Excellent Friends, Excellent Enemies; The Failure of U.S. Foreign Policy in Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua

Jonathan Hill
CUNY City College

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Excellent Friends, Excellent Enemies: The Failure of U.S. Foreign Policy in Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua.

Date: May 9, 2011
By: Jonathan Hill
Advisor: Craig Daigle

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The Sandinista narrative.

On July 19, 1979, a popular revolution led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) seized the capital city of Managua and drove the U.S.-backed Somoza dynasty from the country. For the first time in the modern era, Nicaragua, smaller in area than New York state, was under sovereign control. And elder Sandinista statesman Tomás Borge had a message for the United States. “We can be excellent friends and also excellent enemies,” he said, distilling the Sandinista foreign policy posture into a single phrase on the front page of Barricada, the official news organ of the FSLN.¹

As Borge suggested, early relations between the Carter administration and Nicaragua’s revolutionary government were chaotic, and frequently marred by inconsistent policies and political misunderstandings. But the waning months of 1979 also represented a major diplomatic opening for both parties. Both President Carter and the ruling FSLN junta had personal and political reasons for attempting to forge a new political paradigm in U.S.-Nicaraguan relations. And yet, by all practical measures, this ambitious project failed even before the end of Carter’s presidency, and set the mould for the hostile diplomatic approach which characterized the Reagan administration.

Analyses of this episode have tended to focus almost exclusively on the role of the Carter administration. Washington insiders continue to blame lax leadership and the

¹ Barricada, 6 August 1979, New York Public Library (hereafter NYPL), Collection of the DeWitt Wallace Endowment Fund.
anticommunist zeal of Carter’s opponents for the failure. Academic researchers have often leaned toward economic explanations, depicting the Sandinista revolution and subsequent U.S.-led counterrevolution as “inevitable” processes of Nicaragua’s economic dependency upon the United States. In the early years of the revolution, there were so many scholars writing in defense of the Sandinistas that their work practically constituted an academic genre in itself. More recently, NYU professor Greg Grandin has suggested that U.S. resistance to the Sandinistas afforded the burgeoning neoconservative movement a proving ground for imperialist military strategies still in use in the war on terror. These analyses vary widely in approach, but they share a common disregard for the agency of Nicaraguan actors in this relationship. In a delicious bit of historical irony, these commentators have striped the Sandinistas of agency at the precise historical moment in which the group claimed to “return to the masses their identity as makers of their own history.”

This is why Hal Brands’ recent suggestion that historians seek out and incorporate more foreign archival sources into the record of U.S.-Latin American relations is so welcome. Researchers have long relied upon narratives which depict Latin American officials as either victims or conspirators of the United States, the primary actor in local history. These narratives __________________________

6 Barricada, 11 October 1979, NYPL.
are not entirely irrelevant, but their scope is fundamentally limited. The Sandinistas had a very comprehensive idea of their own role in their relations with the United States and worked hard to construct a new narrative of Nicaraguan history. Traditional analyses have tended to ignore the very real efforts of FSLN officials to build constructive relations with the Carter administration, while unwittingly exonerating them of their obvious mistakes. If we are to gain a more thorough understanding of the collapse of diplomatic relations between the United States and Nicaragua in the years after the revolution, it is essential to more fully explore this Sandinista narrative. Toward this end, there are few sources more boldly reflective of the Sandinista political stance than *Barricada*.

The first issue of *Barricada* appeared in July 25, 1979, less than a week after the Sandinista triumph. The paper was haphazard by any measure, relying on a single $400 investment from the FSLN and a handful of unpaid amateur journalists. The facilities featured equipment salvaged from the pro-Somoza paper *Novedades* and the donations of visiting foreign journalists.\(^8\) Articles frequently featured misspelling of places and people, especially in English. In one particularly egregious example, editors identified U.S. Sen. Edward Kennedy as his long-deceased brother Robert.\(^9\) But the editorial quality of *Barricada* was never of primary importance. The FSLN’s ultimate goal was to create a new Nicaragua out of the ashes of their tiny, war-ravaged country. This would require the elaboration of a new narrative – a new “revolutionary truth” – and *Barricada* was the primary instrument in this effort.\(^10\)

\(^9\) *Barricada*, 18 November 1979, NYPL.
\(^10\) *Barricada*, 16 August 1979, NYPL.
The FSLN was conceptualized as a vanguard party in the classic Marxist-Leninist tradition and, as such, was to be the sole guarantor of the revolution and the authentic representative of the Nicaraguan people.\textsuperscript{11} Sandinista leaders mocked the objectivity celebrated by the Western media, which they believed served as a smokescreen for the profit-driven “industrial” journalism of imperialism.\textsuperscript{12} Rather than adhere to contrived objective norms, the FSLN’s guiding journalistic principle was the “decolonization of the international information system,” which required the media to function in full support of the revolution.\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Barricada} reinforced and legitimized the image of Nicaragua as a sovereign, unified, and distinctly anti-imperialist nation.\textsuperscript{14} Indeed, \textit{Barricada’s} head editor Carlos Chamorro told a wary delegation of U.S. Congressmen that the paper consisted of “education” rather than indoctrination because it instructed Nicaraguans in their new revolutionary reality. “It is our people, the masses, who are creating their own history,” he said, apparently unaware of the anti-Sandinista propaganda value of his comments.\textsuperscript{15}

In theory, the media under the Sandinistas was autonomous. But like all sectors of Nicaraguan society, the media was fully expected to contribute actively to the revolutionary process.\textsuperscript{16} “We cannot conceive of journalism detached from the interests of the people,” said FSLN leader Humberto Ortega. The FSLN, of course, was the self-appointed arbiter of these

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\textsuperscript{11} Jones, \textit{Beyond the Barricades}, 6.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Barricada}, 11 November 1979, NYPL.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Barricada}, 20 October 1979, NYPL.
\textsuperscript{14} Though Baracco makes this point about the FSLN Literary Crusade, the same can be said of Sandinista media. Luciano Baracco, \textit{The Imagining of a Nation} (New York, 2005) 88-90.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Barricada}, 19 November 1979, NYPL.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Barricada}, 13 November 1979, NYPL.
\end{flushleft}
interests.\textsuperscript{17} And though this intentional bias makes the newspaper a poor source for objective news, it also makes \textit{Barricada} is excellent source for understanding the goals and concerns of the FSLN. As discussed by Carter’s appointee as ambassador to Nicaragua in 1979, Lawrence Pezzullo, U.S. officials knew almost nothing about the Sandinistas before the revolution.\textsuperscript{18} Carter and his team were forced to approach the FSLN with very little intelligence or consensus about the nature of the regime. Through \textit{Barricada}, this picture becomes clearer.

But reliance on \textit{Barricada} is not without complications. Most content in this period was dogmatic and repetitive, filling up space while communicating very little. This was a manifestation of the “educational” aspects of the Sandinista media, and raises questions over whether \textit{Barricada} faithfully reflected the true policies of the FSLN. There is evidence that editors adhered rather faithfully to the official party line, so its content can be accepted as an authentic expression of FSLN principles.\textsuperscript{19} But as an avowedly vanguardist organization, it is reasonable to question whether these principles were authentic expressions of FSLN goals, or merely expressions of the image the

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Crushing the counter-revolutionary serpent. \textit{Barricada}, 9 August 1979, NYPL.}
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\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Barricada}, 10 November 1979, NYPL.
\textsuperscript{18} Lawrence Pezzullo and Ralph Pezzullo. \textit{At the Fall of Somoza of Somoza} (Pittsburgh, 1993) 173.
\textsuperscript{19} Like all Nicaraguan newspapers, \textit{Barricada} was reviewed by the Ministry of the Interior before publication, and experienced very little conflict with the FSLN in its earliest years. See Jones, \textit{Beyond the Barricades}, xv-xxvii.
\end{flushright}
FSLN wished to convey. Indeed, critics have long accused the Sandinistas of intentionally manipulating U.S. and Nicaraguan media to obscure their true intentions. But even if *Barricada* was not representative of the true goals of the FSLN, as a public journal, it did express the FSLN’s official foreign policy attitude. If *Barricada* did not show who the Sandinistas were, it did show how they wished to be known. *Barricada* was a means by which to transmit the Sandinista narrative to Nicaragua and the world. That this narrative differed so widely from U.S. interpretations of Nicaraguan reality shows the gulf in understanding which these two parties attempted to bridge in the months after the revolution.

To understand the diplomatic position of the FSLN after the revolution, it is necessary to describe the state of the country they inherited. An estimated 50,000 people were killed over the course of the revolution, or more than 2% of the entire population of Nicaragua. Proportionally, this would have equated to 4.5 million deaths in the United States, about 75 times the death toll of the Vietnam War. Many thousands more Nicaraguans were left wounded and nearly one in four were homeless, leaving the FSLN with a desperate humanitarian crisis well beyond the nation’s ability to handle. This crisis was compounded by the dire state of Nicaragua’s finances. After ruling Nicaragua dynastically since 1937, the Somoza family cleaned out the national treasury before fleeing the country. Nicaragua was left with a crippling $1.6 billion in external debt and only about $3 million in cash, enough for only a

21 *Barricada*, 11 October 1979, NYPL.
few days of food imports. Per capita incomes were set back more than 15 years, and private property damages reached almost $500 million. Perhaps the most enduring symbol of Somoza’s rapacious economic policies was the capital Managua itself, which was leveled by an earthquake in 1972 and never rebuilt because an outpouring of foreign aid was diverted to the dictator’s own coffers. Somoza’s mismanagement and looting left Nicaragua debilitated, and forced the Sandinistas to balance their ideological insistence on non-intervention with the country’s pressing economic needs.

Carter cut off U.S. aid to Somoza over human rights concerns in early 1978, forcing the dictator to prop up his regime with short-term private loans at high rates of interest. This was merely an exaggeration of long-standing Somoza financial practices. Increasing resistance to the dictator’s regime grew ever more costly, constantly requiring new sources of funding. The export-driven economy of Nicaragua, combined with the longtime backing of the United States, made the Somoza regime an attractive borrower and allowed the dictator to run up enormous international debts. By December 1978, 73 percent of debt owed by Nicaragua to U.S. banks had to be renegotiated on a yearly basis, usually on increasingly damaging terms. When aid from the United States finally stopped flowing, Nicaragua was left financially insolvent. Somoza’s final $33 million loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1979, which the

25 Booth, The End and the Beginning, 183.
FSLN petitioned the agency to deny, was simply pocketed by the dictator and taken out of Nicaragua.\textsuperscript{27}

Even the economy which the Sandinistas inherited was more of a burden than an asset.\textsuperscript{28} The country’s production and distribution systems exhibited all the classic symptoms of economic \textit{dependency} which often characterized U.S. relationships with the Third World, especially Latin America.\textsuperscript{29} Nicaragua’s tropical climate and volcanic soil rank it among the most fertile places on the planet, and yet many Nicaraguans starved under Somoza. Bananas, coffee, sugar, tobacco, and cotton were grown in vast plantations to the exclusion of basic food staples. These plantations were owned, operated and financed jointly between local oligarchs and U.S. companies, and their products found guaranteed markets in the United States.

Nicaragua’s industrial sector faced the same problems of dependency. Like the agrarian sector, most of Nicaragua’s factories were managed, financed or owned by U.S. business interests. Most of the production equipment they used was U.S.-made, which required replacement parts and other production inputs to be imported. Under Somoza, these transactions were facilitated with ample credit lines at concessionary rates. But after the revolution, the Export-Import Bank reduced Nicaragua’s credit line of $9 million to $40,000 and suspended a guarantee to finance the importation of replacement parts.\textsuperscript{30} The FSLN was forced to pay cash for all production inputs – cash which it simply did not have.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{27} Mankey, “Sandinista Development,” 91.
\textsuperscript{28} Mankey, “Sandinista Development,” 51.
\textsuperscript{29} LaFeber, \textit{Inevitable Revolutions}, 225-241.
\textsuperscript{30} Mankey, “Sandinista Development,” 133.
\textsuperscript{31} Mankey, “Sandinista Development,” 80-81.
This was the economic legacy of *somocismo*, and it left the FSLN financially insecure and vulnerable to foreign interference.\(^{32}\) Even by the standards of the Third World, Somoza’s long and acquiescent relationship with the United States left Nicaragua uniquely susceptible to U.S. political and economic pressures.\(^{33}\) This inequitable relationship was kept in place for decades by “inertia” on the part of U.S. policy makers, and endowed the Somoza regime with the appearance of legitimacy.\(^{34}\) His National Guard relied in U.S. weapons and training, and his intimate diplomatic ties carried with them the implicit military, political and economic protection of the United States. The FSLN fought for decades to remove the dictator and correct this historical wrong. And yet, even with the departure of Somoza, “the last Yankee Marine in Nicaragua,” the FSLN found itself leading a nation at least as dependent on the U.S. as it ever had been, and perhaps even more so.\(^{35}\) To rebuild Nicaragua as a sovereign and independent nation, the FSLN would be forced to partner with the hated Yankee. This was the great irony of the post-revolutionary period.

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\(^{32}\) *Somocismo* describes the system of political, social and economic policies employed by the Somoza family to consolidate and retain power in Nicaragua.

\(^{33}\) It has been argued that the economic vulnerabilities and strong U.S. ties of the Nicaraguan state after the fall of Somoza made the country especially prone to economic intervention, even though such intervention is typically ineffective in other historical contexts. See LeoGrande, “Making the Economy Scream,” 329-48.

\(^{34}\) Pezzullo and Pezzullo, *At the Fall of Somoza*, 243.

\(^{35}\) Humberto Ortega, in Arias, *Nicaragua, Revolución*, 175.
Sandinista founder Carlos Fonseca indentified “Yankee imperialism” as the “traditional enemy of the Nicaraguan people” in the 1950s, giving voice to a long local history of anti-U.S. sentiment.\(^3^6\) The way to escape the Yankee’s grasp, Fonseca believed, was by imitating the Soviet model, as he described in his 1958 work *A Nicaraguan in Moscow*. But although Fonseca was celebrated as a martyr of the revolution (he was killed in action in 1976), his orthodox vision for a socialist Nicaragua did not survive him. Owing to Nicaragua’s close ties with Castro, Sandinista ideology evolved toward a Cuban-style “new Marxism” which emphasized nationalist politics and anti-Yankee rhetoric over economic and social Marxist orthodoxy.\(^3^7\) Rather than emphasize the intellectual foundations of Fonseca’s ideology, later Sandinista leaders moved toward a more nationalist interpretation, embodied in the person of Nicaraguan rebel hero Augusto César Sandino. In naming the FSLN in his honor, Fonseca explicitly linked the Sandinista revolution to more than a century of foreign domination. This made anti-imperialist Yankee-baiting appear as one of the “inherent, enduring and distinctive characteristics” of the revolution.\(^3^8\) By the time of the revolution, Sandinista leaders were nearly unanimous in describing their revolution not as a Marxist struggle to seize Nicaraguan centers of production, but a hundred-year war for independence from U.S. domination.\(^3^9\)

Nicaragua’s ties to Moscow were always based more on impression than reality. As a powerful, supposedly anti-imperialist enemy of the United States, the Soviet Union was seen as

\(^3^7\) Miranda and Ratliff, *The Civil War in Nicaragua*, 74-75.
\(^3^8\) Baracco, *The Imagining of a Nation*, 163.
\(^3^9\) Humberto Ortega, in Arias, *Nicaragua, Revolución*, 173.
a “natural ally” by many in the FSLN, even those who were not inclined to Marxist ideology.40

Pro-Soviet rhetoric was often swapped or mingled with anti-U.S. rhetoric by the FSLN’s more doctrinaire members. And although its leaders wished to appear as a unified front, the heterogeneous coalition which brought the Sandinistas to power in Nicaragua defied easy labels. As noted by FSLN junta member Sergio Ramírez:

“A lot of time is spent trying to label this revolution. But we know that names can’t make revolutions. People want to define whether it’s Communist pro-Soviet or Communist pro-Cuban, or Social Democrat, or Eurocommunist, or whatever... It’s Sandinista... We don’t claim we’ve invented anything, but we are trying to give this process some new dimension, a local quality, if not a universal one. We don’t claim to substitute universal doctrines, but we do claim the right to lead this process along a truly creative path. It seems to me that a revolution that doesn’t begin by being creative is not a revolution.”41

Even though some Sandinistas looked to Moscow for inspiration, the revolution was still based in Managua. Nicaragua did receive significant aid from the Soviet bloc, but not demonstrably more than it received from the either United States or the rest of the world.42 And the USSR did not begin arming the FSLN until years later, after Carter refused to do so.

In reality, the perceived communist leanings of the FSLN leadership paled in comparison to the popular and deep-rooted ideology of anti-Yankeeism. As FSLN official Victor Tirado pointed out, the essential component of Sandinismo was not Marxism, but Nicaraguan nationalism.43 An excellent example of this shift was the Historic Program of the FSLN, first published in 1969. The document was republished in 1981 to clarify the enemy as “Yankee

40 Robert S. Leiken and Barry Rubin, eds., The Central American Crisis Reader (New York, 1987) 32.
imperialism” rather than Fonseca’s original “exploiting classes.”44 This is not to say that there were no Marxists in the FSLN. Agricultural Minister Jaime Wheelock and his compatriots in the Proletarian tendency most certainly fit this description, as did many older members like Tomás Borge who had fought alongside Fonseca.45 But as a whole, the FSLN relied upon a broad coalition defeat Somoza and eschewed, at least publicly, the most dogmatically Marxist aspects of Sandinista ideology. Anti-imperialism, not Marxism, was seen as the “true political identity” of the Nicaraguan people. And if anti-imperialism was what made Nicaragua “historically and culturally unique,” then the United States was the “absolute Other” against which the country was measured.46

The United States has had a long and checkered history in Nicaragua. From the filibuster William Walker’s abortive Nicaraguan presidency in the 1850s, to the decades of Marine occupation in the early twentieth century, to the execution of populist leader Augusto Cesar Sandino in 1934, the U.S. had a local reputation for overseeing the worst episodes of Nicaraguan history. Because of this long history of intervention – one might even call it a tradition – the images of Somoza and Uncle Sam became conflated within the Sandinista narrative. Victory over the dictator was almost universally interpreted as a long-awaited victory

44 Miranda and Ratliff, The Civil War in Nicaragua, 73.
45 There were three “tendencies,” or factions, within the FSLN: The Proletarian, which focused on Marxist organizing and education in urban areas; the Popular Prolonged War, which emphasized guerrilla activity in the countryside; and the ultimately dominant and less doctrinaire Tercerista (Third Way), which reconciled tactics of both and attracted supportive bourgeoisie to build a broad political coalition.
46 Baracco, The Imagining of a Nation, 163-4.
over the United States itself.47 The triumphant Sandinistas saw in this victory a chance to reinvent this regrettable relationship in an atmosphere of equality and respect.

But this new friendship would prove complicated. Just weeks after the revolution, *Barricada* unveiled the new hymn of the FSLN which proclaimed: “The children of Sandino will never sell out or give in. We fight against the Yankee, enemy of humanity.”48 The Yankee was the distillation of all the most deplorable parts of U.S. foreign policy, and this archetype became codified through *Barricada* into the Nicaraguan historical narrative. This character was depicted in *Barricada* in various ways – often as a corpulent businessman, sometimes as Uncle Sam, but usually as a voracious, star-spangled octopus reaching its tentacles into every corner of the Third World. This image of the Yankee justified the anti-imperialist ideology of the FSLN and trained the popular ire against a common, ever-present enemy. Indeed, the FSLN likely preferred Washington as an enemy within Nicaragua, as anti-Yankeeism was an effective tactic for social cohesion.49

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48 *Barricada*, 3 August 1979, NYPL.
Although virulent anti-Yankeeism was a unifying force in Nicaragua, it had an extremely polarizing effect in Washington. Diplomatic officials anticipated the anti-Yankee backlash, but officials in other department found the brash posturing of the Sandinistas too harsh to ignore. FSLN leaders counted themselves as peers of Cuba’s Fidel Castro, Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi, and Angola’s José Eduardo dos Santos – revolutionaries who had also defeated the U.S. Goliath. The hero’s welcome extended to communist Vietnamese prime minister and Ho Chi Minh disciple Pham Van Dong in September 1979 was perceived by many as a direct insult to U.S. dignity.

The new Sandinista narrative contained two threads which were inherently dissonant. On the one hand, FSLN leaders wished to reorient Nicaragua’s relationship with the United States within a context of sovereignty, respect and mutual benefit. On the other hand, anti-Yankeeism was at the root of Sandinista ideology, and it endured well past July 1979. And it did not flourish alone, but was cultivated by Sandinista leaders as an effective tactic for consolidating the revolution. This seemingly bipolar approach to foreign policy was perfectly sensible within the Sandinista revolutionary context, but it complicated relations with the United States tremendously. “Imperialism is moving its tentacles to stem the advance of our popular


\[\text{\footnotesize 51} \text{ Black, Triumph of the People, 301; Barricada, 13 September 1979, NYPL.}\]
Sandinista revolution,” wrote the editors of Barricada.\textsuperscript{52} As FSLN officials began to see these tentacles everywhere, diplomacy with the United States grew extremely difficult.

It has long been argued, with reasonable justification, that U.S. officials overestimated the communist threat posed by the Sandinistas, and imagined them to be something they were not. Perhaps the same argument can be made of the Sandinistas. FSLN leaders sabotaged their relationship with the United States by failing to distinguish between Anastasio Somoza and Jimmy Carter. Perhaps in their revolutionary fervor, it was Sandinista officials who portrayed themselves as something they were not – as allies in the Soviet struggle to defeat the capitalist empire of the United States. Sandinista ideology was meant to unite the people in a common struggle against a common enemy, but it also made the FSLN’s negotiating position inflexible and reactionary in relation to the United States. The Sandinistas remained stuck within the narrative which had brought them to power in Nicaragua.

“Our example cannot be controlled by Carter,” said Interior Minister Borge at a graduation ceremony of military cadets.\textsuperscript{53} And yet, it is abundantly clear that Carter lacked the means, and likely the will, to actually control the Nicaraguan revolution. But FSLN ideology was fundamentally fixated on the threat of U.S. intervention, and accusations of meddling remained central to Sandinista foreign policy. Although State Department staffers anticipated this reaction, it reached a “disconcerting level” which made negotiations difficult for officials in the

\textsuperscript{52} Barricada, 23 September 1979, NYPL.
\textsuperscript{53} Barricada, 11 October 1979, NYPL.
U.S. State Department urging a moderate approach. Sandinista officials appeared not to fully appreciate that there existed no clear distinction between their fiery public personas and their more moderate approach at the negotiating table. They wished to portray themselves as an uncompromising vanguard of the people in Nicaragua while quietly remaining politically palatable to the U.S. foreign policy establishment. But their calumny grew too hot, and often too specific, to be brushed off, and their rhetorical balancing act ultimately failed.

The Sandinistas were convinced that history stood behind their revolutionary narrative. Like Mexican journalist Leonel Urbano, they believed their revolution was “the most transcendental event of the Seventies on the American continent.” Perhaps it would have been optimistic to hope for full U.S. support for the revolution, but there was a sense that Sandinista leaders at least wished for the U.S. to recognize it as exceptional and unprecedented in the history of U.S.-Latin American relations. The FSLN considered itself uniquely equipped, ideologically and intellectually, to lead Nicaragua toward a new revolutionary future. This belief caused FSLN leaders to reject the “true, potentially constructive alternatives” to conflict offered by domestic opposition and U.S. diplomatic officials. The FSLN’s decidedly immoderate public persona became a growing cause for concern for FSLN opponents in the U.S. and Nicaragua.

More moderate elements within Nicaragua had envisioned something quite different following the revolution. Based on the impressive breadth of the revolutionary coalition forged

\[\text{Sources:}\]

[55] The Sandinistas had wished to learn from the mistakes of the Cuban revolution and avoid the island nation’s isolation. It is somewhat ironic, then, that they engaged in the same virulently anti-Yankee rhetoric which had damaged U.S.-Cuban relations in the 1960s. See Brands, Latin America’s Cold War, 24-36.
[56] Leonel Urbano, El Dia, 19 August 1979, reprinted in Barricada, 27 August 1979, NYPL.
by the FSLN, many non-Sandinistas expected that post-revolutionary Nicaragua would be a
“novel and eclectic” model which sought to incorporate all the various strands of the anti-
Somoza opposition. But once in power, the FSLN began to cast nearly all criticism of the
regime as “counterrevolutionary” meddling egged on by the United States and pro-Somoza
forces, and turned toward a more narrow interpretation of unity. The vast majority of
Nicaraguans believed that accommodation with the United States was both necessary and
desirable. The Marxist-inspired Sandinista narrative, on the other hand, preached the
fundamental incompatibility of Nicaraguan interests with those of the “reactionary” political
and economic sectors in the United States. Like economic historian Walter LaFeber, the FSLN
leaders believed that conflict with the United States was inevitable.

Also inevitable, in Sandinista eyes, was Nicaragua’s natural association with the Soviet
Union. The problem with this narrative was that it was intensely, and indeed intentionally,
agonistic toward the United States. In this sense, the FSLN’s pro-Cuba and pro-Soviet stance
became a self-fulfilling prophecy which virtually guaranteed conflict with the U.S. – conflict
which the Sandinistas claimed was inevitable. But this association with the USSR was never as
deep as the Sandinistas wished to believe. As argued by one historian, “the pro-Soviet bias of
much of the Sandinista leadership [was] in good measure the consequence of a bad history.”
Decades of deplorable relations with the United States convinced many revolutionaries to
pursue what they believed to be the exact opposite of traditional relations. But despite Soviet

59 Miranda and Ratliff, The Civil War in Nicaragua, 77.
60 Leiken, “Can the Cycle be Broken?,” in Anatomy of a Conflict, 3-29.
cheerleading, Nicaragua was never truly compatible with the Soviet global interests. The revolutionary government of Nicaragua offered a fortuitous and visible propaganda victory for the USSR, but little in the way of strategic advantage. By the time Soviet arms began pouring into Nicaragua in the early 1980s, the Reagan administration had long since taken the Sandinistas at their word and branded their government an intractable communist menace in Central America.

The central mistake of Sandinista diplomacy toward the United States was that of narrative. FSLN leaders were unable to separate the historical experience upon which their revolution was founded from the political and economic realities of the post-revolutionary period. Although they were privately open and agreeable, the Sandinistas created a narrative through Barricada and other means which antagonized the United States and weakened the negotiating leverage of their own advocates in Congress and the State Department. During the revolution, the FSLN had intentionally baited Somoza into overreacting and, thus, polarize opinion against his regime within Nicaragua an internationally. This same tactic proved much less effective against the Carter administration, which sought to lessen U.S. involvement in Nicaragua. Perhaps most ironic is the fact that Carter was among a small circle in Washington who approached foreign policy in a way which could have accommodated the FSLN government. And despite the fact that he happened to be president when the Sandinistas took power, relations still soured. Carter did make attempts to redress the very real grievances of the FSLN and incorporate their narrative into a workable policy toward Nicaragua, but he faced

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61 Brands, Latin America’s Cold War, 171.
tremendous political resistance in Washington, where anti-communism and international
stability considered the bedrock of sound cold war foreign policy.

Whatever chance Carter may have had to convince lawmakers of the potential for an
acceptable resolution in Nicaragua was utterly undermined by the Sandinistas themselves. He
did find support within his party, but there were plenty of U.S. officials who instinctively
resisted sending money to guerillas who hailed Castro as a hero and denounced the Yankee as
the enemy of humankind. While this narrative may have helped consolidate the revolution at
home (and this point is debatable), it locked the FSLN into a
pattern of antagonism which undermined negotiations with the
United States. U.S. diplomatic officials were accustomed to the
florid language of Latin American revolutionaries, but it was grew
ever harder to defend FSLN leaders when, for example, they
refused to vote to condemn the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan
before the UN, or received communist Vietnamese leader Pham
Van Dong in Managua as a conquering hero. The Sandinistas
“were beaten down from the outside, but they helped beat
themselves as well.”\textsuperscript{62}

The Sandinista narrative which formed over decades of suffering weaved together a
whole host of sometimes divergent ideologies – Marxist class warfare, Christian liberation
theology, Third World anti-imperialism, anti-Yankeeism, and resurgent nationalism, among the

\textsuperscript{62} Brands, \textit{Latin America’s Cold War}, 267.
most prominent. This broad narrative of resistance and oppression was instrumental in the
FSLN’s struggle to topple a dictator and return Nicaragua to its people. But this sort of
revolutionary narrative is best suited for revolutions, and must necessarily evolve when the
enemy has been defeated. This was a point which the FSLN never truly grasped, and which
ultimately made their revolution unpalatable to the United States. Although FSLN negotiators
privately spoke of reconciliation and friendship, *Barricada* continued to scream of conspiracy,
counterrevolution and conditions.
Jimmy Carter’s foreign policy.

Jimmy Carter arrived at White House with a bold vision to restructure U.S. foreign policy around the promotion of human rights. “It is a new world that calls for a new American foreign policy,” he declared, “a policy based on a constant decency in its values and on optimism in our historical vision.” Carter believed that the U.S. had, in the preceding decade, abandoned the moral high ground in foreign affairs by engaging in policies inconsistent with its values. With the failure of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal so fresh in the public memory, Carter believed that the U.S. was due for a return to original principles. The civil rights movement proved moral considerations could and should be applied to the decisions of government, he argued in his memoirs. No longer would oppressive allies get a pass simply for being anti-communist, they would be required to prove their commitment to democratic values to receive U.S. aid. This policy of demonstrating “American idealism” was no naïve whim, said Carter, but a “practical and realistic approach to foreign affairs.”

In practice, this approach involved cutting off aid to dictators who refused to improve their human rights records, as Carter did to Somoza in 1978. In this way, he believed that societies ruled by oppressive rulers could be gradually democratized to a point in which human rights would be accepted as a universal standard. This approach was also part of Cold War geopolitical strategy, since it would allow conservative dictators to avoid being toppled by similarly oppressive leftist regimes. To implement this theory as a functional policy, Carter

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64 Carter, Keeping Faith, 141-3.
relied primarily on his National Security Adviser (NSA) Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance.

Brzezinski was a Polish expatriate and inveterate cold warrior who wanted to scrap to the system of détente established by Nixon and Kissinger and reapply pressure to the Soviet Union and its allies. Like Carter, he believed that the U.S. was morally superior to the USSR, and that Soviet dominance could be driven from Latin America by making this superiority evident. But Brzezinski also cautioned Carter against ignoring the “uglier realities of world politics.”

Power and principle were both worthy tools of diplomacy in Latin America, he wrote, but “power had to come first.” The issue of human rights was a worthy cause, and a potentially profitable arena of conflict against the Soviet Union, but the United States had to remain ready to flex its considerable military might in defense of human rights if necessary. This was a point of distinction between Brzezinski and the less hawkish Secretary of State.

Vance was a true believer in Carter’s human rights doctrine, which he called “a national requirement for a nation with our heritage.” Though there were points of distinction, Vance and Carter generally agreed on policy in Nicaragua. Like the president, Vance believed that “American values and beliefs” should be at the heart of U.S. foreign policy, rather than “narrowly defined national interests.” The complex struggles of the Third World had the potential to inadvertently draw the superpowers into proxy wars, he said, and winning over nations through democratic ideals had the potential to prevent armed conflict. The U.S. must

68 Cyrus Vance, Hard Choices: Critical Years in America’s Foreign Policy (New York, 1983) 421.
be pragmatic and flexible, he cautioned Carter, since each country had a unique set of circumstances.69 Vance did disagree with Carter’s decision to categorically withhold aid from human rights abusers, since it would intrude too deeply into the internal affairs of other countries and punish its poorest residents.70 As a diplomat, Vance also recognized that cutting off funding would also undermine U.S. negotiating power, a point which would haunt Carter during the revolution in Nicaragua.

The relationship between Brzezinski and Vance was tense. Vance was a committed negotiator who had served as a delegate to the Vietnam Peace talks in 1968 and was instrumental in the Panama Canal treaties, the Camp David Accords, and SALT II. He believed that the Sandinista revolution was a legitimate demonstration of the will of the oppressed people of Nicaragua, and that disregarding the FSLN’s demands could drive the country into the arms of the Soviet Union.71 Brzezinski, on the other hand, believed that the Sandinistas represented a credible Soviet threat, and made repeated attempts to throw the new government to Somoza’s moderate opposition. This disagreement of worldviews, compounded by Carter’s informal approach in foreign policy meetings, resulted in diplomatic disaster during the FSLN’s final push to topple the dictator. As recounted by the new ambassador to Nicaragua, Vance and Brzezinski were barely speaking by the summer of 1979. Pezzullo arrived in Managua to discover he would have to begin negotiations with the Sandinistas from scratch, since the

69 Vance, Hard Choices, 33.
70 Vance, Hard Choices, 455.
embassy had not a single quality contact within the FSLN. U.S. policymakers had for years found an easy friend in Somoza, a legacy which could not be quickly undone.

Perhaps most telling about the sad state of US-Nicaraguan relations in 1979, however, are the personal accounts of these men. In the many hundreds of pages which Vance, Brzezinski and Carter devote to their periods of service in the White House, Nicaragua is mentioned on scarcely more than a handful. The latter two both include detailed chronologies of their service, and neither lists any event in Nicaragua of any type. Neither the term Sandinista nor FSLN appear anywhere in the memoirs of these three men. The fact that nobody close to Carter made Nicaragua a priority may partially explain the “lurching quality” of Carter’s “imprecise” foreign policy approach there. Although the fall of Somoza represented exactly the sort of change Carter was trying to effect with his new human rights policy, Nicaragua somehow failed to capture the imagination of the major players in the president’s foreign policy team. The United States was certainly heavily involved around the globe in 1979, and Carter faced a multitude of international obligations which distracted him from the growing Sandinista issue. But the fact that Nicaragua nearly escaped mention altogether is telling.

The Carter administration’s attitude toward U.S.-Nicaraguan relations has been best described as schizophrenic. The president’s relatively abstract theory of human rights never truly coalesced into a vigorous and thorough system of foreign policy. Most importantly, the term “human rights” was never satisfactorily defined for the purposes of policy discussions.

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72 Pezzullo and Pezzullo. At the Fall of Somoza of Somoza, 71.
73 Brands, Latin America’s Cold War, 176-7.
74 Black, Triumph of the People, 354.
Human rights are clearly comprised of such things as due process, freedom of speech and association, and protection against unfair detention, abuse and murder. But Carter believed these basic rights did not extend far enough, and also sought to apply them to racial and religious discrimination, women’s rights, and access to food, shelter and medical care, among others.\textsuperscript{75} While noble, such issues often lay well outside of Washington’s real sphere of influence, and would have required a deep involvement in the internal workings of sovereign foreign nations. Carter also apparently failed to understand that, by unilaterally changing the criteria for relations with the United States, he had voided longstanding tacit agreements with pro-U.S. dictators around the world (like Somoza) in a single stroke. This was a diplomatic shock which effectively weakened U.S. authority in many parts of the world, even if Carter believed it bolstered the moral authority of his foreign policy. By Brzezinski’s estimation, this policy was “overly ambitious” and failed to effectively communicate Carter’s U.S. policy goals to a skeptical public.\textsuperscript{76}

In Carter’s defense, he did foresee the tremendous difficulties of trying infuse policy decisions with a moral element. Pragmatism would be required, he said, and it could take years to see tangible results.\textsuperscript{77} But although he anticipated the serious challenges to implementing this policy, he failed to recognize some of its major drawbacks. Rather than strengthen the standing of the U.S., this human rights policy undermined Carter’s negotiating power in nations

\textsuperscript{75} Carter, Keeping Faith, 144  
\textsuperscript{76} Brzezinski, Power and Principle, 57.  
\textsuperscript{77} Carter, Keeping Faith, 144
which preemptively renounced U.S. aid before it could be withheld.\textsuperscript{78} And in nations where aid was cut off, like Nicaragua, U.S. economic and political leverage was drastically diminished. Carter’s humane attempt to improve the lives of ordinary Nicaraguans had inadvertently abandoned them to the whims of an unstable and well-armed dictator.

This policy also drew heavy resistance within the United States. Rather than a concerted and virtuous return to American values, Carter’s critics saw his policy as an “ad hoc ideology designed for U.S. moral rearmament after the disaster of Indochina.”\textsuperscript{79} Many in the growing neoconservative movement, who held great influence during the Reagan administration, believed that Carter’s bold vision was based on naïve leftist assumptions about the world. Loudest among these critics was Georgetown University professor of government Jeane Kirkpatrick, whose scathing critique of Carter’s policies put the administration on the defensive and triggered a debate over the proper role of U.S. involvement in the world.\textsuperscript{80}

Kirkpatrick explicated an important distinction between authoritarian states and totalitarian states — authoritarian states preserved traditional institutions through repressive means while totalitarian states, such as Sandinista Nicaragua, permanently revolutionized societies in ways which made them

\begin{itemize}
\item Seven Latin American nations denied Carter the opportunity to evaluate their human rights by renouncing U.S. aid. See Brands, \textit{Latin America’s Cold War}, 176.
\end{itemize}
dangerous, unlivable, and most importantly, indisposed to U.S. interests. Carter’s “deterministic and apolitical” approach was far too idealistic to handle the very real complexities of international relations. According to Kirkpatrick, totalitarian states were Marxist by definition, and appealed to liberal-minded people because they “invoke the symbols and values of democracy.” In the case of Somoza, Kirkpatrick argued that Carter’s misguided insistence on human rights caused him to abandon a loyal autocratic ally, and announced to others that the U.S. was an unreliable partner. At best, the Carter had squandered an easy advantage. At worst, he had forfeited an American outpost to the Soviet Union.

Kirkpatrick’s argument relied on some naïve assumptions of its own, but that did not diminish its appeal among Carter’s critics. Rather than seriously evaluate U.S. goals and motives, Kirkpatrick held up U.S. hegemony as a good in itself, and rationalized intervention wherever necessary to preserve global primacy. “A posture of continuous self-abasement and apology vis-à-vis the Third World is neither morally necessary nor politically appropriate,” she wrote, offering a muscular alternative to Carter’s anemic “moralism.” The United States was not the problem in the world, according to Kirkpatrick, but the solution. In a turbulent era for U.S. diplomacy, she offered a narrative of tempting simplicity which mocked the baroque sensitivity of Carter’s human rights policy. And as the Somoza regime continued to unravel on Carter’s watch in the spring of 1979, her ideas began to gain traction.
As Sandinista forces pressed on toward Managua, Carter’s State Department adhered to a policy of nonintervention which allowed the revolution to play out locally. Yet according to Pezzullo, who arrived in Nicaragua just weeks before Somoza’s departure, this was precisely the wrong approach. In the five months the embassy stood empty before his arrival, and then again during his negotiations with Somoza during the FSLN’s final offensive, the U.S. “stood on the sidelines, ill-informed and confused.” Somoza’s entire governmental system, which for decades had been “Made in the USA,” was facing clear and imminent collapse, and the White House had no plan for accommodating these profound and inevitable changes. Just weeks before the FSLN’s final offensive, with rebels in control of large parts of the country, officials were still seriously discussing the possibility of Somoza completing the two remaining years of his term as president. Lacking even cursory intelligence about such things as the FSLN supply lines in Costa Rica, the U.S. was “in the dark without a position.”

This hands-off approach was seen by the FSLN as hypocritical, and gave the impression that the U.S. was still supporting Somoza. As FSLN commander Dora María Téllez said in the waning months of 1978, “the bombs dropped on Matagalpa as well as the planes are made in the U.S. The tear gas, M-16 rifles, the equipment used by the Nicaraguan army is produced in the United States.” Carter may have backed away from Somoza, but he left him with all the guns. And this blindness to the real forces at work within Nicaragua made a bad situation

81 Viron Vaky, “Testimony on Nicaragua” before the House of Representatives Subcommittee on International Affairs (June 1979), in Leiken and Rubin, eds., The Central American Crisis Reader, 484-9.
82 Pezzullo and Pezzullo, At the Fall of Somoza, 245.
84 Pezzullo and Pezzullo, At the Fall of Somoza, 71, 148.
85 Pezzullo and Pezzullo, At the Fall of Somoza, 52.
worse, as officials pursued policies which antagonized the FSLN and prolonged Somoza’s resignation. Cyrus Vance proposed, allegedly at Brzezinski’s urging, that the Organization of American States (OAS) send a peacekeeping force to support the Somoza government. Yet even with its long and checkered history as a tool of U.S. regional interests, the OAS roundly rejected the proposal, damaging U.S. prestige throughout the region. This marked the last open U.S. attempt to keep the FSLN out of power.87

Even when the inevitability of an FSLN victory became clear, U.S. attempts to transfer power were mismanaged. In the final days, a four-point U.S. plan for the dictator’s departure leaked to the press without any discussion with FSLN leaders, convincing them of U.S. double-dealing.88 This was not the first White House leak to embarrass Carter’s Nicaragua strategy. In late 1978, Carter secretly sent a letter congratulating Somoza for improving human rights in Nicaragua. In fact, Somoza had done very little to improve the lives of his citizens, and the letter was meant to encourage rather than congratulate him. When the letter leaked, it backfired in a myriad of ways. It caused Somoza to believe he still enjoyed the full support of the U.S. It convinced FSLN leaders that the U.S. was not genuinely interested in removing Somoza. And, one editorial claimed, it showed the world that Carter was unable to operate with “reasonable efficiency,” since he had no control over his policy or his people.89

The U.S. proved unable even to “stage manage” Somoza’s departure, and the resulting chaos allowed the Sandinistas to cut the United States out of negotiations and claim sole

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87 Pezzullo and Pezzullo, At the Fall of Somoza, 76-7.
88 Pezzullo and Pezzullo, At the Fall of Somoza, 151.
stewardship over the “new Nicaragua.”\textsuperscript{90} Pezzullo had succeeded in forging an agreement between Somoza and the FSLN which would temporarily transfer power to former Nicaraguan vice president Francisco Urcuyo. The interim president would then allow the Somoza family to leave the country before transferring power to the FSLN when its leaders arrived in the Managua. But, for reasons still not entirely clear, Urcuyo reneged and announced that he would remain in office until the end of Somoza’s term in 1981. This decision, perhaps at the urging of Somoza himself, defied both the terms of the agreement and the realities of a rebel-controlled Nicaragua, and effectively forced Pezzullo to flee the country in protest. Realizing the lunacy of his decision, Urcuyo recanted the next day. But Sandinista leaders had already diverted their Managua-bound flight to the FSLN headquarters in León, intent on resuming hostilities and taking the capital by whatever means necessary.

Sergio Ramírez claimed that this incident proved Carter’s fundamental impotence in managing the affairs of Nicaragua without the benefit of a regional puppet. The decision to fly to León rather than return to Costa Rica signaled the FSLN’s final rejection of U.S. mediation, and represented a major diplomatic failure for the Carter administration.\textsuperscript{91} As Pezzullo astutely noted, Somoza’s resignation was the only piece of the complex revolutionary puzzle over which the U.S. had any measure of control. Negotiating and executing a successful transfer of power could have moderated the revolution and earned Carter “the political capital that comes with leadership.” But because of Carter’s insistence on nonintervention, the U.S. wasted a “historical

\textsuperscript{90} Pezzullo and Pezzullo, \textit{At the Fall of Somoza}, 154-5.
\textsuperscript{91} Sergio Ramírez, in Arias, \textit{Nicaragua, Revolución}, 201-3.
opportunity” at a peaceful transition. Despite good intentions, the president’s human rights policy managed to alienate and antagonize both Somoza and the FSLN, without contributing in any positive way to the interests of Nicaragua or the United States. To the FSLN, the United States had acted arbitrarily and irresponsibly in Somoza’s final days. As evidenced in *Barricada*, the first days of the revolution were marked by profound anti-Yankeeism.

Diplomatic officials in the United States anticipated a popular backlash and were instructed to ignore revolutionary provocations to salvage open negotiations. Carter’s foreign policy goal from the beginning was to remain “patient and open-minded” with the FSLN, proving that the State Department had won out over Brzezinski, who wanted to steer the new Nicaraguan government toward more moderate opposition. But in reality, the revolutionary bombast of *Barricada* was primarily intended for local consumption, and bore little relation to actual interactions between U.S. and FSLN leaders. Early exchanges were by all accounts cordial and open, and Sandinista leaders were known to be exceedingly pragmatic at the negotiating table in comparison to similar revolutionary regimes. In the words of one U.S. diplomat, “If you could peel the roof back and look down on a meeting of their government, you would hear them call us all SOBs, and if you could listen in on us, you’d hear the same thing about them. But when the two sides are face-to-face, things couldn’t be nicer.”

But not every branch of the government was as diplomatic, so to speak, as the State Department. For many in Congress, quietly suffering the slings and arrows of Sandinista anti-

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92 Pezzullo and Pezzullo, *At the Fall of Somoza*, 244-8.
94 Black, *Triumph of the People*, 185.
Yankee rhetoric was not an acceptable price of doing business with Nicaragua. Debate in
Washington over the true essence of the Sandinistas devolved into a “tedious and stereotyped
propaganda war,” as Central American policy formed around a larger framework of partisan
U.S. politics.96 Carter and his liberal allies, such as senators Edward Zorinsky and Edward
Kennedy, urged restraint in dealing with the vituperative Sandinistas. The regime’s penchant for
loaded buzzwords, “appropriate in their own setting,” unnerved many U.S. officials who were
unfamiliar the nature of the Sandinista revolution.97 Other lawmakers, like Richard Stone and
Frank Church, vociferously denounced the FSLN as a dangerous cadre of communist thugs. This
broad spectrum of opinion within Washington reflected the ambiguity
of the revolution itself. Nobody really knew whether the Sandinistas
were committed communists, or whether they posed a credible threat
to perceived U.S. interests. The future direction of the Nicaraguan
government was also unnervingly vague. This general confusion was
exacerbated by Carter’s human rights policy, which artificially
compartmentalized U.S. influence and somocismo – entities which
were intimately linked. Carter had envisioned a humane and pragmatic
foreign policy approach in Nicaragua, but this approach left the U.S.
fumbling for solutions as the FSLN seized power.

96 Leiken and Rubin, The Central American Crisis Reader, 34.
97 Walker, The Land of Sandino, 164.
It is tempting to lay the blame for failed relations between the United States and Nicaragua in late 1979 on President Carter alone. Certainly his human rights strategy there was a foreign policy disaster, and his failure to act decisively as the FSLN took power ceded the initiative to the more radical elements in the group. But Carter, even as president, was hamstrung by a variety of forces beyond his control. The energy crisis, a looming recession, the Iranian revolution, and the marathon negotiations surrounding SALT II and the Camp David Accords all stretched Carter’s diplomatic apparatus to the limit as the Sandinistas launched their final offensive in the summer of 1978. Moreover, with the painful memory of Vietnam still so close at hand, Washington was riven by partisan feuding over the proper role of U.S. power at the end of the decade. Carter’s vision for creating more equitable world was riddled with contradictions, and it suffered the repeated the lashings of the stridently anti-communist bloc within Congress as an election year approached. No quantity of State Department memos could soften the resistance of the FSLN’s powerful enemies in the United States.98

The delay of a promised $75 million aid bill from President Carter was a source of tremendous strain, not only internationally but within Congress as well. Although Carter’s diplomats repeatedly told FSLN authorities that help was on the way, it was obvious that some officials were working feverishly to prevent the bill from passing. And although the bill finally

98 For a good example of the tone of this resistance see Jack Cox, Requiem In the Tropics: Inside Central America (Evanston, 1987); and Alvaro Jose Baldizon Aviles, Inside the Sandinista Regime: A Special Investigator’s Perspective (Washington D.C., February 1986). Cox was Somoza’s personal biographer, and he opened his book by accusing Daniel Ortega’s wife of being the most “sexually degenerate” woman in Nicaragua. Sandinista ideology, he wrote, was an attack on Judeo-Christian values. Baldizon Aviles was an FSLN informer who reported in this State Department publication that the Sandinistas carefully staged their public image to garner support for the revolution while engaging in widespread human rights abuses. The source of this expose, however, was Baldizon’s Aviles’ own testimony and a handful of low-level internal FSLN memos.
did pass June of 1980, with humiliating conditions for both Carter and the FSLN, circumstances had changed in Nicaragua. The two moderate members of the junta, Alfonso Robelo and Violeta Chamorro, had resigned over the growing power of FSLN radicals in April, just weeks after the aid package was shelved indefinitely for budgetary reasons. If there ever was a window of opportunity to use aid to moderate the FSLN, it had already passed by 1980.

Although Carter was not to blame for every failure of U.S.-Nicaragua relations in 1979, he did play a leading role in perhaps the most important episode. In the estimation of his own State Department, Carter’s “pristine commitment” to nonintervention, even when Somoza’s days were obviously numbered, effectively alienated the group’s moderate elements and contributed to radicalizing the revolution. Carter’s priggish approach toward Nicaragua, said Pezzullo, caused him to ignore the ability of the United States to effect positive change.\(^99\) In his push to create a coherent and universal foreign policy, Carter failed to recognize that diplomacy is an inherently contingent undertaking.

At the heart of this misunderstanding, according to Pezzullo’s predecessor Mauricio Solaún, was Carter’s inability or unwillingness to accept the “client-state relations” which existed between the United States and Nicaragua. The president believed that, by cutting off support to Somoza in 1978, the United States had adopted a neutral stance toward Nicaragua. In reality, Carter’s policies destabilized a ruthless dictator while offering no reasonable political alternative to bloody conflict. This hands-off approach made the U.S. an enemy of both the Somoza regime and the people of Nicaragua, and unintentionally reinforced the Sandinista

\(^{99}\) Pezzullo and Pezzullo, *At the Fall of Somoza*, 244-9; Black, *Triumph of the People*, 188; Miranda and Ratliff, *The Civil War in Nicaragua*, 291.
narrative of Yankee interventionism. Since U.S. officials had already made obvious attempts to moderate the revolution by involving the OAS and debating the makeup of the five-member FSLN junta, appeals to U.S. nonintervention rang hollow to Sandinista officials.\textsuperscript{100} The “tragedy” of the situation, according to Viron Vaky, was that the U.S. had the means and justification to dive Somoza from office, and ultimately failed to do so.\textsuperscript{101} U.S. relations with the FSLN were likely to have been tense under the best of circumstances. But Carter’s distance from both the FSLN and Somoza convinced Sandinista leaders that the U.S. had chosen to become an adversary to their government rather than a partner.

\textsuperscript{100} Mauricio Solaín, \textit{U.S. Intervention and Regime Change} (Lincoln, 2005) 4-6.

When the FSLN finally captured Managua on July 19, the relationship between Nicaragua and the United States was in flux, with both sides seemingly resigned to the worst possible outcome. And yet, as the smoke cleared, both the Carter administration and the Sandinista junta found their worst fears unrealized.102 No interventionist force from Washington landed in Nicaragua, and the FSLN refrained from executing national guardsmen and left large parts of the economy in private hands.103 “The United States should learn not to fear the ghosts of its past mistakes,” said junta member Ramírez, calling for a new era of friendship between the two nations.104 And Barricada recorded the goodwill of the United States as well, quoting Vance’s thoughts on their revolution in a triumphant headline – “We cannot stop the changes.”105 But hostility lingered, and the very next day, Daniel Ortega outlined the new direction of the Sandinista revolution:

“Today the enemy is not Somoza, the enemy is in all those places on the continent, beginning with the United States, which have always favored extending interventionist policies over the people of Latin America... The people and their vanguard said ‘Not in Nicaragua’ to the wishes of the United States to intervene in our country. But that danger lies latent there. The gringo senators, the gringo millionaires, the gringo

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102 The form of Nicaragua’s new government was the Junta of the National Reconstruction Government (JGRN), comprised of three Sandinistas and two moderates. In less than a year, moderates Chamorro and Robelo resigned, alleging that the FSLN was consolidating exclusive power within the government.
103 Karen DeYoung, “U.S., Nicaragua Easing Mutual Suspicions,” The Washington Post, 1 December 1979. There was still a rumor circulating in the international press, though, that the FSLN had executed 3,000 National Guardsmen and their families, causing Sandinista leadership to believe that the counterrevolution had already begun. *Barricada*, 3 August 1979, NYPL.
105 *Barricada*, 26 July 1979, NYPL.
politicians and soldiers, who until the last moment backed Somoza, they are there, watching the situation. And they are the enemies of this process.\textsuperscript{106}

Although FSLN leaders wished to reinvent Nicaragua as a sovereign nation and “overcome the appalling and detrimental relations” of the Somoza era, they never believed that Washington would accept their revolution. The “new model for Latin America” around which Nicaragua’s foreign policy would be structured was expressly designed to right historical wrongs and safeguard the country against imperialist machinations.\textsuperscript{107}

Pezzullo’s first official meeting was by all accounts cordial, and FSLN foreign minister Miguel d’Escoto was able to secure from President Carter a commitment to non-intervention in Nicaragua’s affairs.\textsuperscript{108} Yet the president’s human rights policy faced heavy resistance in Washington, and officials from both countries knew that Carter was unable to guarantee the support of Congress. Somoza was a canny politician with a West Point education, a Florida-born wife, and a fluent grasp of English. A handful of U.S. lawmakers were personal friends and business associates of the Somoza family, and they lobbied hard to reinstall the dictator. Many others recognized that Somoza had to go, but were equally wary of the FSLN’s open overtures to Castro and the Soviet Union.

This is not to say, however, that the FSLN had no supporters in Congress. Just weeks after the revolution, Senator Edward Zorinsky (D-NE) became the first U.S. lawmaker to visit Sandinista Nicaragua. A member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he was already popular among the FSLN for his support of the revolution. “The United States is finally on the

\textsuperscript{106} Barricada, 27 July 1979, NYPL.
\textsuperscript{107} Barricada, 18 November 1979, NYPL.
\textsuperscript{108} Barricada, 1 August 1979, NYPL. Clearly, this was the official stance of the Carter administration at this point, as Cyrus Vance made nearly identical remarks the following week. Barricada, 11 August 1979 AP, NYPL.
side of the winner,” he said. “After all the losers we have had, it is about time we have a
winner.” What Barricada omitted from this quote was Zorinsky’s warning – that a failure to
courage a moderate Sandinista government would “fulfill all the prophecies and push them
toward a Marxist government.” Zorinsky’s visit was also complicated by the presence of
another group – a delegation from the Socialist International led by the former Premier of
Portugal, Mario Soares. This group pledged support “without conditions” for the governing
FSLN junta, an offer Zorinsky was unable to match. The unconditional backing of the United
States, which was perhaps the FSLN’s major foreign policy objective, never materialized.

Because of the legacy of somocismo, Sandinista leaders equated U.S. aid with political
approval and international legitimacy. Thus, any political conditions on U.S. aid were seen as an
intolerable attack on the revolution itself. Nicaraguans had suffered for decades under the
Somoza, a dynasty legitimized and sustained solely through unconditional U.S. support. FSLN
leaders believed that their government, which presented itself as democratic, pluralistic and
popular, was far more reflective of U.S. ideals than the dictatorship, and thus deserved this
same unconditional support. “The dignity of a people which has conquered its own liberty
through the blood of its greatest children accepts no conditions of any kind,” said FSLN official
Luís Carrion. Their revolution was a victory for human rights, the Sandinistas believed, and
thus demanded Carter’s unqualified support. That Somoza might escape prosecution for his
innumerable crimes while the JGRN was forced to prove its political palatability seemed a grave

\footnote{109}{Barricada, 8 August 1979, AP, NYPL.}
\footnote{110}{Gordon D. Mott, Associated Press, 7 August 1979.}
\footnote{111}{Barricada, 7 August 1979, NYPL.}
\footnote{112}{Barricada, 23 August 1979, NYPL.}
injustice. Officials in both the State Department and the National Security Council (NSC) were rather open in their assumption that humanitarian aid could be used as a “carrot” to moderate Nicaragua, and FSLN officials feared that spurious charges of human rights abuses and communist encroachment would be used to drive them from power.\textsuperscript{113} For this reason, Sandinista leaders continued to seek out new sources of funding even as they lobbied for U.S. aid.

To prevent against international meddling in their revolution, the FSLN also embarked on an ambitious mission to renegotiate Somoza’s numerous foreign loans. It was initially announced in \textit{Barricada} that Nicaragua would default on these loans, in keeping with their revolutionary philosophy of non-intervention and absolute national sovereignty. But, recognizing backlash this would likely provoke, FSLN leaders soon backed away from this threat. The regime knew that refusal to pay could incur the economic pressure of the developed world and force them to supplicate themselves before the IMF, an option which was anathema to Sandinista ideology. This renegotiation mission represented a suppression of the FSLN’s “instinctive rejection” of imperialist principles for the sake of saving the revolution. The mission was successful, and ultimately helped to earn them the goodwill of the world in the days after the revolution. It also signaled to Carter that the Sandinistas were willing and able to play by the rules.\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{113} Pezzullo and Pezzullo, \textit{At the Fall of Somoza}, 152-3.
Just days after Somoza’s departure, the pages of *Barricada* gushed that “practically the whole world is bending over backward to shower the new Nicaragua, free of repression and exploitation, with offers of aid.”\(^{115}\) This was a typical piece of Sandinista flourish, although Nicaragua did in fact benefit greatly from international support in the latter half of 1979.\(^{116}\) In just the first few weeks following the revolution, *Barricada* recorded official recognition or pledges of aid from the governments of Cuba, the United States, the Soviet Union, Japan, Peru, East Germany, Costa Rica, Algeria, Mexico, Czechoslovakia, Argentina, Libya, Yugoslavia, and Venezuela. Also tallied in support of the revolution were the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the Latin American Federation of Journalists, the Latin American and Caribbean Economic System, as well as the Socialist parties of France and Chile, the Communist parties of Panama and Portugal, and the Cuban press. The Sandinistas had even seized the popular imagination of leading leftist intellectuals, and counted the vocal support of Nobel laureates Gabriel García Márquez and Heinrich Boll, as well as Salman Rushdie, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, and Gunter Grass, among others.\(^{117}\) Sandinista leaders were astute students of the Cuban revolution, and they wished to avoid the international isolation suffered by Castro’s regime. By building a broad base of international support, they believed they could inoculate the revolution against local and regional interference and preserve Nicaraguan sovereignty.

\(^{115}\) *Barricada*, 3 August 1979, NYPL.


This tactic also had the advantage of imbuing the FSLN, which only weeks earlier had been a poorly-armed band of guerillas, with an air of authority and legitimacy in the global community.

Establishing legitimacy was a major priority of the JGRN, especially vis-à-vis the United States, and cultivating aid was seen as an ideal means for doing so. But Nicaragua faced genuine economic devastation, and the new FSLN government also desperately needed humanitarian and long-term aid to build a functional government and economy. The legacy of somocismo, as well as the capital flight and ruined infrastructure of the post-revolutionary period, left the Sandinistas unable to meet even the most basic needs of the population. Among the first nations willing and able to provide such support was the United States, which shipped more than 100 tons of food and medicine daily after the revolution.  

Like President Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress, Carter’s concept of geopolitics was predicated upon the theory that poverty was a major cause of radicalism in the Third World. By helping Nicaragua in its hour of need, Carter hoped to demonstrate the goodwill of the United States and reestablish relations between the two countries. But the long tradition of U.S. intervention in Nicaragua’s affairs made this a necessarily complicated project. Even as FSLN leaders accepted this desperately need aid, and indeed demanded more, they openly questioned the motives behind U.S. support.

Sandinista leaders were “painfully insecure” about their newborn revolution, a fact which colored all interactions with the U.S. during this time. Especially in regards to U.S. aid, these leaders generally assumed that every boatload of food and medicine they received

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118 barricada, 4 August 1979, NYPL.
carried expectations and conditions, explicit or otherwise. And although Sandinista leaders may have played up such concerns for effect, they were not without some merit. Despite assurances to the contrary, it was already clear that the State Department officially considered aid an appropriate instrument for moderating the revolution. The FSLN, in response, threatened to reject all aid which they thought might be used to compromise Nicaraguan sovereignty. This somewhat quixotic ideal of perfect and untainted sovereignty was central to the Sandinista narrative, and was reprinted in the pages of *Barricada* like a popular mantra. But this ideal was complicated by Nicaragua’s desperate need for support from any available source. The JGRN was not actually in a position to refuse aid, least of all from its principal donor. This friction between Sandinista idealism and the realities of U.S. policy was a defining force in the government’s relationship with the Carter administration.

This friction became obvious just weeks after the revolution, when the United States announced that humanitarian aid would be distributed through the Red Cross rather than the Sandinista government. U.S. officials attributed the arrangement to logistics rather than politics, since the Red Cross specialized in managing disaster zones, but FSLN leaders were unconvinced. “We hope that this is not a form of pressure against the Nicaraguan process,” said conservative junta member Alfonso Robelo. “And although we prefer to believe it is not, we still must remain vigilant because it gives the impression of being so.”

120 It has been argued that the economic vulnerabilities and strong U.S. ties of the Nicaraguan state after the fall of Somoza made the country especially prone to economic intervention, even though such intervention had usually proven ineffective in other contexts. See LeoGrande, ”Making the Economy Scream.”

121 *Barricada*, 26 July, 31 July, 1 August from Prensa Latina (hereafter PL), 2 August, 5 August, 11 August, 23 September, 18 November, 19 November 1979, NYPL.

122 *Barricada*, 5 August 1979, NYPL.
FSLN had no evidence of wrongdoing, the mere impression of underhandedness was enough to cast suspicion on U.S. motives. Not even rice and cooking oil – or an international humanitarian aid agency – escaped Sandinista scrutiny. When the first load of aid finally arrived, it was split evenly between the Red Cross and the government, with an agreement to move all future deliveries through the government. According to *Barricada*, this was no mere bureaucratic reshuffling, but a victory over imperialist forces attempting to derail the revolution.\(^{123}\)

The Sandinista revolution was supposed to inaugurate a “new Nicaraguan diplomacy” based on “real openness and friendship with the nations of the world.”\(^{124}\) U.S. officials very quickly learned exactly what this openness entailed, as the Sandinistas made their international debut in perhaps the most antagonistic manner possible – by headlining the 26\(^{th}\) of July celebrations in Havana commemorating the victorious Cuban revolution. There, Castro lavished praise upon the Sandinista “double victory” over both Somoza and the United States.\(^{125}\) Castro had openly rooted for the Sandinistas for years, and it was no secret that their victory relied heavily on economic, military, and political support from Cuba. Yet the real extent of Cuban influence within the new Nicaraguan government was still unclear. Official White House policy was to remain “patient and open-minded” as the nebulous

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123 *Barricada*, 24 August 1979, NYPL.
124 *Barricada*, 16 November 1979, NYPL.
125 *Barricada*, 27 July 1979 (PL), NYPL.
Sandinista government took shape, but the FSLN’s appearance in Havana certainly strained Carter’s faith in the strength of the U.S. example. As Nicaragua appeared ready to practically leap into the arms of Castro, Carter’s administration was forced onto the defensive over its foreign policy. In the words of one official, “anyone who professes to know with certainty what’s going to happen in Nicaragua is talking through his hat.”

But Carter did not abandon his commitment square dealing, and rejected the notion that the FSLN was a communist front. “It’s a mistake for Americans to assume or to claim that every time... an abrupt change takes place in this hemisphere that somehow it’s the result of secret, of massive, Cuban intervention,” he urged, even as FSLN leaders were en route to Havana. Carter’s apparent restraint was echoed by Castro’s own unusually conciliatory tone toward the United States. “It is much better... to send food instead of bombers and Marines,” he said, and came close to complimenting the U.S. for avoiding a “gigantic Vietnam” by staying out of Nicaragua. U.S. fears that Nicaragua would become “another Cuba” were overblown, he said, since “each country has its path, its problems, its style, its methods and its objective. We have ours and they have theirs. We did it in a certain way... and they will do it their way.”

But Castro’s pledge to allow Nicaragua to find its own way did not prevent him from helping the process along. Thousands of Cuban doctors and teachers poured into Nicaragua in the fall of 1979, creating a diplomatic dilemma for the State Department. “There is a difference between teaching and indoctrination,” said Pezzullo, voicing U.S. concerns over growing Cuban

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influence. But after the collapse of U.S. mediation of Somoza’s resignation, the ability of the U.S. to directly influence the revolutionary process in Nicaragua remained severely diminished. Any attempt to reduce Cuban influence could backfire, creating a propaganda victory for Castro and further radicalizing the JGRN. Officials were forced to accept the situation, which they claimed was manageable if levels did not substantially increase. The FSLN’s attraction to Cuba was not surprising, since it cemented the revolutionary pedigree of the regime guaranteed a sympathetic regional ally. But it still remained a political problem for the Carter administration, which was trying to make the case that “new Nicaragua” was still an open book.

This political problem persisted when Sandinista leaders returned to Havana weeks later for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in early September. The meeting was cast by Western officials as another chapter in an ongoing feud, with Yugoslav leader and NAM founding member Josip Broz Tito resisting Castro’s attempts to push the organization toward the Soviet bloc. For FSLN leaders, the summit offered a chance to pursue the regime’s major foreign policy goals – to broaden international support, participate as a full government in a world stage, and confirm the Sandinista revolution as a standard-bearer in the global anti-imperialism movement. Because of their close affiliation with Castro, FSLN leaders arrived as conquering heroes and Nicaragua was admitted as a full member of the NAM. Some have argued that the principles of the Sandinistas – anti-imperialism and political and economic

131 Brands, Latin America’s Cold War, 31.
132 Editorial, The Washington Post, 31 August 1979; Barricada, 1 December 1979, NYPL.
independence – were naturally concurrent with those of the NAM, and that their involvement at the summit was little cause for concern.\textsuperscript{133} But the supposed non-aligned status of the NAM was questionable in 1979, and Castro appeared determined to steer the group into greater collaboration with the Soviet Union. For this reason, FSLN officials believed that U.S. meddling during the conference was inevitable. This suspicion was further fueled by a timely leak in Washington.

As the NAM summit was in session, Sen. Frank Church of Idaho announced the discovery of a combat-ready brigade of at least 2,000 Soviet troops in Cuba, and demanded that the president treat it as a serious threat to U.S. security. Yet, as one observer pointed out, “What becomes news and why remains an arcane subject.” Senator Richard Stone of Florida had announced this allegedly new information in July, but it sat idle throughout the summer recess until after Labor Day weekend. This was the classic Cold War paradigm – “the threat, the intelligence failure, the Communist springboard for rebellion.”\textsuperscript{134} This series was always followed by political maneuvering. And, coincidentally, both Church and Stone were up for reelection. U.S. partisan politics had penetrated the debate on foreign policy.

But \textit{Barricada} crowed that the summit was held without disruption, “a reality the North American imperialists cannot hide.” Despite a “campaign of smoke and mirrors,” FSLN leaders were successful in their mission to align themselves with the global forces of anti-imperialism. Cyrus Vance was forced to backtrack, downplaying the troop threat and denying any intentional

\textsuperscript{133} Waltraud Queiser Morales and Harry E. Vanden, "Relations with the Nonaligned Movement," in Thomas W. Walker, ed., \textit{Nicaragua: The First Five Years}, 467-84.

\textsuperscript{134} Haynes Johnson, “Troops in Cuba: The Issue Changes and Stays the Same,” \textit{The Washington Post}, 9 September 1979. It has been suggested that Church desperately needed to shed his reputation as a dove ahead of a tough reelection campaign his conservative home state of Idaho.
coincidence with the NAM summit.\textsuperscript{135} The CIA had known about the brigade for years, he said, and although it was politically unacceptable, it lacked air and sea mobility and posed no direct threat to the United States.

And though FSLN leaders chalked the episode as a propaganda victory, their performance at the summit damaged already fragile relations with the United States. Daniel Ortega had used his speech before the NAM assembly to crucify the U.S. government for forcing political conditions on aid to Nicaragua. Throughout the summit, front pages headlines in \textit{Barricada} rattled off stock Sandinista buzzwords – U.S. “reactionary sectors” were engaged in a “military conspiracy against Nicaragua.”\textsuperscript{136} Ortega’s preemptive verbal attack against a perceived U.S. counterrevolution was perhaps to be expected. Because Sandinista ideology was, in its very essence, antagonistic toward the United States, most FSLN leaders believed that conflict with the U.S. was an inevitable element of Sandinista narrative.\textsuperscript{137} But this rhetorical jousting also made it difficult for Carter to advocate for the FSLN before Congress, and actually jeopardized the very aid which they accused the U.S. of withholding. The FSLN’s first moment in the international spotlight boded poorly for U.S.-Nicaraguan relations.

And yet, when an FSLN delegation actually traveled to Washington later the same month, they displayed none of this revolutionary bravado. The Sandinistas found Carter and Congress, with the exception of the “reactionary” Senator Stone, friendly and receptive, and


\textsuperscript{136} \textit{Barricada}, 7 September 1979, NYPL.

\textsuperscript{137} Miranda and Ratliff, \textit{The Civil War in Nicaragua}, 70.
were by all accounts well-behaved themselves. Daniel Ortega described their meeting with Carter as “open, from one sovereign nation to another,” and the president even appeared with the Sandinistas for photos in the Rose Garden. This was a courtesy he had never extended to Somoza, who tried repeatedly to secure a private audience with the president. Ortega’s comments at the NAM summit were still fresh in the minds of those in Washington, and Carter urged him to speak more kindly of the U.S. in his scheduled appearance before the United Nations. Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher also expressed his disappointment with Ortega’s diatribe, but remained committed to a policy of “friendly cooperation” and “timely assistance” with the Sandinista government. The Sandinistas had an unsettling tendency to disparage the U.S. at every public opportunity, although privately they were cordial and reasonable. At least for the time being, White House officials were willing to look past the revolutionary rhetoric.

Sandinista concerns in Washington naturally centered on the topic of aid. Carter assured the delegation that the State Department was preparing a significant aid package, and that a smaller $8.5 million emergency package would be released immediately. He also offered to spend another $23 million training the FSLN in U.S. bases in Panama to strengthen the

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139 This is the same Daniel Ortega who, before the fall of Somoza, said he would not negotiate with gringo U.S. senators because “mediation is equal to treason.” Pedro Miranda, “Interview with Daniel Ortega,” Latin American Perspectives 6:1 (1979): 114-18.
Sandinista army. But the victorious rebels had little use for lessons in tactics. What they wanted were arms. Somoza had relied on U.S. arms, and Nicaragua’s meager arsenal under the FSLN, though somewhat antiquated, was compatible with U.S. weapons systems. But this request was politically infeasible for Carter. Although the proposal had the support of both the Pentagon and State Department, U.S. lawmakers were committed exclusively to “non-lethal” aid. Any sort of military aid, according to one State Department official, “wouldn’t get anywhere in the U.S. Congress.” Sandinista officials warned that, though they preferred U.S. arms, they would seek to strengthen their army with equipment from any available source. This was no idle threat – in the coming years, the FSLN military would bear Soviet arms.

The FSLN also had friendly dealings with Viron Vaky, Vance’s Assistant Secretary of State of Inter-American Affairs, who became the point man in Carter’s dealings with Nicaragua at this time. Only days earlier, Barricada had branded Vaky an atavistic zealot because of his official State Department memo on Central America. Decades of mismanagement, he wrote, had created social and economic pressures which were inevitably boiling over. The U.S. faced a choice between a transition which was “peaceful and evolutionary” or “violent and radical.” If moderates were to prevail, the U.S. must assume a leading role in thwarting the machinations of “Castroists-Marxists” in Central America. “The course of the Nicaraguan revolution will thus

142 Barricada, 24 September 1979, NYPL.
143 Walker, The Land of Sandino, 163.
depend in part on how the United States perceives it and relates to it,” he wrote, explicitly writing the U.S. into the Sandinista revolutionary narrative.145

Still, Vaky did not call for an imposition of U.S. prerogatives, but rather recommended a relationship based on “nonintervention, equality and mutual respect.” He also supported, in an attempt to abolish the “symbolism from deep past involvement,” Carter’s economic commitment to rebuilding Nicaragua. But Vaky’s memo, which Barricada called a “prejudicial depiction... with the same language as 20 years ago,” proved to FSLN leaders the self-fulfilling Sandinista prophecy that the United States was categorically unable to accept a sovereign Nicaragua.146 Despite the cautious support of both Carter and the State Department, they failed to recognize that the Sandinista revolution was a popular and permanent rejection of U.S. involvement. It was clear that Vaky’s memo, and especially his reference to “Castroist-Marxist” elements, had hit a nerve. Still, even when grilled by Stone about the true nature of their revolution, FSLN leaders aired no objections to Carter’s new policy in Nicaragua.

In fact, these leaders had a reputation for dealing “pragmatically and flexibly” with the Carter administration, and they remained remarkably open in negotiations.147 This apparent openness was a source of debate in Washington. Carter’s patient and open approach toward the Sandinistas assumed that their leaders entered negotiations in good faith and had a genuine interest in pursuing friendly relations. But it has also been argued that Sandinista political moderation, both domestically and internationally, was a “tactical maneuver” adopted

146 Barricada, 22 September 1979, NYPL.
147 Booth, The End and the Beginning, 265.
to consolidate support for the revolution. The eventual radicalization of the FSLN through the 1980s would seem to support this argument, although Reagan’s economic, political and military intervention certainly contributed to this process as well. Whether this apparent difference in public and private FSLN attitudes was due to deception or political savvy remained unclear.

Even as the White House tried to sort out the true nature of the Sandinistas, these leaders also kept a wary eye on the United States. Following the NAM summit in Havana, Cyrus Vance announced that Philip Habib, “a veteran of diplomatic trouble shooting missions,” would be touring the Caribbean in an attempt to reorganize U.S. foreign policy there and establish a regional common market. Within the pages of Barricada, this was an example of Carter “trying to turn back the clock in the Antilles.” The leftist surge in the Caribbean, including Cuba, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Granada, had scared the Yankees, who were trying to reinstate classic “gunboat diplomacy” of the early twentieth century. According to the solipsistic Sandinista narrative, any U.S. activity in the Caribbean was invariably targeted against their revolution.

This fear grew as Washington moved toward the creation of a Rapid Deployment Force (RDF). Carter first signed a directive creating the RDF in 1977, but institutional entropy kept the project on the ground for two years. The Iranian revolution revived fears of instability in the Middle East and future oil shortages and, at the urging of Brzezinski, Carter began to push for the creation of the RDF in the latter half of 1979 to check Soviet adventurism in the Persian

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148 Brands, Latin America’s Cold War, 172.
149 Angus Deming and John Walcott, “Storm Warnings,” Newsweek, 27 August 1979. Interestingly, the phrase “veteran of diplomatic trouble shooting missions” was translated in Barricada as “veteran of political destabilization,” Barricada, 23 August 1979 (PL), NYPL.
150 Barricada, 11 August 1979 (PL), NYPL.
Gulf.\textsuperscript{151} Despite the fact that the RDF was not even tangentially related to the unfolding crisis in Nicaragua, FSLN officials perceived it as part of a growing military conspiracy against the revolution.\textsuperscript{152} “New bellicose Yankee preparations underway for Caribbean,” read the headline in \textit{Barricada}, alluding to a likely U.S. invasion of Nicaragua.\textsuperscript{153}

Yet, much as the Sandinistas conflated Somoza and Carter, they also conflated U.S. anti-Soviet activity as anti-Sandinista activity. The process of creating of the RDF was ongoing, and was unrelated to Central America. But \textit{Barricada} had depicted upcoming U.S. exercises in the Caribbean as part of the RDF, which they were clearly not. These “show-the-flag” exercises, which involved 3,500 troops moving primarily between bases in Key West and Guantanamo, were more widely seen as a response to the Soviet brigade in Cuba.\textsuperscript{154}

These activities, which would include spy plane surveillance, were standard procedure in earlier years, but had been suspended to avoid antagonizing the USSR. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown said the intent was to “to reveal U.S. combat potential in the Caribbean,” an area of “special concern” to the White House.\textsuperscript{155}

Within Washington, such exercises were considered a prudent

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{“We’re reinforcing our military bases in the Caribbean... only for protection...” The star-spangled octopus plunders the jungles, mines, oil fields and factories of Latin America. \textit{Barricada}, 4 October 1979, NYPL.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{152} \textit{Barricada}, 20 September 1979 (PL), NYPL.
\textsuperscript{153} \textit{Barricada}, 9 October 1979 (PL), NYPL.
\textsuperscript{155} \textit{Barricada}, 11 October 1979 (PL), NYPL.
and appropriate response to perceived Soviet intrusion within a cold war context. But FSLN officials, predictably, found the timing of the exercises, so soon after the NAM summit, proof of U.S. efforts to bully Nicaragua. Not only were these exercises aimed at the FSLN and its Cuban allies, said Barricada, they were also part of a larger imperialist counterrevolution against progressive forces around the globe.

This perceived counterrevolution did not prevent the FSLN from lobbying a substantial U.S. aid package. Even more than humanitarian aid, the FSLN desperately needed long-term funding to stimulate the Nicaraguan economy and begin the difficult task of rebuilding. A variety of nations offered smaller packages, but none could match U.S. funding in either largesse or legitimizing authority. Even though U.S. aid was considered potentially dangerous, Nicaragua was too economically and politically vulnerable to turn down the “mini-Marshall Plan” Carter had envisioned.\textsuperscript{156} But the lack of an immediately forthcoming package was also considered dangerous, as FSLN officials interpreted the delay as a referendum on their revolution. “Much has been said these days about significant aid from the United States,” said Robelo, “but the truth is that the United States is donating only a fraction of what, for example, they sent us during the earthquake in 1972.”\textsuperscript{157} Edén Pastora later repeated the same sentiment with an eye toward the United States, complaining that the FSLN had not received in a hundred days the amount of aid it had received in ten days after the earthquake.\textsuperscript{158}

\textsuperscript{157} \textit{Barricada}, 5 August 1979, NYPL.
\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Barricada}, 9 November 1979, NYPL. Interestingly, both Pastora and Robelo later withdrew support for the FSLN and sided with the U.S.-backed Contras.
In fact, the Sandinista government reported promises of more than $250 million in loans between the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, both headquartered in Washington. And this does not include the cancellation of millions in loans extended to Somoza.\(^{159}\) The Organization of American States (OAS) also offered support, forgiving Nicaraguan loan repayments in 1980 and 1981.\(^{160}\) *Barricada* also closely followed the deliberations of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) in Washington, which had earmarked more than $170 million in loans for the FSLN by mid-September.\(^{161}\) International economic support was also publicized, and appeals for more aid to Nicaragua by the United Nations (UN) were published at near-regular intervals.\(^{162}\) But none of these could supplant direct U.S. aid, which carried “a psychological importance far in excess of the money involved or the projects the money would support.”\(^{163}\) Carter believed that aid was necessary to encourage the democratic evolution of the FSLN, while Sandinista leaders privately recognized that U.S. aid had unparalleled potential to authenticate their revolutionary narrative. U.S. opponents of the FSLN also recognized this, and fought vehemently to prevent the allocation of any legitimizing funding to the new Nicaraguan government. Meanwhile, Sandinista leaders publicly doubted Carter’s ability (and inclination) to approve a package without political conditions.\(^{164}\) These doubts were not entirely misguided.

\(^{159}\) *Barricada*, 27 August, November 1979 from Agence France-Presse (AFP), NYPL.
\(^{160}\) *Barricada*, 1 November 1979, NYPL.
\(^{161}\) *Barricada*, 2 August, 3 August, 24 August, 16 September 1979, NYPL.
\(^{162}\) *Barricada*, 22 August (PL), 3 September 1979, 28 September, 26 October (PL), 31 October, NYPL.
\(^{164}\) *Barricada*, 24 August 1979, NYPL.
Carter had proposed sending $75 million in assorted aid to Nicaragua soon after the revolution as a sign of U.S. cooperation, a proposal which set off a political firestorm in Washington. There were many friends and associates of the Somoza family in Congress, and they began campaigning against bankrolling “a new beachhead... for communism in the Americas.” In September 1979, Republican Robert Bauman of Maryland nearly derailed the whole annual foreign aid bill of $7.7 billion in the House of Representatives with an amendment preventing funding of the FSLN. He implored his peers to “see if Nicaragua is going to be another Cuba” before committing funding. In a response which would characterize the core of the debate about Nicaragua, Democrat Jim Wright of Texas pleaded “Let us not drive them, as Cuba was allowed to be done into the Soviet orbit.”¹⁶⁵ Nobody wanted another Cuba. The debate in Congress, then, focused on how to best prevent this outcome. Should the U.S. rely upon the carrot or the stick?

Perhaps if this was the only serious challenge to aid, the FSLN could have been convinced of overall U.S. support. But Carter’s package faced a gauntlet of resistance, and FSLN leaders began to see Carter as unwilling or unable to comply with his promises. The bill passed the Senate easily, but eventually stalled in the House when Republicans held an extraordinary closed session to present classified information in an attempt to defeat the bill. It still narrowly passed, but was soon shelved indefinitely along with almost all foreign aid as a result of a budget crisis.¹⁶⁶ Within the Sandinista narrative, “imperialism could only act as a single person, with a single will,” and the failure of the aid bill was considered proof of counterrevolutionary

sentiment in the Washington, rather than a symptom of Washington’s prodigious bureaucracy.¹⁶⁷ For the Carter administration, the $75 million aid bill was an imperfect but reasonable effort to encourage democratic developments in Nicaragua, and its failure was a temporary setback unrelated to the country’s revolutionary process. To FSLN leaders, it was served as proof of U.S. duplicity.

This was the concern when a delegation of U.S. Congressmen arrived in Managua in November of 1979.¹⁶⁸ Many U.S. officials did not actively campaign against FSLN, but remained unwilling to underwrite the new Nicaraguan government without some assurances about the direction of the revolution. Sandinista leaders believed that the delegation had arrived to appraise their revolution’s compatibility with U.S. interests. And though the delegation denied that the revolution was under review, the course of their visit suggested otherwise. Their stated goal in Nicaragua was to ensure that the Sandinistas were not exporting revolution to the rest of Central America. But accounts of these discussions in Barricada show that the congressmen discussed at length the political and economic direction of the FSLN and the roles of Cuba and the Soviet Union in the JGRN. The Sandinistas sought and received assurances that that the U.S. had no intention, secretly or overtly, to invade Nicaraguan territory, or to meddle in the internal affairs of Nicaragua. David Obey said he was personally satisfied that the revolution would remain in Nicaragua, although it could prove hard to convince his peers of such, since very few were familiar with the realities of Nicaragua on the ground.¹⁶⁹ The delegation left,

¹⁶⁸ The House delegation included Dante Fascell (D-Fla.), Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), Robert Lagomarsino (R-Calif.), Matthew McHugh (D-NY), David Obey (D-Wis.), and Gus Yatron (D-Penn.).
¹⁶⁹ Barricada, 17-19 November 1979, NYPL.
according to *Barricada*, hopeful but not confident that Congress could be convinced to support the aid package.

Back in the United States, delegation member Dante Fascell did voice support for the aid bill, though he failed to deliver the ringing endorsement sought by the FSLN. “We must support this tendency,” he recommended, “if only to reflect a pragmatic attitude.”170 There was indeed a strong Marxist presence in the FSLN, reported Fascell, but the persistence of a mixed economy with an independent private sector held some promise for pluralism. Within the U.S. Congress, there was a moderate, wait-and-see attitude which held out hope for reconciliation. But to the Sandinistas, this was a bitter pill to swallow. Certainly, FSLN leaders were pleased to receive any support for their cause in Washington, but Fascell’s lukewarm appraisal fell far short of Sandinista hopes. If anything, his comments confirmed that U.S. aid was, in fact, conditional by virtue of the political vicissitudes of Washington. There were members of Congress who would never support the Sandinistas so long as they remained aligned with Cuba and the Soviet Union.

Carter’s aid bill was finally approved in June 1980, but not before languishing in the House of Representatives for eight months.171 And even after its final passage, the bill required the president to recertify every 90 days that no money was diverted to the growing leftist insurgency in El Salvador. It also banned spending on health and education programs involving Cubans (which was nearly all of them) and required that 1% be used to advertise U.S.

170 *Barricada*, 30 November 1979, NYPL. This attitude is close to that of later Secretary of State George Shultz, who believed that the Nicaraguan revolution was popular in essence, but was hijacked by Marxist elements. His emphasis on balancing force with diplomacy fell on deaf ears in Reagan’s White House. See George P. Shultz, *Triumph and Turmoil: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York, 1993).
involvement.\textsuperscript{172} Almost a year after their revolution, the FSLN finally received a long-term U.S. aid package containing precisely the sorts of political conditions they denounced as unacceptable. And yet, the JGRN was in no position to reject such aid, and grudgingly received the U.S. offer while continuing to seek out alternative funding from sympathetic nations.

In early November 1979, fundamentalist Islamic students and militants took 52 U.S. citizens hostage in Tehran, dramatically altering relations between the U.S. and Nicaragua. Although the hostage situation was not directly related to the FSLN, it represented a major political crisis for Carter, who faced an already difficult reelection campaign in the coming year. The president’s had already been heavily diplomatically invested in the SALT II negotiations, the Camp David summit and Panama Canal treaties. The hostage crisis, followed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December, necessarily occupied the bulk of Carter’s political energy. The situation in Nicaragua, though it had the potential to serve as the paradigm of his new human rights model, was never near the top of his administration’s list of international priorities, as evidenced by the memoirs of the president and his staff.

After the hostages were taken in Tehran, the issue of Sandinista Nicaragua began to fade both in the public eye and the priorities of Washington. Carter’s unsuccessful reelection campaign in 1980 was marred by Afghanistan and Iran, both of which complicated his vision of a more progressive foreign policy model and allowed his critics to paint him as weak. In Nicaragua, FSLN leaders still lobbied for Carter’s beleaguered aid package. But when it was

\textsuperscript{172} Walker, \textit{The Land of Sandino}, 172.
shelved in March with no guarantee of being revived, the chance for securing unconditional U.S. support appeared, for the moment, dead. A month later, the JGRN’s two moderates left the junta to protest growing Sandinista predominance within Nicaragua’s new government. While these events are not definitively linked, they do mark a threshold after which friendly relations between the U.S. and Nicaragua became significantly less likely.

This is not to say that negotiations ceased after April 1980. Carter continued to pursue open relations with the Sandinistas, although his diplomatic flexibility in Nicaragua at the end of his term was much diminished by events in central Asia, the priorities of Congress, and the resignation of his Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in April 1980.173 Ultimately, however, Carter was forced to suspend aid to the FSLN, much as he had done to Somoza, due to suspicions that the FSLN was supporting guerillas in El Salvador. Reagan also officially negotiated with the Sandinistas, but his openly hostile approach virtually precluded any accord between the United States and Nicaragua. The secret contra war pursued by the Reagan administration, even in

173 Vance’s tenure in Carter’s cabinet was marked by personality clashes with Brzezinski and disagreements over the relative authority of the Secretary of State and NSA in developing foreign policy. Vance finally resigned after Carter ordered, over his objection, the ultimately failed secret Operation Eagle Claw to rescue U.S. hostages in Iran. Both Vance and Brzezinski devote considerable space in their memoirs to this disagreement. See Vance, Hard Choices; Brzezinski, Power and Principle.
violation of three legislative amendments, was in itself an ample demonstration of Reagan’s opinion on negotiating with the Sandinistas.

So although both Carter and Reagan continued to pursue relations with Nicaragua, the real window of opportunity had closed firmly by the end of 1979. After this point, Carter lacked both the diplomatic initiative and political means to establish strong ties, for reasons not entirely under his control. Reagan had campaigned strongly against Carter’s approach to foreign policy, and though he was officially open to relations with Nicaragua, his election was an obvious blow for the FSLN. The moderate impulse within Nicaragua had also become weakened with the departure of Chamorro and Robelo from the junta. With the FSLN ascendant within the Nicaraguan government and Reagan elected in Washington, like self-fulfilling prophecy, the United States appeared ever more like the dreaded Yankee of the Sandinista narrative. And the chance for friendship faded accordingly.

It has recently been suggested that this chance was an illusion, since FSLN leaders were ideologically unwilling and unable to compromise with the United States. The Sandinistas were master dissimulators, according to another argument, and their flexibility in negotiations served only as a smokescreen for consolidating power. But the Sandinistas were never as monolithic in Nicaraguan society as they wished to portray themselves – not even in July 1979.

\[175\] There is some evidence that the FSLN officially adopted an approach which sought to consolidate the goodwill of the masses and the international community and buy time while pursuing a distinct, more orthodox brand of socialism. See the FSLN’s internal “Seventy-two Hours’ Document,” in Leiken and Rubin, ed., *The Central American Crisis Reader*, 218-227; Muravchik, *News Coverage of the Sandinista Revolution*; Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, 303-4; Hodges, *Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution*, 186.
As one observer pointed out, “young revolutions are moving targets,” and it can be difficult to know their true nature, especially early on.\textsuperscript{176} But it was widely known in Washington, however, that Somoza faced an opposition both broad and deep, and that the FSLN represented only one of a handful of factions responsible for his ouster. The Sandinistas proved to be, quite clearly, the faction best equipped to lead the military insurgency against Somoza. But there were many in Nicaragua who did not believe that this military preponderance directly translated to a talent for administration and government. Even in power, the Sandinistas never held total control over the Nicaraguan masses. The Sandinista narrative, which drew on decades of popular historical experience, was employed to solidify support behind the new FSLN government. Too often, U.S. actors were tone deaf to this basic reality and played directly into the narrative. By unwillingly playing the Yankee, U.S. officials contributed more to FSLN unity than anything the Sandinistas could have done on their own.

For example, Carter refused to intervene directly in the last days of the revolution because of his human rights policy, which held that Somoza paid the natural price for his failure to improve democratic principles in Nicaragua. Yet FSLN leaders drew the opposite conclusion, and denounced Carter’s nonintervention as a sign that the U.S. still backed the dictator, and that his human rights policy was fraudulent. The lack of U.S. presence allowed the FSLN to convince the Nicaraguan public, quite reasonably, that no foreign assistance would be arriving, and that the Sandinistas were the sole guarantors of the revolution. Carter’s subsequent promise of aid, followed by months of delays, similarly played into Sandinista hands, and

seemed to confirm rumors that a counterrevolutionary conspiracy was afoot. The Soviet troops “scare” (if it can be called that) during the NAM summit, while out of Carter’s control, similarly reinforced such suspicions. By the time Caribbean exercises were announced, Barricada could easily connect the dots and link regional activity to anti-Soviet Rapid Deployment Forces halfway around the globe. Through Barricada, the Sandinista narrative of Yankee aggression became the official history of a revolution.

This narrative drew on a deep reservoir of local symbols and ideologies of resistance and, through the image of Sandino, channeled decades of suffering into a coherent and unified front. And yet this same narrative which empowered the Sandinistas in Nicaragua sabotaged their activities abroad. Its stark rhetoric of resistance, revenge and near-religious nationalism was ill-suited for the international stage. Yet even as FSLN leaders lobbied for U.S. aid, they were unwilling (or perhaps unable) to publicly abandon this language, feeding U.S. fears about true Sandinista intentions. Their inability to receive even humanitarian aid without a fight was proof for many U.S. lawmakers that the FSLN remained an intractable communist threat to the United States. Sandinistas had captured the government of Nicaragua, but wished also to remain its guerillas. FSLN mistakes also contributed to the failure of U.S.-Nicaraguan relations.

The real tragedy of this episode was the fact that all the means for a positive outcome were present. As Vance later lamented, “ours was a failure not of opportunity, but of seeing opportunity; a failure not of resources but the wisdom to use them; a failure not of intellect but of understanding and of will.”177 And the same may be said of the Sandinistas who, despite

their questionable allegiances and devastated nation, were met with a surge of international goodwill and a U.S. president eager to prove that foreign policy could be a force of good in the world. Months before Reagan was even elected and the Sandinistas made a hard left turn toward Moscow, however, the White House already had a major diplomatic failure on its hands. The brief window July and December 1979 had marked an opportunity to redefine U.S.-Nicaraguan relations, a project eagerly embraced by both Carter and the Sandinista leadership. And yet, this project failed colossally in less than a year.

Whether or not this failure was inevitable is beside the point, since it will remain unanswerable. What is important is to try to understand how this promising relationship collapsed. U.S. policy failed in Nicaragua because it proved fundamentally unable to address the real concerns, as voiced in Barricada, of the revolution. The U.S. played the Yankee, and relations predictably deteriorated. But relations are a two-way street, and the Sandinistas also bear responsibility. Their anti-Yankee narrative, also developed in Barricada, created an atmosphere overwhelmingly hostile to the U.S., even as they craved this relationship. In this sense, both Carter’s human rights policy and the Sandinista narrative were inherently self-limiting ideologies. As Vance said, the opportunity was there. What was lacking was the foresight, on both sides, to leave behind theoretical agendas and engage in direct and vigorous negotiations early on. Both the White House and the FSLN were willing to talk, but they were never able to find a common language. This is why U.S.-Nicaraguan relations ultimately failed.
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