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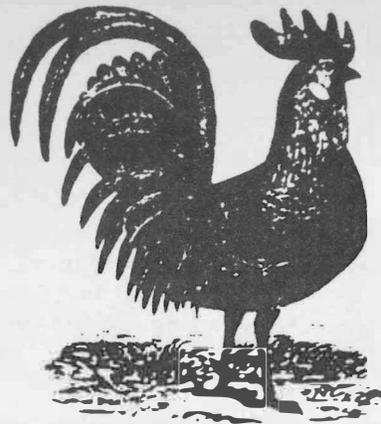
FEARFUL SYMMETRY

NICARAGUAN

SELF-DETERMINATION & AMERICAN RHETORIC

BY DOT TUER

IN THE EARLY MORNING HOURS OF FEBRUARY 26, 1990 when 30 per cent of the counted votes indicated a firm lead for the National Opposition Union (UNO), a fragile coalition of 12 parties ranging from the extreme right to the rigid left, no celebrations erupted, no fiestas or shouts of jubilation broke the eerie silence. It was as if overnight Managua (the capital city of Nicaragua) had become a ghost town, a shroud of mourning descending upon the city streets. At the Bambana, a nightclub hastily converted into the UNO press headquarters in the week preceding the election, incumbent Violeta Barrios de Chamorro was telling jostling international reporters and a straggle of supporters that today in Nicaragua "there are no winners and no losers" but rather a victory for all of the Nicaraguan people.



WO blocks away in a convention centre dedicated to the memory of assassinated Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme, Daniel Ortega was delivering his concession speech to a room full of bleary-eyed journalists and tearful campaign workers. In his televised speech to the nation, Ortega announced that independent of the election outcome, the Sandinistas stood proud and victorious before the people of the world: proud to have contributed a little dignity, social justice and democracy to an unjust world divided between the weak and the strong; victorious in the fulfilment of an electoral process that had been internationally recognized as "free and fair."

Ortega's words were resonant with history, words cognizant of the realities that have confronted the Nicaraguan people since the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) vindicated the memory of Sandino on July 19, 1979 by overthrowing the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship and becoming a symbol for national liberation and anti-imperialist struggles. For in the context of the United States' determination to discredit the Nicaraguan elections as fraudulent and undemocratic, a pluralist facade that masked a sinister totalitarianism, the Sandinistas won an important international victory on February 25, 1990. However, in the context of the U.S.'s determination to destroy the Sandinista revolution as an example of resistance from the periphery that could challenge the hegemony of the centre, the victory proved bittersweet.

The Central American crisis constitutes an immense and acute preoccupation for the United States of America because Central America is our neighbour and a strategic crossing of worldwide significance; since Cuba and the Soviet Union invest massive efforts to extend their influence and therefore carry out in the hemisphere plans which are particularly hostile to the interests of the United States; and because the people of Central America are troubled and in urgent need of our help.

—Henry Kissinger, Central American Bipartite Commission, 1984.¹

Some observers consider the liberalizing trends in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe proof that the Cold War is over and that the West has won. But they ignore the second major contradiction: that between the centre and the periphery.

—Jeanne Kilpatrick, *Baltimore Sun*, September 26, 1989.

The United States of America's aggression against Nicaragua, through low intensity warfare, covert and overt political intervention, and economic blockades and destabilization, has been an object of international condemnation since the Reagan Administration began funding and training counter-revolutionary ("Contra") forces in 1981. The duplicity of politicians and the complicity of the mainstream press in their tacit support of American interventionist policies abroad and of disinformation campaigns at home was analyzed by Noam Chomsky in *Turning the Tide* and *The Culture of Terrorism*.² Other investigations, such as Holly Seklar's *Washington's War on Nicaragua*, detailed the strategies and goals that lay beneath the whitewashed surface of the Administration's official interest in "helping" the people of Nicaragua.

Yet, it was only when the Iran-Contra scandal broke in 1986, with prime-time revelations of arms deals and unconstitutional activities, that the majority of Americans started to pay attention to the events unfolding in their "backyard" south of the border. A groundswell of outrage against a dirty war waged on their behalf, however, never materialized. While the means to an end were clearly repugnant to most Americans, the ideological assumptions that underpinned the Administration's goal of ending a revolutionary "nightmare" in Nicaragua and reinstating the hegemony of the American Dream were never fundamentally in question.

The impact of the Iran-Contra scandal on domestic politics was minimized by a slick public relations campaign which succeeded in diverting public attention away from the implications of a parallel base of power outside of Congress jurisdiction.

From the centre, the periphery remained just that: peripheral to the lived realities and mediated understandings of most Americans. The tensions created by 200 years of American intervention in the region never surfaced in reference to Nicaragua.³

Massive poverty and spiraling inflation, puppet regimes and widespread repression, growing militarization, crippling external debt payments and International Monetary Fund (IMF)-sponsored austerity programs remained issues inherent to Latin America rather than legacies of imperialism.

The United States' determination to destroy the Sandinista revolution as a dangerous example of resistance to a vicious cycle of neocolonialism and underdevelopment was never named as such. The roots of the North/South conflict that had given birth to the Sandinista model of political pluralism and a mixed economy were instead masked by a West/East axis ideology, enshrouded in a Cold War rhetoric of democracy versus totalitarianism. Thus, while the focus of Washington's aggression against Nicaragua would officially shift from a military to a political front during the Nicaraguan electoral process, the false symmetry of equating anti-imperialist and Third World struggles with the spectre of "communist cancers" remained intact.

By 1987, the options for achieving a military victory over the Sandinista government, short of a direct invasion by the United States, had virtually been exhausted.⁴ The combined resistance of the civilian population and the Sandinista Popular Army in Nicaragua had contained the majority of the Contra forces to their bases in Honduras. The heavy fighting from 1984 to 1986 had been reduced to border squirmishes and Contra attacks on "soft" (i.e., civilian) targets. The majority of the indigenous rebels, the Miskito Indians of the Atlantic Coast, had broken with the Contra leadership to return to Nicaragua and negotiate a settlement that became ratified as the Autonomy Law guaranteeing the ethnic groups of the Coast independent jurisdiction over regional issues.

The leaders of the five Central American countries, alarmed at the growing instability in the region created by Washington's proxy war on Nicaragua, closed their usually divisive ranks to support a peace plan proposed by Oscar Arias of Costa Rica. Esquipulas II, signed on August 7, 1987, established a framework for the pacification of the region. It called for a process of national reconciliation within each country to include dialogue with internal opposition groups, amnesty for political prisoners, democratization, free elections, an end to military aid and to the use of national territory by one government to support irregular or insurrectional forces seeking to destabilize a neighbouring country, a call for ceasefires with these forces, and the creation, in cooperation with the United Nations (UN) and the Organization of American States (OAS), of an international commission of support and verification.

It would be these accords and a subsequent summit held in Costa del Sol, El Salvador, on February 14, 1989, that set the diplomatic stage for the 1990 Nicaraguan elections. Nicaragua offered to advance its election date from November to February, reform its electoral and media laws in consultation with the opposition and

invite the OAS and the UN to observe the elections in return for the Central American Presidents' approval of a joint plan to demobilize the Contras. Responding to the Esquipulas II accords, Nicaragua created a National Conciliation Commission in the autumn of 1987 that included Archbishop Obando y Bravo, an outspoken critic of the Sandinista regime, initiated dialogue with the Group of 14 (a coalition of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition parties that would later reform as the UNO), lifted the State of Emergency that had been in effect in varying degrees since 1982, and reopened the American-funded opposition paper *La Prensa*.⁵

By the spring of 1988, Nicaragua had begun direct peace talks with the Contras and declared a month-to-month unilateral ceasefire which remained in effect until November 1, 1989. Following the Costa del Sol accords of February 1989, 1,984 former members of Somoza's National Guard were released and the OAS accepted Nicaragua's invitation to observe the electoral process.

The United States' reaction to Nicaragua's compliance with the spirit and the law of the peace process in Central America was to approve a further \$49 million in "humanitarian" aid to the Contras in April 1989. While the provisions of the package prohibited funds for use in military offensives, they could be diverted to the "voluntary" demobilization and repatriation of the Contras, if requested by the five Central American presidents. Thus by enacting this legislation, U.S. President Bush had succeeded in ensuring that the diplomatic stage of the 1990 elections included the presence of a disruptive actor. Since the expiry date of the aid package, February 25, 1990, coincided with voting day in Nicaragua, it meant that the Contras, an irregular force of 15,000 to 20,000 men, would not only remain in place as a trump card to be used at an opportune moment but would also remain a decisive issue in the electoral campaign.





The importance of holding this trump card quickly became evident as Nicaragua succeeded in linking the demobilization of the Contras as a necessary condition to the holding of "free and fair" elections. For while the U.S. was upping the ante through its continued funding of the Contras, the FSLN was negotiating a series of concessions with the opposition parties that would lay the ground rules for the 1990 elections and achieve an unprecedented degree of national consensus. In April 1989, after two months of bilateral meetings between the FSLN and the opposition, a new media law forbidding censorship and guaranteeing freedom of information, and a number of amendments to the electoral law (including a controversial rule that permitted foreign campaign contributions provided that 50 per cent of all donations were given to the multi-party Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) to help finance the technical costs of the election) were passed by the National Assembly. On August 3, 1989, Daniel Ortega and representatives of the 18 legally recognized parties running in the election met to discuss further reforms demanded by the opposition, particularly by the now formally organized UNO coalition. When they emerged, after 24 hours of tense negotiations, an agreement had been reached that appeared to preclude the possibility of opposition parties withdrawing from the elections (as they had done in the 1984 elections) on the pretence that the process had lacked dialogue and democratic conditions. The terms of this historic National Dialogue included amnesty for all remaining political prisoners, the discontinuation of military conscription for the duration of the electoral process, expanded access to state television for the purposes of political advertising, and the transfer of authority over media violations from the Ministry of the Interior (MINT) to the CSE. The agreement also issued a call on behalf of all parties for the immediate demobilization of the Contras and an appeal against covert foreign intervention in the electoral process.

With these agreements in hand, Ortega was able to go to the regional summit, held in Tela, Honduras on August 7, 1989, with a formal demand for the Contras' demobilization endorsed by all political sectors in Nicaragua. In response, the five Central American presidents agreed at the Tela summit to establish December 5, 1989 as the fixed date for the dismantling of the Contras' Honduras bases and called upon the OAS and the UN to install the International Commission of Support and Verification (CIAV) as a monitoring mechanism. The signing of the National Dialogue and the Tela Accord within days of each other represented an important strategic victory for the FSLN. Ortega was able to strip the Contras of any remaining residue of legitimacy as a national resistance force and to offer the Nicaraguan people evidence that peace was within grasp and that democratic elections would proceed as planned. The immediate reaction of the Contra leadership, which announced that it was not a signatory to the agreement and would refuse to "voluntarily" demobilize, did not

undermine the diplomatic significance of an accord that had de facto numbered the Contras' days as an armed force. But by October 1989, more than 2000 heavily armed and freshly uniformed Contras had infiltrated Nicaragua to initiate a series of military offensive actions on a scale not witnessed since the declaration of unilateral ceasefire by the FSLN over a year and a half previously. The Contras' refusal to demobilize had the serious implication of becoming a threat to regional stability and to the democratic process of the election itself.

The Bush Administration, while maintaining that the Contras must remain in Honduras until after February 25 as a guarantee of "free and fair" elections, feigned concern at the sudden escalation of Contra violence inside Nicaraguan territory, intimating that the Contras were acting independently of official American policy. The effect of this dramatic increase in Contra activity, however, clearly worked in favour of the United States' interests. The ambushes, raids and murders of civilians, timed to coincide with the voter registration process in October, as well as the Contras' active proselytizing on behalf of the UNO, created a tense and uncertain atmosphere in Nicaragua. With the lifting of the ceasefire by Daniel Ortega on November 1, 1989, in response to the Contra ambush and murder of 18 unarmed reserve militia on their way to register to vote, the promise of peace that had seemed within reach receded even further before the spectre of a prolonged war. In the United States, the lifting of the ceasefire was construed as a deliberate attempt by the Sandinistas to undermine the electoral process and cancel the elections. A *New York Times* editorial, "Mr. Ortega's War," which appeared November 3, 1989, announced that Ortega "could have tried to mobilize diplomatic pressure to overcome Washington's foot-dragging on demobilizing the Contras, and U.S. indifference to rebel infiltration into Nicaragua. Instead, he has declared war and raised serious doubts about whether he's ready to risk free and fair elections. It is not a waning insurgency that appears to be Mr. Ortega's real target, but a swelling National Opposition Union."

The false symmetry of equating national liberation struggles with the rise of communist totalitarianism had been evoked in a different guise. The lifting of the ceasefire in Nicaragua was an opportunity to blur the distinction between self-defense of sovereign territory and unwarranted aggression.

Ten years of living dangerously has brought civil war, an exodus of one fifth of our countrymen, an annual inflation rate of 30,000 per cent and, for the first time in our country's history, mass hunger. Our industry and agriculture are paralysed. We have gone from being the bread basket of Central America to being a basket case.

—Violeta Chamorro, *Washington Post*, November 5, 1989.

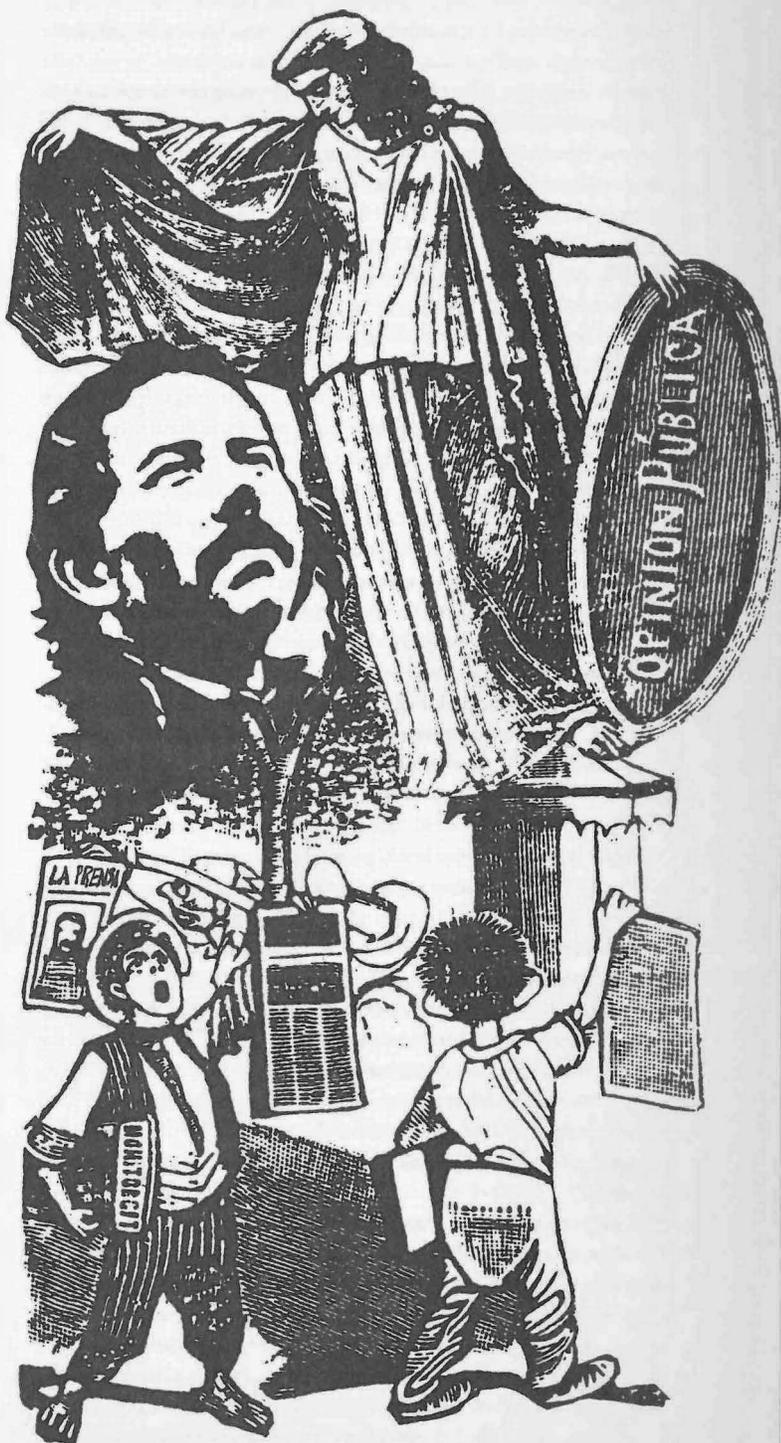
While the signing of the Tela Accord and the National Dialogue was an important, if temporal, victory for the FSLN over American military and political intervention, their battle against the more insidious effects of economic destabilization had not been able to produce as visible results. The Contra war had taken a heavy toll on Nicaragua's primarily agro-export based economy. With 50 per cent of the GNP directed towards military self-defense and the Contras targetting of health, educational, and agricultural cooperatives destroying much of the infrastructure created in the first years of the revolution, the social backbone of the Sandinista project, though not broken by the war, had been severely crippled.

The private sector turned against the revolutionary government when it became apparent that, even though land reform and state acquisitions had been paced to accommodate private interests, the freedom to function economically did not go hand in hand with the acquisition of political power. Attempts to work in harmony with private business met with sabotage and capital flight, production slowdown and obstruction. In the political sphere, the private sector formed a powerful lobby group, COSEP (The Higher Council of Private Enterprise), openly aligning itself with the Contra leadership and subsequently forming the right-wing faction of the UNO alliance. The United States' commercial boycott and international loans blockade added further strains to an economy suffering from the intransigence of private business and \$12 billion in war damages.⁶

Unrealistic economic strategies implemented by the Sandinistas in the earlier years of the revolution also served to exacerbate a mounting economic crisis. Rigid wage and price controls, production incentives and overgenerous credit rates, when combined with an artificially low currency, fuelled speculation, spurred the growth of an underground economy and created a black market.

By 1988, with Hurricane Joan adding a final blow to an already devastated economy, inflation hit a world record of 36,000 per cent. In the state sector, real wages fell below subsistence levels. Factories, lacking workers, parts and incentives, produced at low levels. Poor agricultural yields and plummeting world coffee prices decreased food supplies and increased trade imbalances. Speculation was rampant. Unemployment soared.

To address the severity of the economic crisis, the Sandinista government imposed an IMF-model austerity plan in January 1989, which called for slashing state employment, cutting social services and reducing preferential credit and exchange rates. These measures, when combined with the steps taken since 1987 to lessen wage and price control and liberalize export relations, had a tremendous impact on both workers and peasants. But even though inflation had been reduced to 1000 per cent, the price of basic foodstuffs soared beyond the reach of many people.





Seeking international aid to soften the blow of these austerity measures, the Nicaraguan government met in May 1989 with eight European countries in Stockholm, Sweden. An IMF report had found their efforts to rectify the economic situation positive, but noted the necessity of an immediate infusion of \$250 million to stimulate production and offset the hardships exacted upon the poorer sectors. The Sandinistas were able to obtain a commitment from the eight countries to meet the IMF recommendation. After sustained pressure from the United States, however, only two countries, Sweden and Spain, came through with their portion (\$30 million) of the promised aid.⁷

Thus, in their efforts to break a 10-year boycott in the international loan market, the FSLN's last bargaining tool became the 1990 elections. Their electoral slogan "*todo sera mejor*" (everything will be better) reflected the hope that with the UN and OAS legitimization of the elections as "free and fair," Europe would not bend so easily to American pressure.

The UNION NACIONAL OPOSITORA (UNO), aware of the fact that our country suffers the most delicate crisis of its history, basically as a consequence of the dictatorial and totalitarian system and the administrative disaster of the Sandinista regime, considers that its immediate task consists of dynamic and sustained action capable of rescuing the Nicaraguan people from the social and economic prostration in which they are immersed.

—Preamble for the UNO election platform, August 24, 1989.

From here to the year 2000, a social structure will have been created that is illuminated by the final demolition of the ruins we have inherited and by the birth of an economy overflowing with health and development. In the next years we will be able to do everything that was not possible to do because of the war. . . The political platform of the FSLN is none other than the ratification of our historical platform in new conditions. . . Never have our dreams been more real. And with our electoral victory we will ratify the irreversible destiny of our sovereignty, our liberty and our independence.

—Tomas Borge, FSLN Party Convention speech, Sept. 24, 1989.⁸

In terms of conventional political wisdom, the objective consequences created by ten years of low intensity warfare and economic destabilization would appear to have left the FSLN as an incumbent government at a significant disadvantage in an electoral contest. The 1990 elections, however, were not framed by this assumption by either the United States or the UNO, both claiming that an opposition in Nicaragua had little

chance of winning against the stacked deck of an "undemocratic" revolutionary regime. In September 1989, as the UNO fought among themselves over presidential nominations and the FSLN mounted festive and well-orchestrated party conventions, the claim that the UNO had no chance of winning over the FSLN appeared to have a strong justification in reality, although not for the reasons forwarded by either the U.S. or the opposition. The initial image of the UNO in the beginning stages of the campaign as an ineffectual mishmash of conflicting interests and opposing ideologies never really changed throughout the electoral process. The selection of the American-backed candidate, Violeta Chamorro, the politically inexperienced widow of assassinated *La Prensa* editor Pedro Chamorro, over COSEP's choice of Enrique Bolanos, a politically astute and economically powerful cotton grower, was the first signal that the UNO would be fraught by internal divisions and incoherent strategies.⁹ Revelations in November of links to the Contras, infighting and corruption further discredited the coalition. On November 1, 1989, a communique issued by Enrique Bermudez, as leader of the Contras, announced his refusal to demobilize his troops in order to give "unconditional support and help to the candidates of the UNO."¹⁰ On November 7, *Barricada* published a letter written to Enrique Bermudez from UNO campaign organizer Alfredo Cesar stating that the election campaign of the UNO required the presence of an armed force.¹¹ Cesar's subsequent expulsion from the UNO Political Council and his appointment by Violeta Chamorro as her personal adviser only served to increase internal tensions and further suspicions that the UNO and the Contras were working hand in hand. Meanwhile, Virgilio Godoy, the Vice-Presidential candidate of the UNO, was accused by members of his own Independent Liberal Party (PLI) of embezzling funds and was stripped of his parliamentary immunity by the National Assembly in December. By January 1990, when Antonio Layaco, the campaign manager of the UNO, and Virgilio Godoy were physically fistfighting on stage during a political rally, divisions within the UNO had become a highly public and embarrassing affair.

In spite of \$9 million in election aid to the UNO (approved by the U.S. Congress on October 17, 1989) to make up in hard cash what the UNO coalition lacked in organization and popular support, the UNO campaign remained weak and lifeless. Fears that the influx of the American aid package to create a "level playing field" would result in an upsurge of slick campaign strategies and burgeoning grass-roots organizations with paid "volunteers" went unfounded. The UNO's attempts to avoid paying 50 per cent of political campaign contributions to the Supreme Electoral Council by channelling the money into "non-partisan" democratic educational groups such as Via Civica and the hastily constructed Institute for Electoral Promotion and Training (IPCE) only served to encourage graft and increase bickering

among recipients. The number of organizations receiving funds and the role of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) as the American administrator seeking loopholes and accountability impeded the level of coordinated planning.¹² By February 1990, as Violeta Chamorro continued to stumble over ghostwritten speeches she hesitantly read during poorly attended rallies and the polls indicated that the UNO suffered a negative image as a party too closely aligned with U.S. interests, it seemed as if the strategy of political intervention by the Americans had failed.

Although the UNO failed to mount an effective and visible campaign, it did succeed in undermining the model of political pluralism the Sandinistas had envisioned developing through the electoral process. In theory, the Nicaraguan electoral process was designed to offer all parties an equal opportunity to present their points of view during the campaign and, with their election to the National Assembly, create a forum for resolving ideological differences and interest conflicts through discussion and negotiation. In practice, however, the UNO's participation shifted the focus of the electoral contest away from a multi-party race based on national issues and towards a polarized battle fought between sovereignty and imperialism. Coherent and considered debate that focused on concrete economic and social issues deteriorated into a media war where promises of peace and economic prosperity were articulated in an accusatory atmosphere that pitted patriotism against American salvation. As the U.S.-backed opposition, the UNO promised the Nicaraguan people that they had the ear of the Bush Administration when it came to the issues of lifting the economic blockade and ending the Contra war. Replaying the American paradigm of East totalitarianism versus West freedom, the UNO and *La Prensa* unleashed an inflammatory stream of rhetoric in which the Sandinistas, as blood-thirsty communists/dictators, had imposed a reign of terror and deprivation, bringing war and economic chaos to a country where the leaders lived in castles and the poor died of starvation.

Daniel Ortega responded by denouncing the UNO at FSLN rallies as a scrambled mess of nothing (*UNO no es ninguno*), a haven for ex-Somocistas and ex-Contras and a coalition that had sold its soul to imperialism. Meanwhile, the "centre" of the political spectrum, represented by Eric Ramirez's Social Christian Party (PSC), was squeezed from view (failing to obtain any seats in the National Assembly in the February 25 vote) while other smaller parties faded into obscurity during the initial stages of the electoral campaign.

The fascinating thing is that everybody knows, or should know by now, what a rat the commandante [Daniel Ortega] is. Yet we count on him to keep his pledged word. We react with visible hurt when he shows us unworthy of his trust. It's like the final scene of the Hollywood classic, "Key Largo." Edward G. Robinson, palming the pistol he professes not to have, whines for

his adversary, Humphrey Bogart, to come out and show himself. Bogey proves himself too smart for that old canard. You wonder why men charged with running the destinies of nations sometimes lack the intelligence and insight of a movie actor.

—William Marchson, Editorial, *Washington Times*, Nov. 3, 1989.

On December 10, 1989, the simmering tensions created by a polarized electoral landscape erupted into overt violence at an UNO rally in Masatepe (30 miles south of Managua), leaving a Sandinista supporter dead, 15 wounded and the campaign headquarters of the FSLN destroyed. Although the OAS issued a report following the incident that stated, "It is impossible to determine who is responsible for the initiation of violence," UNO used Masatepe to threaten withdrawal from the elections while the American press echoed its early November accusations that the FSLN was conspiring to create an excuse for the cancellation of the elections. Added to the Contra card that Washington had played out in the autumn was the added worry that the UNO and the U.S. were planning a series of provocations in order to delegitimize the Nicaraguan elections and further exacerbate an atmosphere of polarization and fear.

While millions of East Germans swept through West Berlin like Hurricane Hugo last weekend, apparatchiks all over Eastern Europe began to get the idea that the crumbling of communism had finally begun. Yet in Central America, the revanchists are holding on. El Salvador's Marxist FLMN hoisted its red and black banderole last Saturday night, launching a major assault on the capital city. . . "Our mission is to win or die," a young rebel dramatically told reporters. "This is our last battle." We hope it will be, if the Salvadorans and the Bush Administration finally get serious about bringing peace to Central America. At least they seem to have recognized the source of the problem, which isn't Salvadoran political or economic conditions but the communist governments in Managua and Havana.

—"Communism's Last Battle," Editorial, *Washington Times*, November 17, 1989.

The unfolding of the electoral process in the autumn of 1989 was not only marked by Contra infiltration, the lifting of the ceasefire, polarization and suspected American covert action, but also demarcated by the sudden escalation of tensions in the region. With the military offensive launched by the FLMN (Farabundi Marti National Liberation Front) on November 11 and the Christmas invasion of Panama by the Americans, what in August 1989 had looked like a future horizon of negotiated settlements threatened, by December 1989, to engulf all of Central America in a regional war. In the wake of the FLMN offensive, troop movements in Honduras and Guatemala were rumoured. The reports of the genocidal bombing of civilian neighbourhoods in El Salvador evoked memories in Nicaragua of the 1979 insurrection which blurred with the present escalation of Contra activity inside Nicaragua.



Efforts by the FSLN throughout November to hold a series of talks with the Contras under the auspices of the UN and the OAS failed to advance an agreement on their demobilization. The alleged discovery of a crashed Nicaraguan plane carrying weapons inside El Salvadoran territory was used by Alfredo Christiani, the President of El Salvador, to sever diplomatic relations with the Nicaraguan government. The San Isidro de Coronado regional summit, held in Costa Rica on December 12, 1989, temporarily defused hostilities. The five Central American presidents signed an agreement reaffirming the legitimate sovereignty of each government and calling upon the United States to divert funding for Contra maintenance to the CIAV for purposes of their demobilization. This respite from two months of escalating tensions, however, proved fleeting. The invasion of Panama on December 20, 1989 and the invasion of the Nicaraguan ambassador's residence by U.S. troops a week later led Daniel Ortega to declare that in ten years of revolution U.S./Nicaragua relations had never been as strained. Although Bush's nonchalant admission of a "screw-up" over the Panama incident once again defused overt hostilities, the people of Nicaragua had lived through two months of roller-coaster tensions, with American strong-arm tactics still looming large over Central America.

By mid-January 1990, a surface calm had descended upon Managua, the maximum alert from the Panama invasion was lifted and the army tanks in the city streets were replaced by an urban landscape of political slogans and billboard election advertising. The fear generated by the Masatepe incident and American press coverage that the UNO would withdraw from the electoral races diminished. By the time 3000 international observers and 1500 international journalists descended upon Nicaragua in the last two weeks of February to witness the most carefully scrutinized electoral process in the history of the world, the roller-coaster tensions of the autumn had been displaced by a festive campaign atmosphere. FSLN T-shirts, hats, and slogans of "*Daniel es mi gallo*" (Daniel is my rooster)¹³ inundated Managua, while UNO propaganda, suddenly appearing three weeks before the election, was scarce and unimaginative. Salsa tunes written especially for the FSLN election campaign flooded the state airwaves, while opposition stations continued to harangue listeners with a litany of grievances about Sandinista intimidation of UNO supporters and abuse of the state infrastructure. On television, the UNO commercials, with images of misery and starving children searching through garbage cans, sought to emphasize the economic crisis, while the FSLN rock-video upbeat propaganda sought to evoke a future of peace and happiness.

In the last week of the campaign, each side claimed potential victory. The UNO complained that the FSLN could only win through election day fraud; the FSLN explained that an extensive campaign of door-to-door visits and public rallies across the nation had confirmed

that they were and would be the party of the people. When, on February 18, the UNO held its final rally at the Plaza of the revolution, 40,000 people gathered to hear Violeta Chamorro dressed in virgin white promise economic salvation. The UNO rally, however, proved no match for the FSLN spectacle mounted in the Plaza Carlos Fonseca on February 25 complete with 500,000 cheering fans, girls dancing to Batman themes, dazzling fireworks and a Jimmy Cliff concert. A number of polling companies had conducted surveys throughout the electoral process showing Daniel Ortega leading Violeta Chamorro. Their final opinion surveys, released in February, showed Ortega swinging even further ahead. The only polls contradicting this trend were clearly identified opposition surveys whose links to *La Prensa* and refusal to release methodology made them suspect in the eyes of most political analysts.¹⁴ By the time the campaign officially closed, it seemed as if the FSLN could not help but sweep the election day vote, the only doubt remaining was the American acceptance of their victory. On voting day itself, rumours that exit polls showing the UNO leading would be released before the official count appeared to be one last desperate attempt to discredit the FSLN win and to provoke election day violence. On February 25, 1990, as people across Nicaragua waited patiently in line to cast their ballots, hundreds of writers, including myself, prepared to write analyses of the Sandinista triumph, citing the victory of grassroots organization and popular democracy over a badly managed American intervention. Forgotten in the frantic days that preceded February 25, as the world descended upon this small, war-torn, heat-drenched country to witness history's most carefully scrutinized elections, were the events of the autumn: the escalation of Contra activity, the invasion of Panama, the grinding effects of an economic crisis. The fiesta atmosphere had temporarily masked the underlying tensions of a ten-year struggle against American aggression and camouflaged the exhaustion of a people whose project for self-determination had meant confronting the wrath of the most powerful nation in the hemisphere.

For the Frente Sandinista [FSLN] democracy is not measured only in the political terrain and is not reduced to the participation of the people in elections. Democracy . . . means participation of the people in political, economic, social and cultural affairs. Democracy is initiated in the economic order, when social inequities begin to weaken, when workers and peasants begin to improve their standard of living.

—FSLN, 1980.

I believe that it is important that we begin to analyse the anti-imperialist revolutionary model and ask ourselves why it has ended in economic failure which is finally the essential aspect of each revolution. For one does not make a revolution in order to fortify war, but in order to see economic results, and it is these results that we have not seen.

—Victor Tirado, National Direction, 1990.¹⁵

On March 1, 1990, however, as I prepare to close this chapter in the story of the Nicaraguan elections, it seems as if the past cannot not be so easily forgiven, nor the future of reconciliation so easily attained. Thus, while the people of Nicaragua may have voted in a "free and fair" election to end a confrontation with the United States of America, this electoral exercise of democracy did not end a confrontation with inheritances of a ten-year war and with the disparities created by the "economic totalitarianism" of a global economy that divides the hemisphere into the centre and the periphery, into First and Third worlds, into developed and underdeveloped nations.

For ten years Nicaragua has been at the crossroad of an anti-imperialist struggle, of a North/South conflict, of an East/West rhetoric. As an epicentre of the periphery's struggle against a vicious cycle of neocolonialism and underdevelopment, the results of the 1990 Nicaraguan elections were felt as seismological shocks across the hemisphere. The victory of the UNO, however, was not an earthquake powerful enough to topple ten years of revolutionary infrastructure. The story of the 1990 Nicaraguan elections that began on July 19, 1979, when the FSLN promised the people of Nicaragua a revolutionary model of political pluralism, social justice and a mixed economy, did not end on February 25 with the verification of "free and fair" elections by 3000 international observers and 1500 journalists. In 1990, the FSLN as a political party was defeated at the polls, but as long as the world remains divided into the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, the dream of self-determination bequeathed by the Sandinista revolution will continue to be lived out in the struggle at the periphery for economic and social justice. For during ten years of revolution, the people of Nicaragua did not only live an experience of war and economic deprivation, but also the experience of conscious politicization and popular democracy: the realization of a national literacy campaign, mass organization and industry unionization, control over national resources, an army of and for the people, freedom of expression, freedom from repression, free education, free elections. The Sandinista vision of economic equality and prosperity may have been obstructed by ten years of American aggression, but the ideals of the revolution have passed into the collective memory of the people.

The false symmetry of East/West rhetoric and North/South conflict suggests the enormity of the struggle that lies before the Nicaraguan people in their search for a model of resistance and revolution in the face of an expansionist American capitalism, in a hemisphere where the periphery sinks deeper into a vicious circle of external debt and escalating poverty. Historical conditions gave birth to the guerilla victory of the Sandinistas in 1979. The historical conditions that brought them electoral defeat in 1990 do not signify the end of a revolution, rather they presage a future where the confrontation between imperialism and self-determination is just beginning. ■

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Dot Tuer, a freelance writer from Toronto, has spent the last six months in Nicaragua researching a book on the country.

Further coverage of Nicaragua by Dot Tuer will appear in an upcoming issue of FUSE.

ENDNOTES

1. Silva-Michelena, Jose, ed. *Latin America: Peace, Democracy and Economic Crisis* (London: Zed Books, 1988), p.123.
2. As a sequel to *Turning The Tide* (Boston: South End Press, 1985), *The Culture of Terrorism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1988) examines the Iran-Contra scandal and its implications for American foreign policy.
3. In their October 1989 issue, *Envio*, a Managua-based magazine published by the Instituto Historico Centroamerica, published a list of nearly 100 direct U.S. interventions in Latin America since 1806.
4. In *Washington's War on Nicaragua* (Toronto: Between The Lines, 1988), pp. 368-71, Sklar describes a Centre for Defense Information (CDI) document issued in 1987 that discusses an invasion scenario involving 50,000 American troops with U.S. casualties estimated at 3000 dead, 9000 wounded, and Nicaraguan casualties at 10,000 dead and 30,000 wounded. The plan included an estimated cost of the invasion at \$7 billion with an additional \$6 billion required over four to five years to rebuild the post-invasion economy.
5. In a report issued by Hemispheres Initiatives, an American election observer group, it was revealed that from 1984 to 1989 *La Prensa* had received 72 per cent of the National Endowment for Democracy's allocation of \$1,137,405. In 1985 alone, these funds covered the entire operating costs of the newspaper. "Nicaraguan Election Update #2: Foreign Funding of the Internal Opposition," *Hemispheres Initiatives*, October 16, 1989.
6. In Gerardo Timossi's *Centroamerica, Dueda Externa y Ajuste Estructural: Las transformaciones Economicas de la Crisis* (Costa Rica: CRIES, 1989), a statistical table on p. 129 shows that Nicaragua did not receive external loan financing after 1983. Until 1983, the World Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank gave minimal loan assistance, while the IMF has maintained a complete boycott from 1979.
7. Information given by Migel D'Escoto in a speech to North American observer groups and solidarity workers on February 23, 1990. See also "Two Voices From The Private Sector," *Envio*, Vol. 8, #99 (October 1989), pp. 30-39.
8. Tomas Borge, "Por Que Votaremos Por Daniel." Speech reprinted in the FSLN official newspaper, *Barricada*, September 26, 1989, p. 3. (translation the author)
9. Violeta Chamorro was promoted by U.S. advisers for her "Cory Aquino" image as the widow of *La Prensa* editor Pedro Chamorro. His assassination by Somoza in 1978 united a broad spectrum of Nicaraguan society with the FSLN against the Somoza regime.
10. A copy of the original letter was reprinted in *Barricada*, November 3, 1989, p. 5. (translation the author)
11. A copy of the original letter was reprinted in *Barricada*, November 7, 1989, p. 2.
12. For more information on American political intervention see Holly Sklar, "Washington wants to buy Nicaragua's Elections Again," *Z Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 12 (December 1989) and "The Failure of the U.S. Intervention in Nicaraguan Elections" (available from Institute for Media Analysis, Nicaraguan Elections Project, No. 5, Aptdo 789, Managua, Nicaragua. Tel. 22836.)
13. "*Daniel es mi gallo*" refers to betting on the winner in a cockfight. The slogan also alludes to sexual virility and strength.
14. Nicaraguan polling firms ECO, DOXA, and American firms Univision, Greenberg-Lake, and ABC-Washington Post showed the FSLN leading in various polls conducted from October 1989 to February 1990. Borge & Associates of Costa Rica and a Via Civica poll conducted for *La Prensa* and NED all showed the UNO with a substantial lead.
15. From an interview with Victor Tirado conducted by Sergio Ferrari of the Agencia Nueva de Nicaragua. *Barricada*, March 20, 1990, p. 3. (translation the author)