although they roamed mostly free in the northern mountains, very few people lived and worked the land altogether. Nine-thousand families had been relocated away from free-fire zones by 1985, crippling a key way to garner additional support.<sup>164</sup> Furthermore, the area was inhospitable and dangerous. Controlling a “no-man’s land” was a political loss for Contra leaders. Any attempt to infiltrate cities was met by Sandinista challenge. In a prison interview with William Baltodano Herrera, he described his mission to blow up a cement factory in near Managua. In describing his mission, he said, “What I needed, of course, was to be able to move around in the country with relative security. This was guaranteed to me. But it didn’t correspond to reality... we assumed that they [Contras] had certain cells, safe houses, and that they could move around. But things were really quite different.”<sup>165</sup> He goes on to describe how he was supposed to meet a contact, but was captured by Sandinista State Security officials at the contact’s location. They had learned of the operation well in advance. Herrera’s story is important for several reasons. First, Herrera was one of a few Contra combatants to ever attempt an infiltration into cities like Managua. Before 1987, the Contras relied heavily on the *foquismo*, a theory of guerilla warfare.<sup>166</sup> Written by Che Guevara of Cuba, it relied on military operations in remote rural sectors where the government is prone to struggle.<sup>167</sup> The manual, however,

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<sup>164</sup> Williams, “The Social Programs,” 194.

<sup>165</sup> William B. Herrera, interview by Eich and Rincón, Nicaragua (1985): quoted in Dieter Eich and Carlos Rincón, *The Contras: Interviews with Anti-Sandinistas* (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1985), 26.

<sup>166</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 201.

<sup>167</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 201.

mostly ignored political organizing and the urban areas. By 1987, the Contras had quickly outgrown this model as they had little penetration into densely populated areas. The absence of operations in cities had a detrimental impact on the Contras by 1987. Secondly, minimal resources were devoted to the cities. In Herrera's case, he was expecting well thought-out contingencies like safe houses and cells that did not exist. There were not any reliable agents who lived in the cities. And if there were, State Security was able to easily penetrate any loose-ends. For example, in 1986, State Security made 1,500 arrests in less than two weeks in the Matagalpa region.<sup>168</sup> Lastly, the peasants' rural heritage would have been a natural deterrent in conducting saboteur acts. An estimated 517 Contra fighters or roughly 2% of the entire force had previously lived in the combined cities of Managua, Granada, and León.<sup>169</sup> Although Herrera had received plenty of training in this specialty, the Contras overwhelmingly rural base would have posed problems. Garvin notes how, "In the capital they would have been about as obvious, and as effective, as the Beverly Hillbillies."<sup>170</sup> Metropolitan areas never witnessed any direct confrontation with the Contras besides sons or fathers being recruited into the Army. As the Sandinista revolution was *their* battle and fight for justice, the Contra conflict never arose to this level for them. This separation between urban and rural gave the Sandinista government a strategic advantage to determine how the Contras would be viewed by citizens.

In the early stages after the revolution, the FSLN successfully established Sandinista Defense Committees (CDS) in communities around the country. The role of the CDS was to provide low-level security while reinforcing the Sandinista ideology.<sup>171</sup> Although not mandatory, they were strongly encouraged. Without any first-hand knowledge of the Contras, citizens relied

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<sup>168</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo* 176.

<sup>169</sup> (CIAV/OAS), "Cuadros estadísticos del proceso de Desmovilización," 117.

<sup>170</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 176.

<sup>171</sup> Hager Jr., "The Origins of the 'Contra War,'" 143.

on the CDS for information regarding the conflict and their adversaries. With this method in place, the government fruitfully curved any oppositional fervor or information that did not portray the Sandinistas in a positive light. The CDS also took advantage of the Contra's use of foreign aid and ties to the Somoza *Guardias*. The Sandinistas played on traditional narratives of the Contras as puppets of the U.S. government. To connect the message on a local level, they compared their revolution with the triumph of Sandino against U.S. occupiers.<sup>172</sup> A common slogan was, "After 50 years, the enemy is the same."<sup>173</sup> With its small National Guard base, Contras were linked to nicknames like beasts or frogs.<sup>174</sup> These same names were common language in the revolution against the Somoza *Guardias*.<sup>175</sup> Insignificant phrases and assumptions of the Contra's identity built off of each other, forming persistent narratives that became reality for citizens. Without personally knowing or understanding the Contras, neutral citizens were left on the sidelines of the conflict with a Sandinista driven account of reality.

The lack of support by the densely-populated regions had taken its toll on the Contras by 1989. In polls by Univisión television (November 14, 1989) and Hemisphere initiatives (December 13, 1989), the vast majority of Nicaraguan citizens held a negative image of the Contras. In Univisión's poll, 20% of respondents had a positive view of the Contras while 65% did not.<sup>176</sup> Hemisphere Initiatives had even worse results. The Contras held a 10% positive in Nicaragua.<sup>177</sup> For these respondents, the majority sided that the U.S. government was to blame for the conflict.<sup>178</sup> Utilizing narratives of their affinity for one another, it is no coincidence that

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<sup>172</sup> Colburn, "Foot Dragging," 191.

<sup>173</sup> Colburn, "Foot Dragging," 191.

<sup>174</sup> Colburn, "Foot Dragging," 191.

<sup>175</sup> Colburn, "Foot Dragging," 191.

<sup>176</sup> Sergio Bendixen, & Rob Schroth, political poll, Univisión television, November 14, 1989.

<sup>177</sup> Greenberg, Stanley & Celinda Lake. Political poll. Hemisphere Initiatives, December 13, 1989.

<sup>178</sup> Univisión television and Hemisphere Initiatives, political poll.

the U.S. government and the Contras were extremely despised in Nicaragua. Thus, the Contra's rural base was baseless in the wider context of Nicaragua.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the Contras of Nicaragua exhibited an actual, authentic rural base. Peasants had separate motives than other actors such as the U.S. or the *Guardias*. They joined for various reasons, from Sandinista repression to unpopular social programs. At the heart of a peasant's decision to join was his or her family. Yet, the Contra conflict could not have achieved its partial success without the loosely-connected strings between all parties. Regardless of their sizable and genuine counterrevolution, they were unable to achieve any real change in Nicaragua. Unlike the Sandinista revolution, the Contras were unable to acquire support from the municipalities. Being mostly segregated from the rest of the population, their inability to penetrate cities cost them dearly. Much of the population had little knowledge of who they were. From there, the Sandinista government had clear control to how the Contras were perceived. In addition, differences between culture resulted in even more detachment, leading to the Contras ultimate demise.

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