WASHINGTON'S
FOUNDERING FATHERS

The Contras and Contragate

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Contragate revealed the depth of Washington's commitment to the Contras. But it hasn't made life any easier for Nicaragua.

There is no issue closer to the heart of the Reagan administration than its crusade against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. President Reagan is completely besotted with the Contras. He has described them as freedom fighters following in the footsteps of the Founding Fathers of the United States, and has likened them to Simon Bolivar, the French Resistance and, most recently and bizarrely, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade of the Spanish Civil War. When the US Congress finally voted, in July 1986, to renew aid ($100 million) to the Contras, Reagan commented "I'm sure it put a smile on the face of the Statue of Liberty".

Support for the Nicaraguan counter-revolution is the best example of the US's grotesque efforts at "symmetry" — i.e. the attempt to
mimic and counter the Soviet Union's alleged instigation of national liberation movements by fomenting anti-communist insurgencies in regions of the world where US hegemony is threatened by nationalist and socialist states.

The Contras emerged from the ranks of the hated National Guard who fled to Honduras and Costa Rica following on the fall of the Somoza dynasty in 1979. The bedraggled and demoralised Somocistas in Honduras were reorganised by the CIA during 1981, receiving $19 million in US government funds, and training from Argentine military advisers who had been blooded in the ferocious "dirty war" of 1976-81 in which 25-30,000 Argentine civilians were murdered. Since then, US strategy has been aimed at creating a unified military command for the counterrevolution, together with a civilian veneer (UNO) staffed by "respectable" non-somocista figureheads like Arturo Cruz, Alfonso Robelo and, to a lesser extent, a former Coca Cola franchise operator, Adolfo Calero.

The FDN (Nicaraguan Democratic Front) is the largest force within the Contras' umbrella organisation UNO (United Nicaraguan Opposition). It is also by far the most reactionary and brutal of the Contra groups. The military direction of the FDN is firmly in the hands of National Guard officers, the most senior of whom is Enrique Bermudez, the FDN's "defence minister" and a former Somoza military attache in Washington. Bermudez' second in command, the heads of logistics, intelligence operations, and special warfare, and the bulk of the FDN's field commanders, are also former Guard officers.2

A number of other smaller Contra forces are based in Costa Rica, a state whose much-vaunted "neutrality" conceals a deep commitment to the anti-Sandinista crusade. Until 1985, the most important of the "southern" Contra groups was ARDE (The Democratic Revolutionary Alliance), whose best-known military figure was Eden Pastora, a former Sandinista commandant. A series of major disputes within ARDE over the CIA's insistence that the body merge with the Honduras-based FDN led to Pastora's expulsion from the group in 1985. Since then, Pastora has consistently accused US intelligence of organising the attack.

A number of anti-Sandinista paramilitary groupings have also sprung up among a minority of the small Indian communities on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast now living on the Honduran-Nicaraguan border. Although their relationship to the Contra general command has always been rather tense, these indigenous groups constitute the only significant social base on which the Contras have been able to draw — a reflection of early mistakes made by the Spanish-speaking Sandinistas who failed to grasp the importance of national and ethnic questions in the struggle for reconstruction after 1979.

In 1985 and 1986, some progress was made in discussions between the Sandinistas and Miskito organisations like MISURASATA and KISAN over the question of greater autonomy for the Indian regions on the Atlantic coast. A final settlement has not been reached, in part because of extreme demands by some Indian leaders, including a call for the Atlantic Coast to be allowed to secede from Nicaragua. A number of Indian commanders who have participated in dialogue with the Nicaraguan government have been assassinated by hardliners within the Contra organisation.3

Over the last two years, the Contras have expanded their numbers through mass intimidation, including the kidnapping of entire communities, and forced recruitment from among Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras. Despite their access to lavish US funding (dollars are always a powerful attraction), the Contras have been conspicuously unsuccessful in building a real basis of support for their activities in the Nicaraguan countryside.

This is hardly surprising in view of the strategies adopted by the Nicaraguan counter-revolution. The Contras have increasingly directed their energies towards anti-civilian terrorism and economic destabilisation designed to cripple the Nicaraguan economy and create an environment of demoralisation and resentment over economic hardships. The principle victims of the Contras have become health workers, doctors, teachers, agricultural aid workers — in short, anyone who is associated with the
socio-economic and political programs of the Sandinista government.

Other targets have been communications equipment, oil storage facilities, agricultural cooperatives, crops (especially coffee — which is a major earner of foreign exchange) and cattle. Most recently, the Contras have been planting land mines on roads in northern and western Nicaragua in an attempt to isolate remote villages and cripple rural trading networks. Civilian casualties have been enormous.

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There is also considerable evidence that the involvement in terrorism by the Contras and their backers extends way beyond the borders of Nicaragua itself. The FDN’s intelligence chief, Ricardo Lau, is now believed to have played a key role in the assassination of El Salvador’s Archbishop, Oscar Romero, in March 1980. More recently, the “Contragate/Irangate” scandal and the revelations of Eugene Hasenfus, a crew member of the Contra supply plane shot down on 5 October, 1986 have thrown more light on links between the Contras and the activities of rightwing terrorist networks spearheaded by Cuban exiles. Luis Posada Carriles, one of the two organisers of Contra supply operations in San Salvador, had been held in a Venezuelan jail on suspicion of involvement in the bombing of a Cuban civilian airliner in 1973, in which 73 people died. In 1985, another key pro-Contra figure, and head of the Alabama-based Civilian Military Assistance (CMA), Tom Posey, was involved in a plot (to be paid for by Colombian drug circles) to murder the US Ambassador to Costa Rica, Lewis Tambs.4

The Contras’ military record inside Nicaragua has so far been extremely poor. They have been unable to hold territory — a sign of their lack of a genuine social base — and the bulk of their forces have been pushed back into their Honduran bases. However, the Sandinistas’ worst nightmare is of a serious border clash between their troops and Contra forces supported by units of the regular Honduran army which could provide a pretext for direct US and Honduran military intervention. This might provide sufficient cover for Contra seizures of Nicaraguan territory either on the Honduran border or on the Atlantic coast — followed by the declaration of a counter-revolutionary provisional government recognised by the US. The Contras would then have a beachhead through which the US could massively step up arms supplies.

Nicaraguan fears regarding this scenario were strengthened in late November and early December 1986 by a sudden sharp escalation of border tension with Honduras in which the Honduran air force (the most powerful in Central America) bombed three towns inside Nicaragua killing seven soldiers and injuring 14 civilians. At the same time, a meeting of UNO in Costa Rica announced details of plans for the establishment of a Contra provisional government in Nicaragua, while the US announced the reopening of bases in Panama to house members of the infantry brigade which invaded Grenada.

Conclusion

At this point it is not clear how far the Irangate scandal will affect the viability of the Reagan Doctrine’s strategy of “rolling back” the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. So far, the debate unfolding in Washington has not included any serious challenge to the Reagan administration’s anti-Sandinista crusade and has concentrated largely on the legality of actions undertaken by government employees and agencies. It is possible that the scandal and the increased Democratic majority in Congress will make continued funding of the Contras more difficult, but the cowardice shown by most Democrats on Central American issues over the last year or so doesn’t give much cause for optimism.

Within Nicaragua, however, President Daniel Ortega and other Sandinistas have argued that the scandal could very well accelerate the likelihood of a direct US intervention following the Contra forces’ spectacular offensive in early 1987, intended to establish their credibility as a viable politico-military alternative worthy of renewed support by the US Congress. And even if further direct US government aid is not forthcoming, the last five years have clearly demonstrated that the Reagan administration is prepared to stop at nothing in its struggle to strangle the Nicaraguan revolution.

NOTES


2. 46 of the 48 positions in the FDN command structure are held by former guardsmen, according to a 1985 report by the US Congressional Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus. See Reed Brody, Contra Terror in Nicaragua: Report of a Fact-Finding Mission, September 1984-January 1985 (Boston: South End Press, 1985), pp. 132143.
