

The Sandinista Defense Committees and the
Transformation of Political Culture in
Nicaragua

An Essay Presented

by

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Preface

This essay is based primarily on two months of fieldwork in Nicaragua in July and August of 1987 made possible by the generosity of the Committee on Latin American and Iberian Studies and Dr. Robert Coles. Approximately 90 interviews with CDS leaders, members, and non-members are complemented by close observation of several CDSs in Nicaragua, most notably those in Ciudad Sandino, Managua, Masaya, and Condega. The bias of this essay is inevitably toward the individual member of the working and peasant classes and toward how the CDS has affected his or her political self-conception, aspirations, and outlook. Access to higher ranking officials with authorization to speak for political parties or institutions is both extremely limited and not of great relevance to this essay. Since the FSLN currently forbids any sort of opinion polling in Nicaragua, many people agreed to speak with me only if I did not use their real names. Consequently, many of the names in this essay are pseudonyms.

I owe a tremendous debt to a number of people instrumental in this project. Professor Frances Hagopian provided extremely valuable advice and worked to see that this essay would be written with academic rigor. Dr. Robert Coles assured that I understood the very real limitations of academic rigor in understanding people who live, feel, and pray, and who have endured struggles that most will never know. The UNICEF field office in Managua provided assistance and contacts that made the many interviews that went into this essay possible. Most importantly, I owe a tremendous debt to my parents, Judith A. Himes and James R. Himes, who were extremely supportive throughout the entire odyssey.

Note: The typeset employed in this essay prohibited the use of accents on Spanish words.

1 Introduction

As the sun rose on the morning of July 19, 1979 over the dingy *barrio* of OPEN-3, the timeless crows of a hundred roosters were background to a sound for which generations of Nicaraguans had waited, fought, and died. Early morning radio broadcasts told the population of OPEN-3 that they were free, that Somoza was gone, and that the hated National Guard was fleeing into the mountains or surrendering *en masse*. Before long, the *barrio's* dusty streets were filled with the celebrating throngs of OPEN-3. Music, laughter, and honking horns fueled a raucous celebration that would not end for days. Amidst the growing crescendo of revolutionary euphoria, a bent cobbler emerged from his rundown shack, and with the unlikely tools of his profession, toppled the government sign that designated the *barrio* "OPEN-3". In its place, the cobbler erected a hastily painted sign of his own. In blazing, hand-painted red letters, the sign read "CIUDAD SANDINO".

The story of the revolutionary cobbler has become part of the local mythology in Ciudad Sandino. Any resident of the *barrio* can

relate it, and most claim to know the cobbler involved. It is a parable of change, symbolic of the radical alterations the revolution would make in every sphere of Nicaraguan life. The ideological program of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional* (FSLN) dictated far more than a simple change of regime; it called for the complete overhaul of Nicaraguan socio-economic and political structures.

The structural transformations that have occurred under the Sandinista regime have been legion. A document released by the FSLN in June of 1981 called for "a revolutionary government that will eliminate the reactionary [political] structure . . . an agrarian policy that achieves an authentic agrarian reform . . . the development of the national culture . . . [the elimination of] the foreign policy of submission to Yankee imperialism."¹ Since July of 1979, a new constitution has been adopted completely restructuring the nation's government and judiciary, a land reform program has redistributed land to 51,000 of 110,000 landless farmers², and an armed forces of 119,000 men and women has been established that is extremely loyal to the FSLN.³

Structural transformations, however, are only part of any revolutionary program. A problem arises in how to transform a people's political culture in order to make structural changes relevant and meaningful. Political culture has been usefully defined by Sidney Verba as the "system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values which defines the situation in which political action takes place. It provides the subjective orientation to politics."⁴ Because revolutionary changes are inherently broad-reaching, the task of

bringing a people's "subjective orientation to politics" in line with those changes is a difficult endeavor. As Luis Serra, an Argentine political scientist, noted, "If the experience of other countries [than Nicaragua] in transition to socialism teaches anything, it is that old ideological legacies have much more weight than revolutionary theory supposes."⁵

The transformation of political culture is ideologically appealing to revolutionaries because of the depth of change implied. In the words of Eric Hoffer, "The radical has a passionate faith in the infinite perfectability of human nature. He believes that . . . by perfecting a technique of soul forming, a society can be wrought that is wholly new and unprecedented."⁶ More broadly, however, the transformation of a people's political culture to one congruent with the aims of the revolution is important for tactical reasons. A people's political culture affects the extent to which the people will participate in politics and the kinds of institutions in which they will participate. As Verba argues in *Political Culture and Political Development*, "History is full of examples of constitutions that did not 'take' as the constitution writers had hoped because their application was mediated through a particular political culture"⁷ Mass political participation, the "essence of revolution"⁸, is necessary for the survival of revolutionary institutions. The alternatives to mass participation in revolutionary regimes are counter-revolution or authoritarianism.

The question faced by revolutionary regimes is precisely how to bring about a dramatic transformation in political culture.

Ideology is limited in the answers it offers to this fundamental question. Classical Marxism is equivocal because Marx did not acknowledge the political realm as an independent sphere of human activity. Instead, Marx spoke of the revolutionary class consciousness of the proletariat, which he believed evolved as a consequence of material conditions, not as the result of concerted revolutionary efforts. Once sufficient contradictions emerged in the social relations of production in the capitalist order, the proletariat would become aware of those contradictions and sweep in the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Lenin, breaking with Marx, offered a real *method* for transforming political culture. In *What is to be Done?*, Lenin postulated that "class political consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from without*, that is only from outside the economic struggle."⁹ Specifically, Lenin envisioned an elite party to be the agent of transformation. The party would serve as a vanguard, leading and instructing the people in the revolutionary endeavor.

History, however, has not conclusively demonstrated that vanguard leadership fundamentally transforms political culture. Although Leninism has succeeded as a form of political organization, it is not clear that this is attributable to the change of political culture. Questions arise about whether vanguard parties actually promote willful participation or simply coerce a population into mobilization. As Gabriel Almond writes in his essay "Communist Political Culture" events in Poland and Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968 suggest that force, not consent, is the support

behind revolutionary party policies.¹⁰

A pattern has developed whereby revolutionary regimes bent on the transformation of their nation's political culture either end up being transformed themselves, or resort to coercion to attain the behavior expected of their "new man". As Almond has written,

political cultures are not easily transformed. A sophisticated political movement ready to manipulate, penetrate, organize, indoctrinate, and coerce and given an opportunity to do so for a generation or longer ends up as much or more transformed than transforming.¹¹

Contemporary revolutions concerned with popular participation have employed a combination of force and education (or re-education) to remodel the political culture of the people. As Fidel Castro has said, "All revolution is an extraordinary process of education . . . Revolution and education are the same thing."¹² Castro's many "educational" programs, combined with a variety of coercive mechanisms and incentive systems, have resulted in a politically mobilized (if somewhat less than politically participatory) Cuban populace.

The political culture inherited from the autocratic Somoza dynasty was no more auspicious for building a truly participatory political system than those inherited by French, Russian, or Cuban revolutionary parties. Prior to the mid-1970's, the political culture of the vast majority of Nicaraguan people was characterized by political impotence, the conviction that change occurs violently or not at all, and a lack of identification with local or national communities. Most Nicaraguans had never considered the possibility that they might

participate in the formulation of their own political destiny.

This political culture stemmed from a historical legacy of political underdevelopment caused by Nicaragua's economic position as a supplier of raw materials to a hegemonic power, constant foreign intervention, and brutal domestic despotism. This legacy reached its epitome in the Somoza era. From 1936 to 1979, the Somoza family had ruled Nicaragua as a virtual fiefdom, dispensing economic and political tidbits to a small circle of cronies, while the largely illiterate peasantry and working class were economically and politically disenfranchised.

The FSLN has long recognized the importance of transforming the political culture of the Nicaraguan people. In 1969, Carlos Fonseca, a founder of the FSLN, wrote in "*Nicaragua: Hora Cero*" that the main obstacle to the revolution was neither the *somocistas* nor the bourgeoisie but the "lack of deep revolutionary consciousness"¹³ in the Nicaraguan people. This obstacle had to be overcome because the idea of *poder popular* (people power) is fundamental to the Sandinista's notion of revolution. In a speech in July of 1983, Sergio Ramirez, current vice-president of Nicaragua, defined this relationship:

Effective democracy, like we intend to practice in Nicaragua, consists of ample popular participation; a permanent dynamic of the people's participation in a variety of political and social tasks; the people who give their opinions and are listened to; the people who suggest, construct and direct, organize themselves, who attend to community, neighborhood and national problems.¹⁴

The FSLN understands that if it is to succeed in transforming Nicaraguan society according to the "grass-roots" tenets of *sandinismo*, it must maintain the base of popular support it had garnered by 1979. The FSLN sees itself as a party that owes its existence to *el pueblo* (the people), and predicates the consolidation of its own power on the success of mass popular participation. Thus, the FSLN equates the transformation of Nicaraguan political culture with its own political success. This equation, however, is not nearly as automatic as it might have been during the insurrection when the FSLN led a broad anti-Somoza coalition. As political culture evolves, the FSLN is beginning to realize that that evolution is not easily controlled. Consequently, the FSLN occasionally resorts to its self-conceived role as a revolutionary vanguard to dispense rule-from-above policies reminiscent of the coercion-mobilization patterns of earlier revolutions.

The seriousness with which the FSLN originally regarded the transformation of Nicaraguan political culture is evident in the rapidity with which ~~they~~^{it} began implementing programs and policies to transform the nation's political culture--policies it regarded as certain to consolidate mass support. Immediately after the revolution, the FSLN began massive propaganda and implemented a literacy crusade which dropped Nicaragua's national illiteracy rate from 52 percent to just below 13 percent¹⁵ and provided the regime with opportunities for political resocialization. But the most important tool in the transformation of political culture was to be the nation's mass organizations. Conceived as a means for involving the

hitherto dispossessed population in every aspect of the revolution, the mass organizations were intended to mobilize, educate, and ameliorate the situation of the people of Nicaragua within the revolutionary paradigm of the FSLN.

The success of the Sandinista's political program, therefore, is to a large degree predicated on the evolution of the mass organizations. If the mass organizations evolved without real mass participation, the regime would lack organized popular support and the means for its mobilization. On the other hand (as the FSLN would learn), if the mass organizations evolved with real popular participation but with too much independence, the result might be identical. To examine the transformation of political culture in Nicaragua, therefore, this thesis focuses on the mass organizations--specifically, the Sandinista Defense Committees (CDSs).

With over 600,000 members--40% of the adult population¹⁶, the CDSs are the largest mass organization and the most ambitious in scope. The CDSs are organized by block or rural zone--anyone may belong to his or her local CDS regardless of age, occupation, sex, or party affiliation. While the Nicaraguan peasant and worker groups limit their objective to representing their constituencies along functional lines, the CDSs serve a role akin to municipal governments. Each CDS is charged with addressing any and all issues relevant to its members. As such, the scope for debate of political issues is not limited to sectoral or functional interests but extends to any issue of national or local relevance to a particular

community.

In this essay, I will argue that the real role played by the CDSs in Nicaraguan society far transcends the limited role of political socialization envisioned for the CDSs by the FSLN. Indeed, in some realms, the CDSs are shaping Nicaraguan political culture in ways that contradict FSLN interests. The CDSs are developing not only a participatory political culture in the Nicaraguan popular classes, but an informed and critical participation that often runs counter to FSLN expectations. There are three primary reasons for this: the autonomous development of the CDSs, their functional and financial independence from the FSLN, and the ambiguity of the ideology that has guided the institutionalization of the revolution.

The transformation of political culture by non-coercive, autonomous organizations offers a striking difference to earlier revolutionary attempts to remodel political culture. In 1979, there was no purge of sectors of the Nicaraguan population deemed anti-revolutionary, certainly not to the extent that there was in the French or Cuban revolutions. Furthermore, coercion and negative incentives play far less of a role in the Nicaraguan revolution than preceding revolutions. Because of this, Nicaraguan political culture is evolving to be much more meaningfully participatory in a sense that transcends the simple mobilization that has been achieved in Cuba.

Several qualities of the CDSs encourage the formation of an informed and critical citizenry. Most importantly, the CDSs integrate the Nicaraguan popular classes into local and national communities

which serve as contexts for political participation. The sense of national community has historically been vitiated by a rift between a national elite which did the bidding of foreign interests and the disenfranchised popular classes. Similarly, anarchic domestic political relations prevented the formation of any meaningful local sense of community and limited association to vastly complex (and often feuding) kinship systems.

In terms of national community, CDSs employ the ambiguous but powerful nationalist ideology of *sandinismo*, participation in national development campaigns, and a variety of connections to national leadership to create a sense of national participation. This gives individual Nicaraguans a personal stake in the abstract notion of the Nicaraguan state, blurs the traditional distinction between the national elite and the popular classes, and gives the popular classes a context in which to exercise their political will. The CDSs integrate Nicaraguans into local community through the participation they encourage in local development projects, through the institutionalization of historically informal social customs, and through the forum they provide in which individuals may freely associate to press common interests.

In and of itself, the integration of Nicaraguans into national and local communities is no guarantee of informed and critical political participation. This guarantee is provided by the CDSs in their role as a forum for political action. In many ways, the CDSs serve as "schools" for informed political action. After an initial period of organization, the CDSs functioned democratically, electing their

own leadership and encouraging the free exchange of ideas. Similarly, a number of ambiguities in the CDSs' jurisdiction and in their relationship to the FSLN provide a bevy of political issues which give rise to a variety of interest groups within the CDSs. In other words, the CDSs enable their members to see that their interests are tied up in relatively abstract issues that transcend the basic material needs of the individual.

Naturally, the formation of independent political interests within the CDSs is a challenge to the political power of the FSLN, particularly given its self-conception as the "vanguard" of the Nicaraguan popular classes. This gives rise to conflict between the CDSs and the FSLN and within the CDSs that further familiarize Nicaraguans with the consequences and vagaries of political activity.

While previous revolutions have resorted to a variety of essentially coercive measures, the Nicaraguan revolution has witnessed the transformation of political culture through voluntary, non-coercive organizations independent of the state and party. Revolutions that resort to coercion to "transform" political culture may simply succeed in mobilizing their people rather than making them participatory in any meaningful civic sense of the word. The Nicaraguan revolution may offer an alternative. If the CDSs maintain and advance their autonomy and continue to serve the role they have served, they will help insure that the people of Nicaragua play the kind of participatory role in their own political destiny that they were promised by *sandinismo*.

2 Dispossession and Non-Participation: The Historical Setting

When the nomadic Aztecs descended from the north and established the great city of Tenochtitlan on the shores of Lake Tezcuco in 1325, they displaced the Toltecs, the people of the great humanist god Quetzalcoatl. To the Toltecs, the Aztecs were a "faceless" people--without tradition, without a creatively expressed culture, and most importantly, without an understanding of their own history.

"Faceless" is an apt adjective for the pre-revolutionary Nicaraguan popular classes. For centuries, the Nicaraguan common man had been alienated from his own nation--from its levers of political and economic power, from his indigenous culture, from the very idea of a Nicaraguan state for the Nicaraguan people. A sense of national history, culture, and heritage presented an economic and thus a political challenge to the elite who held the reins of power, and who sold the Nicaraguan birthright abroad for

centuries.

It is impossible to understand the "systems of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values" that comprise Nicaraguan political culture without an understanding of the history that formed them. In this regard, two interrelated themes resound through centuries of Nicaraguan history: Nicaragua's unfavorable position in the world economy and political underdevelopment caused by repeated foreign intervention and domestic despotism. The historical recurrence of these themes, and their culmination in the Somoza dynasty, shaped a political culture characterized by its non-participation, a penchant for violent change, and a lack of identification with national and local community.

The Socio-Economics of Dispossession

Since 1523, when the conquistador Hernando Cortes' lieutenants discovered the region of the New World governed by the Indian *Nicarao*, that land has been exploited for the benefit of foreign powers and their domestic proxies. The people of Nicaragua, largely of Indian and mestizo stock, have served as perennial pawns, exploited for their labor as the land was for its fruits.

Because Nicaragua lacked precious metals, the Spaniards abandoned it to independence-minded local aristocrats in 1821. The Spanish crown had never consolidated its rule over Nicaragua, and thus left behind social and political systems lacking unity and cohesion. In the east, Carib Indians that had never fallen under Spanish control fiercely guarded the autonomy and independence of

their own communities. In the Pacific-plains region of the west, the remnants of the Chorotec Indians (largely eliminated by disease and warfare) and the mestizo population were economically subjugated to the land-owning Creole aristocracy. This disunity denied Nicaragua the Indian cultural heritage that would prove an important element of national pride in Peru (the Incas) and Mexico (the Aztecs).

Another important Spanish legacy in Nicaragua was the the inherently exploitative and violent *hacienda* system. This system employed inescapable debt to bind the mestizo and Indian workforce to the land and the Creole land-owner. Bishop Bartolome de las Casas, who championed the Indian cause in the mid-16th century, accused the *hacienda* owners of subjecting the Indians and mestizos "to so much evil cruelty, bondage, and injustice that no human tongue would be able to describe it . . . [They] kill more every day through the services they exact and the daily, personal oppression they exercise."¹

This social structure survived in post-Independence Nicaragua, manifesting itself in what historian George Black calls the "quarrels of tiny elites [in which] no powerful social group emerged linked to a particular economic activity or political history."² Ultimately, the belligerents coalesced into the Liberals of northern Leon and the Conservatives of southern Granada. Because of the lack of centralization and experience in self-government, neither party was able to fill the political vacuum left by the departure of the Spaniards.

The struggle between the Liberals and Conservatives defined the Nicaraguan political context for more than a century. The

Liberals and the Conservatives are best understood not as political parties, but as warring clans operating at the expense of the luckless peasant. As Henri Weber points out:

The Nicaraguan "liberals" were champions of free trade more than civil rights and freedom, and the personal dictatorships they established were not a whit less severe than those of the conservatives. In both camps, moreover, the troops were essentially peasants pressed into service under the command of the landowners.³

Although the two parties differed philosophically on several issues such as the role of the church in government, the conflict between the two "was not generally related to these differences in philosophy. Rather, it was about power and the possibilities that power offered for enrichment."⁴

The Liberal-Conservative split prevented the political and economic unification of Nicaragua until the nationalist episodes of the late 1800s. Black writes that the split

did much to prevent the development of a strong and united national bourgeoisie. The two cities developed independent power structures and economies, using their own separate ports for foreign trade. Both cities were substitutes for a non-existent national state.⁵

Despite the lack of national unity, the U.S.-inspired constitution of 1826 and the Conservative constitution of 1858, both of which ensured the emancipation of peasants and small landowners from obligatory labor and protected their land, assured these groups more independence and economic security in the late 1800s than they would have anytime before the 1979 revolution.

The late nineteenth century ushered in a change that would fundamentally alter the Liberal-Conservative social structure of Nicaragua and thrust the nation into the global capitalist economy. This was the rise of coffee as an export crop. In 1870, twenty years after the other Central American nations began exporting coffee, Nicaragua began its exports, and coffee quickly became its main export commodity. Indeed, until the cotton boom of the mid-1950s, coffee never accounted for less than 50 percent of the value of Nicaraguan exports.⁶

As Nicaragua became integrated into the world capitalist economy, land and cheap labor to work it became critical to its economy. In this regard, the new coffee bourgeoisie was quick to flex its economic muscle in the political sphere. In the 1870s and 1880s, legislation was passed granting landowners the right to confiscate peasant land and impress the peasantry into military service.⁷ This meant "turning the clock back to impose semi-feudal relations between landowners and the rural workforce, relations which remained the norm in much of the Nicaraguan countryside until the 1979 Revolution."⁸ Furthermore, since the local elite's interests lay more in the foreign market than with the welfare of the Nicaraguan people, the people bore the brunt of international economic turbulence. When coffee prices plummeted from \$458 to \$142 per ton between 1926 and 1938, production costs were slashed by cutting wages and expropriating the land of small landowners.⁹

Apart from accentuating the rift between the agroexporting elite and the peasantry, the rise of the coffee economy exacerbated

regional disunity in Nicaragua. The climate and land best suited to coffee production were primarily in the north-central mountainous regions, while most of the eastern two-thirds of the nation was unsuited to coffee production. Consequently, the Pacific regions of Jinotega, Matagalpa, and Granada profitted from the boom while most of the country remained economically and politically isolated.

In 1893, the coffee bourgeoisie installed in power the highly nationalistic General Jose Santos Zelaya. The sixteen year dictatorship of General Zelaya was characterized by its authoritarian modernization of Nicaragua. Zelaya sought to "assemble and guarantee 'the general external conditions of capitalist production'"¹⁰ by encouraging the coffee industry, Nicaragua's main source of foreign exchange and capital investment. Zelaya passed legislation forcing farmers to justify their occupation of land based on certain commercial criteria, opened church and Indian lands to expropriation, and encouraged the formation of large estates through government payment of five centavos per tree to owners of more than 5,000 square feet.¹¹ Zelaya also developed the nation's commercial and industrial infrastructure, giving rise to a nascent working class. To that end, he authorized huge capital loans from American and British financiers and turned to the inflationary printing of money.

Zelaya's nationalist development was brought to an abrupt end in 1909 by a force that would come to play an integral role in the Nicaraguan socio-economic structure for 70 years--U.S. intervention. Zelaya's undoing was his nationalism and his desire to distance himself from the United States at a time when a divided Nicaraguan

state was in the financial interests of U.S. business. For years, Zelaya attempted to reduce Nicaraguan reliance on the U.S. by seeking business contacts with the Japanese and the British. When Zelaya executed two Americans caught trying to sabotage Nicaraguan ships as part of a Conservative revolt in 1909, four hundred U.S. marines joined the Conservatives to overthrow Zelaya's presidency.

For the first three decades of the twentieth century, the already significant rift between the national elite and the Nicaraguan peasants and workers was exacerbated by the elite's dependence on the U.S. marines to preserve the status quo. Issues of economic inequality were gradually merged with the issue of nationalism. The combination of economic dispossession and the compromise of national sovereignty proved volatile and gave rise to "an entirely new phenomenon: the embryo of popular resistance, an army of patriots largely composed of peasants and poor artisans."¹² This army was led in revolt against the U.S.-appointed president of Nicaragua by the nationalist General Benjamin Zeledon. Although initially successful, marines ultimately cornered Zeledon on a hill in Masaya, killing him and massacring more than 600 of his followers.¹³ The first feeble attempt at popular revolution had been drowned in blood.

The rift between the national elite and the people of Nicaragua would not be closed by force. After fourteen more years of factional fighting between the Conservative and Liberal elites (conducted largely at the expense of the peasantry), and increasing sacrifice of sovereignty to U.S. business, a popular uprising of peasants and landless laborers occurred in May of 1926. The U.S. would not tolerate

this nationalist challenge to its economic interests any more than it would tolerate Zeledon's; 215 officers landed commanding 865 marines and 3,900 soldiers. ¹⁴

By this time, the U.S. State Department recognized that supporting either the antiquated Conservatives or the faction-ridden, nationalist Liberals was a bankrupt policy. Consequently, special envoy Henry L. Stimson was sent to Nicaragua to present the terms of the Espino Negro Pact which provided for a ceasefire, the handover of all arms to U.S. marines, U.S.-supervised elections the following year, and the organization of a "non-political" national guard which would be trained and overseen by North American officers.¹⁵ In 1927, all parties concerned except for the Liberal general Augusto Cesar Sandino signed the pact. Sandino insisted on Nicaragua's right to elect its own leaders, free from the control of U.S. interests. Sandino took to the northern mountains and fought the marines and the nascent National Guard for six years.

For the first time ever, the fighting in Nicaragua became class-based in nature. Sandino's experience as a warehouseman, an agricultural laborer, and as an oilfield worker had given him a class-consciousness and an appreciation of the economic realities of U.S. domination. His army was composed mainly of unemployed miners and plantation workers. Black writes that "under Sandino's leadership, the war against U.S. intervention was Nicaragua's first organised questioning of bourgeois power structures, and gave shape for the first time to a long-if sporadic--tradition of spontaneous popular revolt."¹⁶

In 1933, strong domestic pressure from the U.S. and the marines' inability to capture Sandino in the nearly impenetrable northern mountains forced the marines home. Before leaving, the marines installed Dr. Juan Bautista Sacasa to the presidency, and appointed Nicaraguan officers to lead the National Guard. Several weeks later, when Sandino was in Managua to negotiate peace arrangements, he and his top advisers were captured and assassinated by the National Guard. In the following months, in a campaign known as the 'Pacification of Las Segovias', the Guard killed many of Sandino's followers and burned Sandino-inspired agricultural cooperatives and farms throughout Nicaragua.¹⁷

The man responsible for Sandino's assassination and the following campaign of terror was the U.S.-appointed commander of the National Guard, Anastasio Somoza Garcia. The North Americans had appointed Somoza because of his excellent command of English and his pro-U.S. views. Now, however, Somoza moved rapidly to consolidate his own power, and by 1936, he was able to force Sacasa to resign from the presidency. Somoza had himself sworn in as president of Nicaragua on January 1, 1937.

The Somoza family, which "had become synonymous with 'the state'"¹⁸ used the post-war economic recovery and technological developments to establish an economic stranglehold on Nicaragua. Somoza's emerging economic control was based primarily on the emergence of cotton as Nicaragua's most important cash crop. A variety of technological advances made large scale cotton farming highly profitable at a time when the post-war world economy was

demanding raw materials. Similarly, cotton provided a capital surplus which was plowed into other sectors such as industry, finance, and commerce--again to the personal benefit of the Somozas.

Somoza's control of cotton production and subsequently of a variety of industrial and commercial enterprises had an important social effect--it increased the dependency of every Nicaraguan social class on the Somoza regime. As the antiquated coffee-based economy lost importance relative to cotton and nascent industry, Somoza's control of these sectors rendered the last vestiges of power of the old Conservative agroexporters irrelevant:

The conservative faction, unable to gain control over [the state] through election, rebellion or coup d'etat, could only obtain services from the state apparatus through coming to an *understanding* with Somoza. This ended the independence of the conservatives and thus the vitality of the old liberal- conservative conflict.¹⁹

Somoza, himself a Liberal, used similar means to gain control of the primarily industrial and commercially based Liberal bourgeoisie. Business or commercial ventures of any kind required connection to Somoza, usually via kickback payments or inclusion of the Somoza family. Somoza granted import and export licenses, controlled capital financing, and dispensed state permission to begin new construction and businesses.²⁰ Somoza personally took over the nation's chemical factories, cement factories, the national airlines, and the national broadcasting service, to name a few.²¹

The emergence of the cotton and industrial sectors also resulted in the increasing marginalization of the peasant and working classes. The profitability of cotton production led to the

concentration of vast quantities of land in relatively few hands, a process which changed small farmers into plantation peasants or forced them off the land into cities such as Leon, Chinandega, and Managua.²² The relative glut of urban labor, in turn, kept wages low and resulted in a tremendous burden on the social services existing in the cities.

Finally, the agrarian based capital accumulation that emerged with the cotton economy gave rise to a new salaried middle class which owed its livelihood to the *somocista* regime. As Pablo E. Barreto wrote in *Nicaragua: A People's Revolution*, "success came to [the middle class] so rapidly that it failed to question the roots of its development. This created, intentionally or not, a new social stratum which legitimized the dictatorship."²³

Lino Real, the CDS coordinator in Ciudad Sandino, described the various mechanisms whereby classes were kept subjugated to Somoza's personal whim:

There was a basic paradox in the only class that might have opposed Somoza; the national bourgeoisie owed its livelihood to Somoza's economic empire--without him, they were nothing. Patronage kept them in line until Somoza's greed became such that it was either him or them. The working class and the peasants, of course, were either fooled by Somoza or beaten and killed into submission by the Guard.²⁴

By the time a young poet named Rigoberto Lopez Perez assassinated Anastasio Somoza Garcia in 1956, power was so consolidated in the dynasty's hands that it was passed smoothly into the hands of his son, Luis Somoza Debayle. The transition of power

from Luis Somoza Debayle to his brother Anastasio upon the former's death in 1967 was as unquestioned as the transition of 1956. By 1967, the Somoza dynasty was fully consolidated and unchallenged by anyone. Anastasio Somoza Debayle II (known as "Tachito") had been educated at West Point and was Commander of the National Guard during his brother's tenure in power. His ascension to power would mark the start of the most brutal repression of the Nicaraguan populous yet seen, and its complete economic and political marginalization. Somoza's policies would ultimately erode even the tenuous economic power of the *somocista* middle class. Significantly enough, "Tachito" would be the last Somoza of the dynasty.

Neither Luis or Anastasio acted to reverse the socio-economic patterns begun by their father. The agroexporting elite still kept the nation's peasantry in a nearly feudal economic stranglehold. Even in the 1970s, of the 500,000 Nicaraguans engaged in agriculture, approximately 20 percent were landless laborers who could find work only four months a year during the cotton, sugar cane, and coffee harvests.²⁵ Peasants who did own land rarely had enough meet the basic needs of subsistence. In total, approximately 80 percent of rural workers were engaged in wage labor.²⁶

The tiny working class (comprising only 16 to 18 percent of the economically active population in 1975²⁷), was itself the result of dispossession in the rural sector--"the product of a century of violent dispossession of peasant farmers . . . linked to the incorporation of Nicaragua as an agro-export producer within the world economy."²⁸ Despite Somoza's nominal attempts to win the sympathy of the urban

working class, their conditions of existence remained miserable. By 1979, "thirty-five percent of the urban population lacked access to potable water."²⁹ Studies conducted in the 1970's estimated child malnutrition in Nicaragua to be between 46 and 83 percent.³⁰ Basic national literacy in 1979 was less than 48 percent.³¹ Only five percent of the population received an education beyond the 5th grade, and higher education was available to only 0.3 percent of Nicaraguans.³²

The desperate conditions of the popular classes were in sharp contrast to the relative wealth of the Nicaragua's tiny agricultural and business elite. Throughout the early 1970s, the wealthiest 5 percent of the Nicaraguan population earned about 28 percent of the total national income while the poorest 50 percent earned less than 12 percent of total income.³³ Despite their economically secure position, the Nicaraguan elite provided the only significant opposition to the Somoza regime between the death of Sandino and the rise of the FSLN in the mid-1970s. Although this was partly due to the strictures of the *Somocista* economic system, their opposition was caused largely by their inability to exercise political power consonant with their economic means.

An understanding of the socio-economic conditions of the Nicaraguan popular classes and the political disenfranchisement of the national elite naturally raises the question of how such unstable conditions were perpetuated. The answer lies in the brutal repression of Somoza's National Guard. Because of his unstable position, Somoza had built the Guard into "an anti-popular, anti-national"³⁴ force. Elite units like the BECATS (*Brigadas Especiales Contra Actos*

de Terrorismo) became especially notorious for massacring peasants in northern vilages and for hair-trigger readiness to destroy any signs of political opposition no matter how peaceful. The extent of the hatred for the popular classes cultivated in the National Guard is evident in a call-and-response drill heard in Guard barracks throughout Nicaragua in the 1960s and 1970s.³⁵

'*Quien es el enemigo de la Guardia?*' (Who is the enemy of the Guard?)

'*El pueblo!*' (The people!)

'*Quien es el padre de la Guardia?*' (Who is the father of the Guard?)

'*Somoza!*'

'*La Guardia arriba!*' (Up with the Guard!)

'*El pueblo abajo!*' (Down with the people!)

'*Quienes somos?*' (Who are we?)

'*Somos tigres!*' (We are tigers!)

'*Que comen los tigres?*' (What do tigers eat?)

'*Sangre!*' (Blood!)

'*Sangre de quien?*' (Whose blood?)

'*Sangre del pueblo!*' (The blood of the people!)

The Politics of Disenfranchisement

Since the turn of the century, the socio-economic conditions that dispossessed the Nicaraguan people from economic and political power were perpetuated by self-interested despotism subservient to the will of U.S. business. This foreign-friendly despotism precluded nationalism in all its forms and gave rise to repeated military and political intervention by the U.S. Having a politically active Nicaraguan populace was simply not "good business" for U.S. monopolies.

Foreign Intervention

If there is one episode that is burned into the collective national consciousness of the Nicaraguan people, an episode that has become an allegory of the relationship of Nicaraguans with their large and powerful neighbor to the north, it is the misadventure of William Walker in the mid 1800s.

William Walker, a Tennessee journalist, doctor, and filibuster who had earlier tried to conquer northern Mexico, landed on the Pacific coast of Nicaragua with his 58-man "American Phalanx of Immortals" in 1855. Offering the financial support of Accessory Transit Company, a corporation interested in financing a canal, Walker rapidly teamed up with the Liberals and succeeded in capturing Conservative Granada later that year.

It soon became clear that Walker had his own designs for Nicaragua. On June 10, 1858, Walker abandoned his Liberal allies and had himself "elected" president of Nicaragua. Apart from his desire for personal gain, Walker dreamed of uniting Nicaragua and the four other states of the Central American isthmus into a model slave state that would bolster the South against the abolitionist North. Slavery, banned in Nicaragua since 1824, was reintroduced, and English made the official language. Franklin Pierce, then president of the United States, immediately recognized Walker's government.

After restructuring Nicaragua to his own liking, Walker made the fatal error of taking on Cornelius Vanderbilt, the American business magnate. The Conservatives had granted Vanderbilt a highly profitable concession ferrying passengers from the Atlantic

coast across Lake Nicaragua and then by train over the twelve miles of land separating the lake and the Pacific. Vanderbilt had built the service to provide Americans with easy access to the West and the gold rush occurring there. Shortly after assuming power, Walker confiscated the ferry service. Vanderbilt joined the British (who were concerned about Walker's designs on the Atlantic coast) and the other Central American states (concerned for their sovereignty) in an invasion of Nicaragua. Walker was defeated in Rivas in May of 1857, and after an unsuccessful attempt to regain his presidency, met his demise before a Honduran firing squad on September 12, 1861.

The Walker episode was the harbinger of an era of self-serving U.S. intervention in Nicaragua that would peak and die with the Somoza dynasty. This era began in earnest with the first intervention of U.S. marines to overthrow the troublesome nationalist Zelaya in 1909. Before leaving Nicaragua, the marines installed in the presidency Adolfo Diaz, an accountant with the U.S.-owned Rosario Light Mines Company. Diaz, as the scion of the historically antiquated Conservatives, was unable to control Liberal and nationalist opposition to his regime. In 1911, he requested a second intervention by the marines in a note that would presage decades of Nicaraguan history: "it is my intention, through a treaty with the American government, to modify or enlarge the Constitution . . . permitting the United States to intervene in our internal affairs in order to maintain peace."³⁶

In the following decade, U.S. penetration into Nicaraguan affairs was formalized through a variety of treaties and unilateral

actions on the part of the U.S. European loans were assumed by New York financiers, American officials took over the Nicaraguan treasury, its railway, steamship line, and National Bank. In 1916, financial control of Nicaragua was assured the U.S. via the Lansing Plan. According to this document, financial control of the country was given to a three man committee composed of the Nicaraguan Minister of Finance and two North Americans, one of whom would be selected by the U.S. State Department.

Later that year, the Nicaraguan government signed the Chamorro-Bryan Treaty which gave the U.S. exclusive rights to construct a canal through Nicaraguan territory, a 99-year lease of the Caribbean Corn Islands, and the right to build a naval base in the Gulf of Fonseca. In return, Nicaragua was given \$3 million, which went immediately to New York to service Nicaragua's debt. Black writes that "rarely can any government had been [sic] party to such a humiliating document as the 1916 Chamorro-Bryan Treaty."³⁷

The years between 1916 and the rise of Somoza in 1936 were characterized by the nearly continuous presence of the U.S. marines. They assisted in the brutal quashing of the popular uprising in 1926, helped impose the Espino Negro Pact in 1927, and chased Sandino's army around northern Nicaragua until 1933. When the marines finally left, their final act was to place Anastasio Somoza Garcia in charge of the National Guard--a reward for the loyalty he had always shown the North Americans.

Part of the reason for the nearly uncontested passage of power from Somoza to his son in 1956 lies in the intervention of U.S.

Ambassador Whelan, who made it clear that the U.S. completely backed the Somoza dynasty. This intervention was emblematic of the intimate connection between the U.S. and the Nicaraguan regime. While every social sector of Nicaragua was dependent on Somoza, Somoza himself was economically and politically dependent on the U.S.

The U.S. had always militarily supported whichever Nicaraguan faction it found most to its liking, but the U.S. support of the *somocista* National Guard far exceeded anything in the pre-Somoza era. The National Guard had been created by the U.S., and throughout its existence its officers were trained at West Point and the various U.S. war colleges, and its weaponry was exclusively U.S.-made. Between 1941 and 1976, the Guard received over \$20 million from the U.S.--more military aid than was given any other Central American nation except Guatemala.³⁸ Even its rituals were American inspired; graduation from the elite Basic Infantry Training School was celebrated with cases of Budweiser beer.

The U.S. military presence in Nicaragua had always been, and to some extent, still was designed to protect U.S. business interests in Nicaragua. After World War II, these interests exploded in significance. Direct U.S. business investment in Nicaragua increased almost five-fold in the sixteen years between 1943 and 1959 from \$4.0 million to \$18.9.³⁹ The U.S. had become Nicaragua's only major source of foreign investment, a fact which further subjugated the Nicaraguan economy to U.S. business.

The relationship between Somoza and the U.S., however, ran

both ways. The Somozas had always shown a great ability to manipulate Washington for their own personal enrichment. At the start of World War II, Somoza had cultivated President Roosevelt by immediately declaring his staunch support for the Allies (a measure which also permitted him to personally confiscate a variety of German ranches and businesses in Nicaragua. The success of Somoza's measure was summarized in Roosevelt's famous quip: "He's a sonofabitch, but he's our sonofabitch."⁴⁰ After World War II, Somoza's tactic remained the same but the arena changed to the Cold War. To administrations made skittish by Marxist-inspired revolutionary activity throughout Central and South America, the Somoza's iron-fisted political domination of Nicaragua was comforting. The strength of this commitment is evident in the ambivalence displayed by Washington over denying Anastasio Somoza II aid even in 1979 when it had become clear that he lacked any legitimacy or support in Nicaragua.

Politics Under Despotism

From his ascension to the presidency in 1937 until the mid-1940s, Anastasio Somoza Garcia had attempted to cover his Machiavellian political machinations with a thin veil of legitimacy. Winning farcical elections and maintaining a constitutional façade pleased the U.S. State Department and somewhat tempered the complaints of the nation's still powerful political elite. In 1939, Somoza dissolved the National Congress and called for a new constituent assembly. Inevitably, such an assembly would be less

experienced in politics and more prone to the influence of the rapidly growing National Guard. By February of 1939, what Millet calls the "puppet assembly"⁴¹ had drafted an 11,000 word constitution which provided for a six-year presidential term with no reelection. Article 350 of the document thoughtfully exempted the current president from this stricture. When Somoza came up for reelection, the entire process was run by the National Guard--he won 107,201 votes to 169.⁴²

Gradually, it became clear that Somoza intended to use the National Guard and his links to the U.S. to perpetuate his own personalist dynasty. This became evident as Nicaragua conspicuously failed to benefit from the surge of democratic sentiment that gripped Central America as a result of the struggle against fascism in the 1940's. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, National Guard raids on Conservative and Independent Liberal Party (a faction of Liberals which had broken with Somoza) offices and functions became standard occurrences. Christian writes that

a few of those who demonstrated or plotted against him [Somoza] would be killed in confrontations with the National Guard, but most would live to serve an unpleasant year or so in jail . . . He terrorized some of his opponents in prison. With others he destroyed their self-respect or their businesses or personal reputations, or simply played dirty tricks on them.⁴³

The irrelevancy of the party-system and the National Congress was assured until the revolution when the Conservatives decided to unite with Somoza's Liberal dictatorship in return for a variety of economic safeguards. Following a failed military uprising led by the Conservative general Emiliano Chamorro, the two parties signed

agreements in 1948 and 1950 which guaranteed the Conservatives one-third of the seats in Congress and respect for their economic activities. To the Conservatives, the agreement meant economic survival and the permanent loss of popular support. To Somoza, "the two party state with its built-in Liberal majority meant that dictatorial control could be maintained under a veneer of political representativity"44

Historically, the Conservative and Liberal parties had been the political bastions of Nicaragua's agricultural and commercial elites. Popular participation in the two parties had been token at best. The agreements of 1948 and 1950 removed even this token popular participation in the political system and completed the political disenfranchisement of the peasantry and working class.

Traditionally mass-oriented parties offered no alternative. The Nicaraguan Socialist Party, founded in the 1940s, went underground following the 1948 constitutional ban on communist parties, and when it reemerged in 1967, it joined in the Conservative-led National Opposition coalition and supported a distinctly bourgeois candidate and platform. Even labor unions provided no forum for organization. As late as 1975, as a result of Somoza's coercion, only 10 per cent of workers belonged to any of the nation's five trade unions, one of which was under Somoza's control.⁴⁵

The FSLN, which had been founded in July of 1961, was also unable to provide any real organization to Nicaragua's popular classes until late in the 1970s. This was primarily because of brutal National Guard repression and Anastasio Somoza II's wholesale

propaganda associating the FSLN with foreign communism. Furthermore, factional infighting within the FSLN, which ultimately resulted in a three-way split in 1974, prevented the presentation of a unified, cohesive position that would appeal to the nation's workers and peasantry.

Conclusion

Much of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's epic work *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, a novel which describes a prototypical Latin American dictator in mythic and macabre surrealism, was based on the author's knowledge of Nicaraguan history. The brutality, dispossession, and disenfranchisement that characterize that history and achieved their apotheosis in the Somoza dynasty are reflected in the political culture of the nation's people.

The socio-economic rift between the national elite and the peasantry and workers alienated the popular classes from their own nation. Nicaragua and its attendant symbols conjured not patriotism, but images of oppression and poverty. Socio-economic conditions were so dire and alienating as to make mere existence struggle enough. As one Nicaraguan put it, "until the *muchachos* [FSLN] really began agitating in our neighborhoods, we worried about staying fed and alive, not about changing the system."⁴⁶

The fact that political problems in modern Nicaragua had always been settled by the U.S. military or its indigenous proxies took an inevitable toll on the ability of Nicaraguans to see themselves as the agents of their own political destiny. Crisis throughout Nicaraguan

history had always been met with speculation over how the U.S. would "solve" the problem. Stefano Lizardo, a middle class Managuan electrical worker, summarized this for me:

Through all the fighting in the 1970's, everyone always wondered when the U.S. would intervene to prop up or depose Somoza. The people viewed events not as significant in and of themselves, but significant in terms of their impact on the [U.S.] embassy. Really only the *Frente* [FSLN], saw themselves as capable of their own action; even the rich businessmen sought to bring down Somoza by playing to the U.S.⁴⁷

It would be wrong, however, to argue that the Nicaraguan popular classes lack any tradition of political activity or rebellion. The revolts of 1881, 1912, and 1926, and the assassination of Somoza Garcia by Rigoberto Lopez Perez indicate that the Nicaraguan people were not historically incapable of political action. But since no avenues of peaceful change were available, it had always been disorganized and violent. As Carlos Fonseca wrote in *Hora Cero*, this ingrained an appreciation of violent change into the Nicaraguan political culture: "the employment of violence by different political forces . . . predisposed the people of Nicaragua against electoral farces and in favor of armed struggle."⁴⁸ This predisposition to armed struggle would combine with a national furor bred of desperation to bring about the cataclysmic renunciation of somocismo in 1979.

3 The Contradictions of Revolution

"True revolutions . . . and Nicaragua's is one of them, are full of contradictions. They draw their sustenance from them, they live on them."¹

The 1970's were probably the most dramatic decade of Nicaraguan history. In July of 1979, the events of the 1970s caught up with Anastasio Somoza II-- he fled the country, leaving the victorious FSLN in control. Just five years earlier, Somoza had appeared invulnerable behind his staunch American backers, a brutally efficient National Guard, and a completely subjugated populace. The revolution succeeded because of the emergence of a broad multi-class consensus that demanded Somoza's ouster. This consensus manifested itself in an unlikely coalition of the various sectors of the Nicaraguan people hesitantly united behind the ascendant FSLN.

The contradictions within the Nicaraguan revolution that would come to bear on the transformation of Nicaraguan political

culture existed in the agents and the ideology of the revolution. The primary agent of the revolution, the FSLN, had historically been rife with internal divisions based on competing ideologies. These competing visions would be important inasmuch as they would foment ambiguity over the FSLN's post-revolutionary role. Was the FSLN to be one party among many? First among equals? Or would it follow the leads of other revolutionary parties in Latin America and blur the distinctions between it and the state?

The multi-class coalition behind the FSLN was filled with contradictions as well, contradictions that would set the terms of political debate in Nicaragua for years. Within the coalition existed ideologies and backgrounds so distinct that it required the surreal brutality of the Somoza regime to unite them into an unsteady marriage of convenience. Once the catalyst was removed, however, the contradictions within the revolution would reemerge. At the elite level, this would cause the defection of business leaders such as Adolfo Calero and committed revolutionaries like Eden Pastora, and ultimately result in civil war. At the popular level, however, the re-emergent contradictions would remain *within* the revolution and supply the dynamic conflict and tensions that would assist in the transformation of the political culture of Nicaragua's popular classes.

Finally, the ideology of the revolution, sandinismo, was inherently pragmatic and flexible. This flexibility permitted the various sectors of the Nicaraguan population to rally behind something more analytically substantial than hatred of the Somoza regime, but it also sowed the seed of ambiguity and lack of consensus.

The contradictions and ambiguity of the Nicaraguan revolution assist in the transformation of a political culture of apathy, impotence, and dispossession to one of active and critical participation because they force Nicaraguans to debate the nature of the revolution at all levels. Were *sandinismo* a rigid body of orthodoxy (like Stalinism) or were the FSLN a totalitarian party bent on the transformation of Nicaragua on its own terms, contradictions would not exist, and Nicaraguan political culture would not necessarily be forced to change. As it is, Nicaragua's people, spurred by contradictions that fundamentally affect their futures, actively work to solve the issues left open by the revolution in their mass organizations-- most notably, in the CDSs.

Somocismo in Crisis

Several factors combined to polarize the Nicaraguan population against Somoza. As the last chapter indicates, the dire socio-economic conditions in Nicaragua made change almost necessary. However, such conditions were nothing new to Nicaraguans. The revolution must be explained in terms of the events that immediately preceded it--events that were without precedent in Nicaraguan history.

In 1972, five years after coming to power, Anastasio Somoza II would face a national crisis which would bring misery to the Nicaraguan people and profit to himself. On December 23, 1972, an earthquake destroyed most of Managua, leaving over 10,000 Nicaraguans dead and another 100,000 homeless.² Naturally, the

destruction left many opportunities for new investment and construction. Somoza responded by organizing his own bank, insurance company, finance companies, and construction firms. As Barreto wrote, "Overstepping the traditional ethical bounds of capitalist competition, Somoza took over the most dynamic areas of capital accumulation."³ These questionable commercial practices paled in comparison to the widespread fraud that accompanied the reconstruction effort. Somoza pocketed outright much of the foreign aid money that arrived from around the world. Goods such as medicine and food were sold on the black market by the National Guard.

The earthquake's aftermath had two important social effects which would ultimately prove fatal to Somoza. First, his exclusion of the bourgeoisie from the economic boom that accompanied reconstruction alienated the middle class and the business sector. In March of 1974, COSIP, an organization of Nicaraguan businessmen, issued a statement accusing Somoza of corruption in the use of relief funds and in his management of the reconstruction effort. This represented "the first public break with Somoza by private enterprise."⁴

Second, the gross mismanagement of the relief effort further aggravated serious social inequalities. The desperate condition of much of the middle and lower classes inevitably led to the political radicalization of the Nicaraguan people. The FSLN, which had always had difficulty recruiting members of the urban middle and working classes, began to achieve significant successes in the cities.

A Managuan policeman, who had been an FSLN militant in Managua at the time, recalls that

after the earthquake, no one was safe. The Guard looted stores and homes, and hundreds of people wandered about aimlessly. Most Managuans saw Somoza's perfidy and realized that the political opposition leadership had no solution to the problem. People became very interested in us, and we began to get more and more militants from the middle and lower classes.⁵

One of the main explanations for the revolution lies in Somoza's alienation of the national bourgeoisie at a time when the other Nicaraguan classes were in a dramatic state of upheaval and dislocation. The critical catalyst, however, the event that set an unstable mass into irrevocable revolution was the assassination of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro. On January 10, 1978, Chamorro, the respected publisher of the opposition newspaper *La Prensa* and scion of one of Nicaragua's oldest and wealthiest political families, was shot in his car by National Guardsmen in plain clothes. He had recently published a series of scathing articles exposing Somoza's corrupt commercial practices in a Managua blood bank.

The murder hit Nicaragua's upper classes especially hard. As Shirley Christian writes,

They [the elite] had known that they could be thrown in jail for a few weeks but had never expected to be killed. It was part of the unwritten agreement covering the political and economic space that Somoza had long allowed them.⁶

As soon as word of the murder reached the populace, business leaders called a general strike that shut down 80 percent of the businesses and factories in Nicaragua's major towns.⁷ More than 10,000 Nicaraguans followed Chamorro's funeral, and in an ensuing riot, 50,000 people roamed through Managua burning cars and buses, and attacking factories and banks.⁸

The Contradictions of Coalition

The result of these events was the emergence of an informal, multi-class opposition coalition. This coalition included wealthy businessmen like Adolfo Calero, communists, Christian Democrats, and legions of apolitical middle and working class Nicaraguans whose sole ideological common ground was their fervent anti-Somoza sentiment. Current Nicaraguan accounts of the revolution tend to downplay the broadness of this coalition, painting it as a "people's revolution" or as the culmination of 18 years of fighting by the FSLN. It is arguable, however, that the revolution might never have occurred had opposition businessmen not united with the FSLN in a broad coalition of opposition.

The anti-Somoza coalition did have some formal structure, most notably in the association of twelve prominent professionals united in the "Group of Twelve" (*los doce*). *Los doce* was made up of lawyers, businessmen, priests, and academics who had not previously participated in political activity. Although they were not themselves revolutionaries, they saw the FSLN as a mass-based party and encouraged business leaders and middle class groups to unite

with it. Most importantly, los doce ^{was} ~~were~~ instrumental in convincing the Broad Opposition Front (FAO), a coalition of Conservatives, Christian Democrats, and several business groups, to unite with the political leadership of the FSLN.

This union was made possible only by several major concessions on the part of Sandinista leaders. In 1977, the FSLN had released a remarkably moderate document detailing the "minimum plan" for a new government. This government would be based on three tenets: political pluralism, a mixed economy, and international non-alignment.⁹ The "minimum plan" was successful in allaying the fears of the middle class opposition that the FSLN would seek to replace Somoza with a Cuban-style Communist revolution.

Ideological concessions aside, there were practical reasons for the FAO to unite with the FSLN. Once serious working class agitation began in 1978, much of it spontaneously, business leaders realized that the FSLN had far more legitimacy in the eyes of the working class than did the business leaders themselves; and it was clear that the huge and disenfranchised working and peasant classes would be the main force in the insurrection.

Nonetheless, what formal organization did exist in the anti-Somoza coalition existed only at the level of the national elite, and had very little bearing on the working class and peasantry. Businessmen like Leonel Poveda negotiated with the largely middle class leadership of the FSLN, and various opposition parties jockeyed for position within the FAO, but spontaneous fighting was breaking out in *barrios* all over the country. The FSLN itself, while closest to

this grass-roots agitation, had only nominal control over the increasingly violent clashes between the populace and the National Guard. Humberto Ortega, Nicaragua's current minister of defense, acknowledges the FSLN's auxiliary role vis a vis "the masses": "it was the guerrillas [of the FSLN] who provided support for the masses so that they could defeat the enemy by means of insurrection."¹⁰

A kind of snowball effect began as various sectors of the Nicaraguan populace saw other sectors setting aside their differences to unite with the FSLN. After a particularly large offensive against Somoza in September of 1978, Leonel Poveda, a wealthy Nicaraguan businessman turned militant, received a note from Joaquin Cuadra, the military leader of the FSLN's "Internal Front", thanking him for his support. Poveda recalls that the note pointed out that "the middle class, when it realized that we [business] were participating with the [Sandinista] Front, decided that this must be good. So the whole world began to support the Front--capitalists, noncapitalists, peasants."¹¹

The FSLN itself, apart from its role in the support and organization of working class and peasant revolt, served an important morale-building role in the revolution. Several astonishing military victories throughout the 1970's helped to show Somoza's vulnerability and further rallied the populace. On December 27, 1974, ten FSLN militants took hostage Somoza's foreign minister, his brother-in-law, and just missed Turner Shelton, the U.S. ambassador. The hostages were released in return for \$1 million, publication of an FSLN announcement, and safe passage to Cuba. On August 22, 1978, the FSLN, combined with a group of businessmen, snuck into the

National Palace disguised as Guardsmen. Once inside, the small band held the entire National Congress hostage. With the help of Archbishop Obando y Bravo, they negotiated for the release of fifty political prisoners, \$500,000, and the publication of a series of communiques. As the bus carrying the guerillas to the airport passed, thousands of people lined the roads cheering and chanting "Down with Somoza!" and "Somoza to the gallows!"¹²

By early July of 1979, the FSLN controlled most of the nation. Only the more heavily guarded parts of Managua remained under the full control of the Guard. As disorganized rebel groups continued to converge on Managua, Somoza and one hundred of those most closely associated with *somocismo* left the country. It was July 17, 1979. On July 19, the remaining officers of the National Guard agreed to a surrender organized by the Red Cross. On July 20, the leadership of the FSLN made a triumphal entrance to Managua, and in front of the National Palace before a crowd of 50,000, introduced the new ruling junta.

Division Within the FSLN

The publication of the "minimum plan" of 1977 disguised the internal divisions that had plagued the FSLN throughout the 1970s. In fact, in the mid-1970s, the Front had split into three factions: the *Tendencia Proletaria*, the *Guerra Popular Prolongada*, and a group favoring broad class alliances known as the *Tendencia Insurreccional* (or *Terceristas*). Although the split was primarily over what tactics should be used to overthrow Somoza, it indicated the

severity of the ideological divisions in the FSLN.

Divisions within the FSLN were made almost inevitable by the broad spectrum of revolutionary ideologies which could be accommodated within the FSLN's guiding ideology of *sandinismo*. As one FSLN member put it, "the Front is a group of Marxist-Leninists, reformists, and liberals who are dedicated to the solution of Nicaraguan problems through a combination of revolution and traditional Nicaraguan struggle."¹³ Naturally, the divisions within the FSLN, which could be set aside in the pursuit of a common goal, would reemerge once that goal was achieved.

After the insurrection, the divisions within the FSLN reappeared as ambiguity over precisely what institutional role the FSLN would play in revolutionary Nicaragua. The "minimum plan" had stipulated political pluralism and had given rise to hopes that the FSLN would be one party among many. After the revolution, however, the FSLN dominated the Junta of National Reconstruction, kept control of the army and police, and consciously attempted to reduce the influence of other political parties. Currently, the line between the state and the FSLN is indistinct. The FSLN has declared that it is willing to share the government if it loses elections, but has added that it will not give up power. This is generally interpreted to mean that it will not relinquish its control of the army and police.¹⁴

The ambiguity over the institutional role of the FSLN presents Nicaraguans with a complex array of power centers. On the one hand, the elections of 1984 gave the Sandinistas control of the National Assembly. On the other hand, the FSLN National Directorate often

dictates national policy through Daniel Ortega, a member of the Directorate and president of Nicaragua. Finally, to individual Nicaraguans, local FSLN offices present yet another power center. As one Nicaraguan said, "Everyone knows that the Sandinistas are running the country, but no one really knows how. They have so many options--the Assembly, the army, the local offices, and the prestige of the National Directorate."¹⁵

The Contradictions of *Sandinismo*

The main ideological force responsible for galvanizing the dispossessed and apathetic working class and peasantry of Nicaragua and forging them into a national coalition with businessmen and the middle classes was the ambiguous ideology of *sandinismo*. Throughout Nicaragua, in rural villages as well as urban *barrios*, people speak with reverence of the new paradigm *sandinismo* offers for Third World development. This reverence, however, is rarely accompanied by any sort of consensus over precisely what *sandinismo* is. As Bayardo Arce, a coordinator of party affairs for the FSLN said in a speech before a group of visiting Americans,

I guess you could say that *Sandinismo* is Marxist-Leninism applied in Nicaragua. But I would also say that Sandinismo is Christianity applied in Nicaragua. And I can also tell you that it is liberalism applied in Nicaragua¹⁶

The key element to *sandinismo* is its inherent applicability to Nicaragua. As David Nolan writes in *The Ideology of the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan Revolution*, "*Sandinismo* was

created in the minds of its adherents from a set of intuitive feelings and emotional reactions to the modern Nicaraguan environment."¹⁷ This pragmatism gives *sandinismo* a flexibility that permits its successful application to a wide variety of Nicaraguan problems. However, this ambiguity also leads to differences of interpretation and a lack of consensus. It is this ambiguity that causes the conflict within the CDSs, and more generally, the conflict spurring the current transformation of Nicaraguan political culture.

Within the framework of *sandinismo*, there exist several themes over which there is at least nominal consensus among Nicaraguans. Interestingly enough, these themes are ones which formed the core of Sandino's own anti-imperialist, nationalist philosophy. These are 1) Nicaraguan nationalism, 2) a commitment to "popular democracy", and 3) the imperative of economic change. These three themes were given no consideration in the Somoza dynasty, and thus were the philosophical structure behind the anti-Somoza feeling that united Nicaraguans in the late 1970's.

Nicaraguan Nationalism

Nationalism was perhaps Sandino's most closely held tenet. Sandino's nationalist appeal stressed more than simple patriotism; it stressed what he considered the nobility of being Nicaraguan, and the vitiating of this nobility by imperialism. Sandino believed that Nicaraguans had relied on U.S. intervention to settle domestic problems for so long that they no longer considered themselves capable of self-governance. In other words, imperialism had alienated the Nicaraguan from himself. In his first political

manifesto, dated July 1, 1927, Sandino elaborated his nationalist pride:

I am Nicaraguan and I am proud that in my veins flows, more than any other, the blood of the American Indian, whose regeneration contains the secret of being a loyal and sincere patriot. The bonds of nationality give me the right to assume responsibility for my actions on matters of Nicaragua . . . without concerning myself over what the pessimistic and cowardly eunuchs may call me.¹⁸

With this pride came the denunciation of the "blond invader", the "Yankee morphine addicts" who invaded his nation and the native "bootlickers" and "serpents" who did their bidding.¹⁹

Naturally, this line of argument was a powerful unifier for Nicaraguans living under the Somoza regime. This brand of nationalism was ideologically compatible with the Marxist-Leninists of the FSLN, the middle class, and the alienated national elite. The only dissent to the nationalism of Sandinismo came from the insignificant Communist Party of Nicaragua (PCN). As one *barrio* CDS leader explained to me,

How could anyone, be they rich or poor, argue with the idea that we were Nicaraguans and should be proud of it? How could anyone see the mess we were in because of Somoza and the Americans and think that Nicaraguans would do worse? When we fought Somoza and we could agree on nothing else, at least we could agree on this.²⁰

While Nicaraguans were unified by the idea that they might become capable of self-government and find solutions from within the national context rather than from without, ambiguity arose as to

precisely who was to undergo the "regeneration" described by Sandino and become the new political actor. To many Sandinistas, the national elite was, and always had been, an agent of U.S. imperialism, and thus would be superseded by the class revolution that would remove Somoza. In Sandinista eyes, it was only the masses who were legitimately qualified to rule. Most FSLN party members I spoke to referred to the national elite as "traitorous", "agents of U.S. domination", or "disinterested in Nicaraguan autonomy".²¹ As one CDS member in Ciudad Sandino said, "of course there is a role for the elite in the revolution, but the promise of *sandinismo* was made to the masses, and it is the masses who will lead."²²

Naturally, landowners and capitalists feel that such attitudes are a betrayal of the intent of the coalition that destroyed *somocismo*. They did, after all, play a crucial role in the overthrow of Somoza. Some argue that the FSLN has even betrayed the nationalist tenet of *sandinismo* itself. As one Managuan businessman said, "Am I not Nicaraguan? I chose to stay and help the revolution when so many left. But the Front has its own ideas, Cuban ideas, Russian ideas."²³

Even within the popular classes, there is no consensus on precisely what role should be played by the national elite. Throughout Nicaragua, people I interviewed expressed uncertainty over the ability of the masses to rule without the assistance and active participation of the national elite. One Sandinista leader explained this to me as the last vestiges of the idea that Nicaraguans could not rule themselves, but acknowledged that many members of Somoza's old regime have

expertise lacked by the young leaders of the FSLN,²⁴

Popular Democracy

Sandinismo's tenet of popular democracy is the source of considerably more ambiguity. Before 1979, consensus over *sandinismo's* tenet of popular democracy was possible among various sectors in the coalition of opposition because it was not rigidly defined. Almost all of the Nicaraguan people and many of the opposition leaders maintained a very ambiguous definition of democracy as simply that which *somocismo* was not. To be certain, opposition elites viewed with suspicion the post-revolutionary expectations of other groups, most notably the business groups vis a vis the FSLN, but the prevailing attitude throughout the late 1970's was one of cooperation and of setting aside differences until after the revolution.

After July of 1979, the tensions that had been latent in the anti-Somoza coalition emerged into bitter disputes over precisely what form democracy would take in Nicaragua. At the risk of over-simplification, it is possible to characterize this conflict as between those groups favoring a democracy that emphasized mass participation (the FSLN, labor unions, the nascent mass organizations) and those that favored a more traditionally liberal notion of electoral democracy (business, the Conservatives, the Independent Liberal Party). There were, of course, many more conceptions of what the political order should be, but this fundamental conflict most closely describes the conflict that occurred within the ruling junta, and therefore, the terms in which the debate

within the popular classes occurred.

To the FSLN, democracy is inextricably linked to change in the economic order, a belief not shared by much of the national elite and middle class. In 1980, Humberto Ortega detailed the Sandinista position:

democracy neither begins nor ends with elections . . . Democracy first appears in the economic order, when social inequalities begin to diminish, and when the workers and peasants improve their conditions of life . . . At a more advanced state, democracy means worker's participation in the management of factories, cooperatives, cultural centers and so on. In short, democracy is mass intervention in every aspect of social life.²⁵

Opponents of the FSLN charge that the Sandinista's original commitment to democracy was a façade designed to enable coalition with other sectors. To business groups and much of the middle class, the sort of system Ortega describes is not democracy--it is socialism, or, in heightened political rhetoric, communism. Small businessmen I spoke with in Nicaragua were particularly adamant on this point. Roberto Reyes, who owns a drugstore in Managua, told me that "the FSLN is not interested in democracy, not for the middle class, not for the people. They want a new Cuba here so they can make all the decisions."²⁶ Many point to press censorship, the harassment of opposition parties, and the ban on public opinion polls as evidence that the Sandinistas are more interested in solidifying their own rule than in bringing democracy to Nicaragua.

In many ways, the facile terms in which both sides of the

debate paint the issue renders the dispute somewhat moot. Democracy will certainly not come to Nicaragua until there exists a properly evolved social order to support it; it is not clear, however, that the FSLN is committed to furthering such an order if it would pose a challenge to its political power. Nonetheless, since the dispute is cast in facile terms by both the FSLN and the opposition, it manifests itself in these facile terms in the minds of the Nicaraguan people.

At the popular level, the debate is not over how to reconcile the personal liberties characterizing liberal notions of democracy with the social justice endemic to more participatory models of democracy. Rather, it centers on what is "democratic" and what is "non-democratic" or what is "revolutionary" and what is "counterrevolutionary". As such, in my experience, it rarely transcended essentially semantic arguments. These semantic arguments, moreover, had predictably economic criteria. At one CDS meeting in Managua, a local dairy merchant was charged with being "undemocratic" because he sought permission for a price increase for milk. Similarly, the complaints the middle class voices against the Sandinista notion of democracy focus not on the idea of mass participation itself, but on the economic adjustments the FSLN sees as integral to the establishment of participatory democracy.

The urgency with which the debate is conducted in Nicaragua and the frequency with which one hears epithets of "democratic" or "non-democratic" suggests one important point of consensus on the issue of popular democracy--that it is important. It is clear that the word "democracy", ambiguous though it may be, is powerfully

associated with legitimacy. As one CDS leader told me, "Under Somoza everyone knew that the solution was democracy. Unfortunately, no one really knew what exactly democracy was."²⁷

Economic Change

Perhaps the most ambiguous tenet of *sandinismo* over which there existed some consensus during the revolution was the imperative of economic change. Aside from some vague suggestions that the peasantry and working class needed economic empowerment before they could achieve political empowerment, and the recurrent idea of building a nationally controlled canal through Nicaragua, Sandino's writings give no relevant plan for the contemporary transformation of the Nicaraguan economy. Part of this is due to the fact that Sandino was a Liberal general and saw Nicaraguan economic problems in the old Conservative-Liberal paradigm. Similarly, Sandino preceded the alienation of the national elite that would occur under *somocismo*, and thus presents few economic solutions relevant to current socio-economic problems.

At the popular level, *sandinismo's* tenet of economic change affects the dynamic transformation of Nicaraguan political culture less as an idea or ideology in and of itself than as grist for the mill of popular debate. More so than either nationalism or popular democracy, the tenet of economic change raises concrete, day to day issues which are in need of resolution. The process of their resolution through popular debate, and the tension between this popular debate and the solutions imposed by the FSLN, is fundamental in the shaping of the political outlook of the Nicaraguan individual.

Conclusion

Much of the current transformation of Nicaraguan political culture is due to the tremendous number of issues left unresolved by the agents and ideology of the Nicaraguan revolution. The agents, the FSLN and the broad coalition that supported it, were ridden with internal divisions that would emerge in ambiguity over what the post-insurrectional socio-economic and political orders should look like. *Sandinismo*, which provided much of the ideology under which the coalition was formed, provided no unambiguous answers. Thus, the Nicaraguan people find themselves with issues to debate, political structures to understand, and decisions to make as to how they will shape their own political destiny.