

# The Psyops Manual the CIA Gave to Nicaragua's Contras Is Totally Bonkers

By [Jared Keller](#)

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Region: [Latin America & Caribbean, USA](#)

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*During the U.S. government's decade-long support of the Contra rebels who waged an armed campaign against Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista regime in the 1980s, the CIA funneled all manner of assistance to the anti-socialist "freedom fighters," from training and financial assistance to covert operations. The original "[advise and assist](#)" mission was a disaster in retrospect, spurring [all manner of human rights violations](#) as well as the [modern crack cocaine scourge](#). But the CIA aid program's most fascinating product might be the batshit crazy psychological warfare manual cooked up for the Nicaraguan counter-revolutionaries.*

First [described](#) to the Associated Press by the House Intelligence Committee in October 1984, the guide to "psychological operations in guerrilla warfare" was whittled down to 38 pages and [released](#) on Dec. 16 in [response](#) to a Freedom of Information Act request from Muckrock national security reporter Emma Best. The guide covers all sorts of weird topics, from the development of "armed propaganda teams" to engaging would-be socialists in an impromptu game of Model UN. The manual says it was [designed](#) specifically with "the Christian and democratic crusade being conducted in Nicaragua by the Freedom Commandos" in mind — and it is fucking bonkers. Here are some highlights:

Book-of-the-month clubs

The CIA manual emphasizes from the beginning that every successful warfighter "must be highly motivated to engage in propaganda face to face": no [Facebook ads](#) or "[Cuban Twitter](#)" here. And that means it's book-group time, y'all!



An excerpt from the psychological warfare manual produced by the CIA for Nicaraguan rebels in the late 1970s or early 1980s (Photo via MuckRock/FOIA)

Isn't this wasting time that could be spent fighting down-and-dirty against the tenets of socialism? Probably, but who cares?

Make people comfortable with your brandished weapons

In any guerrilla conflict, especially in urban centers, the imminent nature of armed violence is always a pressing concern for civilian populations. For the CIA, this poses an interesting challenge: How do we make locals OK with *our* heavily-armed bandits, but wary of *other* heavily-armed bandits? Behold "armed propaganda," which, according to the

manual, “improves the behavior of the popular towards its author, and it is not achieved by force.”



An excerpt from the psychological warfare manual produced by the CIA for Nicaraguan rebels in the late 1970s or early 1980s (Photo via MuckRock/FOIA)

The end goal is “to create an identification of the people with the weapons and with the guerrillas who carry them, so that the population feels that those weapons are, indirectly, the weapons that will protect them and help them in their struggle against an oppressive regime,” per the CIA manual. Translation: The only way to stop bad guys with guns is [lots and lots of good guys with guns](#) — even if that [isn’t a totally true statement](#).

Teamwork makes the dream work

Especially if actual training and experience isn’t a concern beyond “persuasive powers.”



An excerpt from the psychological warfare manual produced by the CIA for Nicaraguan rebels in the late 1970s or early 1980s (Photo via MuckRock/FOIA)

Beware of social justice warriors

I’m not even kidding: The CIA has seen “social crusaders” as useful idiots to be exploited for decades.



An excerpt from the psychological warfare manual produced by the CIA for Nicaraguan rebels in the late 1970s or early 1980s (Photo via MuckRock/FOIA)

Free assembly is for [sheep](#)

But it’s a great chance to spark chaos!



An excerpt from the psychological warfare manual produced by the CIA for Nicaraguan rebels in the late 1970s or early 1980s (Photo via MuckRock/FOIA)

“Support for local contacts who are rooted in reality”

This one is my favorite, hands down. Despite the emphasis on promoting a positive perception of the Contras in Nicaragua’s shaky political environment, the goal of the CIA psyops was a long-term undermining of the very perception of reality. A successful psyops mission ends with the creation of “propagandist-combatant guerillas” who champion a chosen ideology as warriors against a repressive regime:



An excerpt from the psychological warfare manual produced by the CIA for Nicaraguan rebels in the late 1970s or early 1980s (Photo via MuckRock/FOIA)

Chilling stuff. Sounds familiar, right? [It should](#).

Read the whole CIA training manual below:

[Psychological Operations in Guerilla Warfare](#) by [Jared Keller](#) on Scribd

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