

CIA Covert Ops in Central America: Nicaragua and the Road to Contra-Gate

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Global Research, June 27, 2013

[Maverick Media](#)

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#),
[Intelligence](#)

This is the thirteenth chapter of a series excerpted from “Maverick Chronicles,”

In July 1983, only weeks after being arrested with other anti-war protesters for nonviolently blocking the gates of the GE Gatling Gun plant in Burlington – ironically, on the orders of Progressive Mayor Bernie Sanders — I joined the first Witness for Peace delegation to Nicaragua, spent weeks meeting with leaders of the Sandinista revolution, and became a human shield against Contra attacks at the border.

At the time the CIA said that \$19 million a year wasn’t enough to pay and arm all the Contras eager to invade. President Reagan called the small country, crippled with debt, struggling to rebuild a looted economy, a totalitarian threat to US security.

UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick openly urged overthrow of the three-year-old regime.

After a stop in Managua, the national capital, the plan was to move on to Jalapa. A week before several of us arrived two US journalists had been killed a few miles away. Nicaragua and Honduras blamed each other for the crime. On the day I flew out of Miami, the Contras, many of them former supporters of the late Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza, based in Honduras, announced plans for a major offensive against the Sandinista government.

The rural region looked bucolic. Lush green forests and undulating hills reminded me of home. There wasn’t a paved road for more than 50 miles. It was here, nevertheless, and on the Atlantic Coast and at the southern border with Costa Rica, that the CIA was conducting its latest “secret” war.

Jalapa wasn’t much involved in the revolution that ousted Somoza in 1979. Now it was a battleground in a counter-revolutionary struggle being stage-managed by the US administration. Yet training, Honduran complicity and US millions to build a mercenary army hadn’t yet translated into military victory. Instead, destruction of bridges, crops and lives hardened campesinos against their attackers. Even some of those peasant who hadn’t helped to win the revolution were now arming themselves to defend it.



The audience in Jalapa

As our bus lurched over a rutted, muddy road I thought about the previous day – July 4th, America’s Independence Day. I’d spent it in barrios and church learning about reconstruction and democratization. Our group’s movements were being dutifully recorded in the local press. The pro-government newspaper, *Nuevo Diario*, exploited us like gringo celebrities, Americans who said “Si a Nicaragua y No a Reagan.” It was surely odd being publicly embraced in a country my own government was intent on destabilizing.

The day ended with an immersion in revolutionary faith, an evangelical service climaxing in an ecumenical mass at Santa Maria de los Angeles. Between remarks by Father Uriel Molina and others about Contra violence, the nuclear threat and God’s protection of the poor an acoustic band played songs of love and peace. Children roamed through the domed church as the Americans and Nicaraguans rejoiced and reflected.

At one point Molina read a letter from the Christian community in Jalapa. “The defense of one’s life against unjust aggression has always been justified by Christian faith,” the writer argued. Two weeks later President Reagan labeled that type of self-defense, in the form of local militias, the building of a “war machine” and sent warships to surround the country.

“We don’t believe that power lies in arms,” Interior Minister Tomas Borge told celebrants at the mass. Unannounced and greeted with cheers, a military hero had joined us during the service. The US Right considered Borge a “hardliner.” His vigorous defense of an armed citizenry tended to support the theory. But he also talked about “moral force” and his hope that social transformation in a “new Nicaragua” would produce a “new man and woman.”

As people hugged and linked arms, the service turned into a celebration of solidarity. Doves were freed as people flocked to the altar for communion. This was liberation theology in vivid practice, a revolutionary synthesis of faith and principles that had become an engine for social change.

As we poured out of the church at midnight, exhausted but inspired, I recalled the words of Ernesto Cardinal, a Catholic priest and Marxist poet. After resisting Somoza and developing a militant Catholic vision, he’d become Nicaragua’s Minister of Culture. One of his poems, written during the most brutal phase of the dictatorship, concluded:

At midnight a poor woman gave birth to a baby in an open field

and that is hope.

God has said: "Behold I make all things new"

and that is reconstruction.



Front Page, El Nuevo Diario, July 7, 1983 (Greg's the one in the cap.)
Main headline: "Viaje secreto de Jefe de la CIA"

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Struggle at the Border

The caravan reached Jalapa after a day on the road, plus an unscheduled stop when one of the buses couldn't make it over a washed-out section. By this time the delegation had grown to 150 people from over 30 states. The goal was to confront violence with conscience.

Once upon a time this was a quiet place, a town of about 10,000 people in a region that produced corn, rice, beans and about 75 percent of the tobacco grown in the country. Now Jalapa was swollen with refugees, driven into town from homes in the mountains by Contra attacks. Crop production was down and peasants lived in a constant state of anxiety, girded for an invasion. Still, as we made our way to the Instituto, our lodgings, people greeted us with smiles. The generosity of spirit was humbling.

Originally built in 1980 as a center to train Brigadistas for the nationwide literacy crusade, the Instituto had no beds or running water. We were tired, hungry and dehydrated — and shortly drenched by a rainstorm. But many people, even children, were dying in similar circumstances — despite government vaccination programs and other efforts to fight disease and malnutrition. No one complained.

Would a vigil and public witness make any difference? Could it make clear that not all Americans supported US-backed terrorism? Maybe. On a more basic level, we'd also brought food and medical supplies. But what the people we met seemed to value most was our

support and our presence.

We were promised a military briefing. Before that, however, we attended a rally. In heavy rain 500 peasants squeezed into Jalapa's town hall. As we entered the crowd parted and cheers erupted. On the stage, we lined up with local leaders as a theologian in the delegation told the audience that Reagan's plan for Central America did not represent the will of the American people.

After the rally Captain Gonzalez, who commanded about 3,000 troops in Nuevo Segovia, outlined the mathematics of aggression: 400 murders and abductions by Contras in the last six months. The attacks were not a recent development, however. Ever since the 1979 revolution, the Contras had been intent on invading this remote region, about 300 miles from Managua. The fighting intensified after 1980 with CIA advice and funding, and training of Contras in US camps like Libertad outside Miami, owned by Cuban exiles.

Small Contra bands frequently crossed the border from Honduran bases, under cover of Honduran helicopters and small planes. They abducted local leaders, ambushed travelers, burned buildings and farm equipment, and kidnapped youngsters to carry their cargo. Occasionally there were major operations, involving up to 600 men and mortar shelling.

The short-term objective was to take Jalapa, Gonzalez explained. The methods included repeated attacks from at least nine locations along the jagged border, and the indiscriminate shelling of civilians. Sometimes the Nicaraguan army shelled Honduras in response.

The US was allegedly backing the Contras so that they could "interdict" arms moving through Nicaragua to El Salvador. But this was a farming region, not an ideal weapons supply route; it faced rugged Honduran mountains over which arms shipments could reach only Contras. No, the battle for Jalapa was a case of aggression designed to make the region uninhabitable, turning farmland into a staging area for an invasion force. And even if that failed, the Contras could still provoke the Sandinistas into war with Honduras.

Action for Peace

At 7 a.m. the next day delegation of peasants joined us on the Instituto's concrete basketball court. With blankets as cushions, we had spent the last few hours resting on the tile floors. Some of the supplies we used were Russian imports.

Campesinos and mothers of several local martyrs joined the vigil under a scorching sun. They shared stories and revealed their grief as US group unfurled banners and offered their own testimony. One Nicaraguan woman, tearful, dressed in black, painfully recalled how the Contras had taken her son. They had tried to "recruit" him for their army. But when he refused to work for men who were devastating his community they cut him into small pieces, she said. Not being able to see her son was, in a way, more painful than the realization that he was gone.



Border vigil, July 1983

After the vigil we walked out of the Instituto into a cornfield. Sandinista soldiers guarded us from a hilltop barracks silhouetted against the sky. The border was just ahead, the route a line of trenches that divided the fields, slashes of red earth about four feet deep. The campesinos hid there when Huey helicopters from Honduras flew overhead. We linked hands as people planted corn with water from our two nations.

There were many moments of forgiveness and mutual support that day, but the war obviously didn't end. Yet our presence in Nicaragua did mean something, and certainly built a deeper commitment within members of the group to oppose this and other undeclared, illegal wars.

Back in Managua we soon found an opportunity to confront US Ambassador Anthony Quainton. At an Embassy event, we asked for the justification of the covert US role in a Honduran-Nicaraguan war?

"We are trying to get back to the original goals of the revolution" he said. The reply sounded arrogant. Asked about the pointless violence he tried to explain that "the killing of women and children is not the policy of our government," then attempted to define the situation as "Nicaraguans fighting Nicaraguans." Witness for Peace members became enraged as he defended the Contras, claiming that they wanted to "return to democratic political institutions."

When someone said that war wouldn't bring peace he had to agree.

In a private conversation later, Quainton did acknowledge that Reagan's characterization of the Sandinistas as "totalitarian" wasn't constructive. He also agreed that US actions such as aid cut-offs and import sanctions were pushing Nicaragua toward the Soviets, a situation policy-makers claimed they were trying to prevent.

"But the problem of regional destabilization is at the head of the agenda," he said, "and that determines policies and makes other things less important."

In other words, it made little difference that Nicaragua had a mixed economy, open elections at the local level, or a Council of State with representatives from various parties and social groups. The country's social and economic progress, agrarian reform and literacy

crusade were simply cancelled out. Why? Perhaps because the existence of a “New Nicaragua” served as a good example that raised aspirations throughout the region. Now, that was “destabilizing” to US interests.

Reagan put it more plainly. He wasn’t about to let “communists” get a foothold in Central America – even if they did hold elections. The administration therefore wanted people in the US to think that the Sandinista government was a brutal dictatorship increasing the misery of its people. After seeing Nicaragua, however, that was very hard to swallow.

Next: The Hunt for the Secret Team

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