The "Contra" War in Nicaragua

by
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This article attempts to analyze the "contra" war, an ongoing struggle between the government of Nicaragua and counter-revolutionary forces who have the moral and financial backing of the U.S. government. The unfolding of this five-year old war is considered by detailing the U.S. government strategy in concert with the development of the counter-revolutionary forces both politically and militarily. The effect of the five-year war on Nicaragua's people and its economy will be explored sector-by-sector, and a prognosis for the future will be offered.

Taking office in 1981, the Reagan administration initiated a new policy toward Nicaragua designed to strangle the Sandinistas economically and to begin the financing of an armed counter-revolutionary army to be used against the Nicaraguan government. The new administration's policy represented a shift from the Carter administration which, while not supporting the Sandinista revolution, had successfully lobbied Congress for approximately $100 million in foreign aid, targeted primarily for the Nicaraguan private sector. The Carter administration had hoped to affect the course of the revolution through support of elements in Nicaragua that were seeking to temper the revolution and steer it toward the United States. Presidential candidate Reagan attacked the Carter administration's Central America policies and once in office moved definitively against the Sandinistas. The change began in early 1981 with U.S. pressure on international aid agencies and banks not to lend to Nicaragua and a cut-off of U.S. aid to Nicaragua. In 1982 the U.S. followed with a 90% reduction of Nicaragua's quota for sugar imports to the U.S., Nicaragua's traditional principal market.[1]

Concurrent with this economic pressure, the CIA engaged in a growing program of training, financing, and equipping a counter-revolutionary army to launch attacks against Nicaragua. A $19.5 million dollar program was approved for 1982, followed by $30 million in 1983 and $24 million in 1984. In the fall of 1984, Congress suspended the aid program but in June 1985 a new program was initiated granting "humanitarian" aid to the counter-revolutionaries. That program distributed $27 million to the "contras" in the period ending March 31, 1986. On June 25, 1986, the U.S. Congress approved an additional $100 million in assistance to the rebel forces; the appropriation included military armaments. This new aid began flowing to Central America soon after it was approved by the President in October. In November the public learned through the exposure of the Iran affair that the various officials in the Reagan administration had been involved in obtaining money for the "contras" even during periods when Congress had banned either all funds or military assistance to the rebels. While there has been considerable criticism in recent months of the White House for its handling of the "Iran/contra" affair, it is not yet clear if Congress will

terminate the assistance when it has the opportunity to do so in the summer of 1987.

What arguments did the Reagan administration use to convince a reluctant Congress to support its Central American policy? President Reagan spelled out his attitude toward Nicaragua publicly in a joint session of the Congress on April 27, 1983. Reagan outlined four policy goals in Central America. First, he promised to support democracy, reform, and human freedom, particularly through the promotion of fair elections. Second, to offset what he called "economic sabotage" by the FDR-FMLN guerrillas in El Salvador, the President proposed economic development. Third, in response to what he called the military challenge of Cuba and Nicaragua, Reagan vowed to support the security of America's allies in the region. Finally, the President pledged to support dialogue and negotiations among the countries of the region and within each country. The President's position was summed up by one of his closing comments in the April 27, 1983 speech: "There can be no question: the security of all the Americas is at stake in Central America. If we cannot defend ourselves there, we cannot expect to prevail elsewhere."[2] The President further underscored his remarks by warning those who would oppose him that they would bear the responsibility if the U.S. was less than forthright in opposing Nicaragua. By playing on the fear of those in Congress who felt they would be labeled pro-Communist if they continued to oppose him, the President was eventually able to carry the day.

It should also be noted that many analysts believe the Reagan administration sees much more at stake in Central America than simply the defeat or containment of the Nicaraguan revolution. For example, then Secretary of State Alexander Haig made clear that restoring America's credibility and power was at stake in Central America: "I know the American people will support what is prudent and necessary, providing they think we mean what we say and that we are going to succeed and not flounder as we did in Vietnam."[3] For the Reagan administration Central America is seen as a relatively safe arena for demonstrating that the United States has recovered from Vietnam.

Contemporaneously with the arming and training of the "contra" force, the U.S. government has carried out a massive military build-up in Honduras. The scope of this build-up can be understood in simple terms of U.S. military assistance to Honduras. Aid in the fiscal year 1980, the final year of the Carter administration, was $4.0 million compared to $31.3 million in the 1982 fiscal year. The increases have continued rising to $37.3 million in 1983, $77.5 million in 1984, $62.5 million in 1985, and $88.2 million in 1984.[4] Another side of the U.S. build-up in Honduras has been the virtually permanent stationing of U.S. military personnel in the country through periodic maneuvers. The ongoing military exercises have, in this author's opinion, a number of purposes including: the preparation of the Honduran army for a possible attack against Nicaragua; the preparation of U.S. Armed Forces to attack Nicaragua; the creation of the practical infrastructure for a region-wide conflict; and

the gradual conversion of Honduras into an occupied country and a docile instrument of American politics.

The maneuvers began in the summer of 1981 with operation "Combined Deployment," 40 kilometers north of the Honduran border and continued with "Halcon Vista" maneuvers in October on the Honduran coast close to Nicaraguan beaches. These operations were stated to be a demonstration that "Cuban and Soviet intervention in Central America would not be permitted." The year 1983 saw a dramatic increase in U.S. troop presence in Honduras beginning with the Big Pine I operation in February involving 1,600 U.S. soldiers and 4,000 Hondurans. In the summer, major U.S. naval maneuvers were conducted off both coasts of Nicaragua, and in August 1983 the start of six month Big Pine II operations signaled the beginning of significant permanent U.S. troop presence. During the last two years there has been an average of 3,000 U.S. troops in Honduras at any one time.[5] In addition to the maneuvers, the U.S. has upgraded the military infrastructure of the country significantly: runways at six airbases have been extended; the Regional Military and Security Training Center at Sin Sin has been upgraded; the radar base at Cerro Hule has been renovated; and numerous highways in the vicinity of the Nicaraguan border have been rebuilt. Additionally, Honduran bases, over the objection of the Honduran government, have become the major location for U.S. training of Salvadoran troops. The Honduran bases became increasingly important with the closing of the U.S. Southern Command training facilities in Panama. It should be noted, however, that the actual use of U.S. military forces against Nicaragua is not a foregone conclusion. While the Reagan administration has gained bipartisan Congressional support for its policy of supporting the "contra," it has little support in Congress or among the American people for direct military action against Nicaragua in the absence of a more tangible national security threat to U.S. territory. While U.S. military men have assured the White House that Nicaragua can be subdued by U.S. military action, they have also cautioned against the involvement of U.S. forces in Central America without a domestic consensus in favor of such a policy.[6] Another continuing constraint on U.S. military action against Nicaragua is that such involvement would likely cause severe damage to U.S. relations with the rest of Latin America for a significant period afterwards. In conclusion it should be noted that in spite of these obvious constraints, the use of U.S. military force against Nicaragua remains a possibility. In the meantime, the Reagan administration seems to be committed to its objectives against Nicaragua through use of the "contra," making an analysis of their prospects crucial.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE COUNTER-REVOLUTION

In order to understand the current state of the counter-revolutionary forces and their future prospects, it is necessary to trace their complex development since the fall of Somoza. At the time of the revolution in July 1979 some 5,000-7,000 former National Guardsmen fled the country. By far the largest group went to Honduras, but others went to

Guatemala, Paraguay, Argentina, and the United States. Political and military organization began almost immediately among the exiles who sought to return to power in Managua. Retraining began in private camps in Florida operated in cooperation with various anti-Castro Cuban groups. Initially the two main groups were the 15th of September Legion and the Nicaraguan Democratic Union (UDN), then headed by Nicaraguan business leader Jose Francisco Cardenal. These former Guardsmen organized into small bands and raided peasant communities near the Nicaraguan-Honduran border. A few isolated attacks were made on literacy campaign workers during 1980. The fortunes of the "contra" were given a boost in that year by the first defections from the revolutionary government—the resignations of Violeta Chamorro and Alfonso Robelo in April 1980. While they did not join the rebels at that time, these resignations together with the departure of Eden Pastora in 1981 demonstrated to the rebels that political openings against the Sandinistas were possible among those who had initially supported the revolution.

The efforts of the former Guardsmen were also given a big lift in 1980 by the election of Ronald Reagan to the Presidency of the United States. During the campaign, Reagan had committed himself to an aggressive policy against the Sandinistas; once in office, his administration began a systematic effort to strengthen the anti-Sandinista forces. Edgar Chamorro, himself a member of the UDN at that time, recounts that Vernon Walters, now U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, "arranged for all the bands to be incorporated within the 15th of September Legion and for the military government of Argentina to send advisors and trainers."[7] The merger and creation of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) was consummated in August 1981 in Guatemala City at a meeting arranged by the CIA. Also present at the meeting and integrating his forces into the FDN was Steadman Fagoth, a leader of the Miskito Indian organization, MISURA (Organization of Miskitos, Sumos, and Ramas). MISURA had initially worked with the Sandinista government within the framework of a larger organization, MISURASATA (Organization of Miskitos, Sumos, Ramas, Sandinistas United), but the government dissolved that organization when its leaders, Fagoth and Brooklyn Rivera, attempted to set up an independent government in the northern Atlantic region. Following the dissolution Fagoth reformed MISURA as the first armed indigenous group on the Atlantic coast and began to operate out of Honduras under the leadership of the FDN. In fact, the first major military operation of the FDN was carried by MISURA at the end of 1981. Named Red Christmas, the operation resulted in the evacuation of 39 Coco River communities to Tasba Pri some sixty kilometers to the south and caused several thousand Miskitos to flee into Honduras.[8]

The northern front maintained by the FDN and the Miskito rebels was only one of the two fronts that carried on the war against the Nicaraguan government. During 1982 the war against Nicaragua became a two-front war with the formation in Costa Rica of the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE) under the leadership of Eden Pastora

and eventually Alfonso Robelo. ARDE was a dissimilar formation in that its leadership was not made up of former Guardsmen but rather supporters of the Sandinista government. Eden Pastora, who won international fame when he played a leading role in the Sandinista seizure of the National Palace in 1978, later served as Vice-Minister of the Interior and Vice-Minister of Defense. He left the country in July 1981, resurfacing nine months later in Costa Rica announcing his intention to fight the Sandinistas. Pastora was later joined in ARDE by two important allies — Alfonso Robelo and Brooklyn Rivera. Robelo was a prominent opponent of Somoza who formed the Nicaraguan Democratic Movement in early 1978. He served in the first National Reconstruction Government junta from July 1979—April 1980 before breaking with the Sandinistas. In early 1982 he left Nicaragua for Costa Rica where he was founder and co-director of ARDE along with Pastora. Linking up with ARDE in 1982 was MISURASATA, the Miskito organization led by Broklyn Rivera. MISURASATA was formed in 1982 by Rivera after he broke with Steadman Fagoth over MISURA's collaboration with the ex-National Guards. Rivera used the name of the original indigenous movement as a sign that he did not want to overthrow the Sandinista government but did demand that it recognize the Indians' historical rights.[9]

Concurrently, the U.S. commitment to the counter-revolutionaries escalated. In early December 1981 President Reagan authorized the "contra" war as a CIA "covert" project. In April 1982, following the U.S. support for the British in the Falklands/Malvinas War, the Argentinian government withdrew its advisors from Honduras. Following that withdrawal, the CIA took full control of the operation, and within months it was the largest CIA operation since the Phoenix program of the Vietnam War. During 1982 the FDN carried out its first significant armed actions in the northern border regions, designed to acquire a portion of Nicaragua, declare it "liberated territory," invoke the Inter-American Reciprocal Assistance treaty, and call on the international community to recognize a "provisional government." With this strategy MISURA carried out the "Red Christmas" plan in late 1981, and in late 1982 the FDN tried to take various towns including Jalapa and Somoto. These attacks, while often causing significant civilian casualties, failed in their objective, and in fact, no significant town has been held by the FDN at any time during the war. In 1983 the counter-revolutionaries diversified their strategy, incorporating more political elements into its plans. The FDN penetrated Nicaraguan territory to carry out various diversionary activities: kidnappings, ambushes, and attacks on civilian and economic targets. Its most spectacular success in that year was a sabotage bombing of the Pacific part of Corinto that caused more than $100 million in economic losses. However, on the other side of the coin, at least three times in 1983 the rebel forces tried and failed to take the town of Jalapa. Such failures only served to underscore the lack of success of the FDN's overall strategy to create a "liberated" zone. In 1984, the FDN developed more ambitious plans, infiltrating the interior of the country with its forces and generally seeking to create a climate of civil war in the country. That year also saw the mining of two of Nicaragua's

key ports, several aerial attacks, numerous attacks on agricultural cooperatives, and a major attack in June on the city of Ocotal. ARDE probably reached its height of activity in early 1984 when Pastora's forces took the southeastern town of San Juan del Norte for two days and carried out extensive military actions throughout the Nicaragua-Costa Rica border area. However, since mid-1984 numerous splits and controversies have rendered the southern contra front nearly irrelevant militarily. During 1984 the FDN worked very closely with the CIA and entered 1985 in a relatively hopeful state projecting for that year what it called "the year of the Final Offensive." The plan was to culminate in mid-year with an offensive within Nicaragua against the main central and northern cities, following earlier attacks against Sandinista army border units. The armed actions were to have been complemented by propaganda actions aimed at legitimizing the counter-revolution widely among the Nicaraguan population.[10]

In reality 1985 turned out to be a disastrous year for the counter-revolution and may have represented the beginning of the end of their political and military plans. The rebel plans for a "Final Offensive" turned out to be significantly overstated. In particular, battalion-size campaigns against major towns in central and northern Nicaragua resulted in high casualties for the contra forces. According to the Nicaraguan government, Sandinista forces inflicted 5,469 casualties in 1985, an increase of 70% over 1984.[11] While the exact numbers may be somewhat high, the dramatic increase is definitely verifiable and can help to account for the recall of contra forces into Honduras by the end of 1985. The failure of the contra in that year can be directly traced to the failure of the rebels to establish any significant political base within the country and the increasing effectiveness of the Sandinista army. The weakness of the contra during 1985 may also be attributed in part to the total Congressional ban on assistance that began in 1984 and continued well into 1985. However, it should be noted that recent revelations about continued covert U.S. support for the contra during this period reduce the persuasiveness of this argument to a certain degree. In spite of difficult economic conditions and significant civilian and military casualties, the rebels have not been able to create a "civil war climate" except in a few remote border areas. They have been able to win some support from conservative peasants in the Northern regions of the country who have rejected the land reform programs of the government, but they have failed to attract the support in urban areas and among the middle class that would enable them to build a political movement and an army able to reach into the towns and cities. The rebels continue to be seen inside Nicaragua primarily as a purely military force led by former members of the defeated National Guard and civilians who were loyal to Anastasio Somoza. Such connections make significant recruitment difficult to achieve. To carry out its "Final Offensive" in 1985 the rebel leaders had projected that they would grow at a rate of 1,000 per month when in reality their numbers were probably smaller at the end of 1985 than they were at the beginning of the year.[12] It does appear that rebel activity within Nicaragua picked up somewhat during mid-1986 due at

least in part to the air supply operations that were revealed when a U.S. plane was shot down in southern Nicaragua in October. However, by the end of 1986, contra activity within Nicaragua had again subsided. In early 1987, following the flow of newly voted Congressional money to the rebels, Reagan administration officials have claimed that the contra have reentered Nicaragua in large numbers and will soon again be a major military factor. It is obviously too soon to assess the validity of that proposition, but it is clear that the contra are under great pressure in 1987 to prove their military capabilities, particularly in light of potential renewed Congressional opposition to the funding.

Beyond their own problems, the plans of the FDN have been thwarted up to now by the efficiency of the Sandinista forces. During 1985 and 1986 the 60,000 man Nicaraguan army was able to use a combination of new equipment, better training, and new tactics to deliver significant military setbacks to the counter-revolutionaries. Increased assistance from the Eastern bloc countries brought Nicaragua automatic weapons, mortars, long-range artillery and, most importantly, helicopter gunships. Battlefield reports have indicated that the Soviet-made MI-24 helicopter gunships have made a distinct difference in limiting the rebels' freedom of movement in certain parts of the country and in key battles.[13] The Sandinista army successfully used its new firepower in concert with infantry units to blunt virtually all of the major rebel offensives in 1985. Their success, particularly with helicopter gunships, has prompted the U.S. government to begin to supply the rebel forces with surface-to-air missiles through the 1987 (fiscal year) $100 million funding. As of early 1987 it is too early to tell whether the rearming of the contra and their training at bases in the United States will be able to reverse the obviously overwhelming military advantage that the Nicaraguan army possesses.

In spite of the gloomy outlook, the Reagan administration has pressed ahead with its strategy of full support for the counter-revolution. How has the White House attempted to carry it off in the face of obvious obstacles? From the beginning the U.S. government pursued a two-track strategy with the FDN forces in Honduras. On the one hand, the CIA accepted the Somocista leadership of the FDN and worked with these former Guard commanders to plan and carry out increasingly significant attacks on Nicaragua during 1982 and 1983. On the other hand, the U.S. government worked to change the political face of the FDN leadership hoping to make it more acceptable to the U.S. Congress which, by mid-1983, was becoming wary of the CIA operation. In December 1983 the FDN restructured its military leadership, doing away with a separate military command made up of five ex-Guardsmen. The general staff was formally replaced by a Military-Civil command made up of four members of the seven-person FDN directorate. However, Enrique Bermudez and other ex-Guardsmen with the CIA advisors continued to head-up operations in the field, a situation that continues down to the present day. In addition, the CIA began to work on the political front with Adolfo Calero, the president of the FDN direcorate. Calero, who is based in Miami, was manager of the Coca-Cola franchise in Managua and leader of the Conservative Party during Somoza's time. He has

He has become an important person in the U.S. government's efforts to unite the contra opposition. A key breakthrough in the U.S. efforts came in June of 1985 with the constitution of the Unified Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) bringing together Adolfo Calero, Alfonso Robelo, Arturo Cruz, and their forces and supporters. Neither Robelo nor Cruz brought significant organizational structures into the alliance, but both were politically important as legitimate Somoza opponents who served in the early juntas of the Government of National Reconstruction. The lack of power of Cruz and Robelo has often been underscored during the past year. In September 1985 Cruz reportedly attempted to reduce sharply the influence of several former Guard officers including Bermudez, but he was definitely rebuffed.[14] The continued weakness of Robelo and Cruz led to a series of high level negotiations mediated by the CIA in Miami during May 1986. On May 27, an accord was apparently reached that has strengthened the hand of Robelo and Cruz somewhat by giving the power to make key political appointments and to discipline or dismiss military commanders of the directorate of UNO—the power previously held by Calero alone. It should be pointed out that there is some skepticism over whether the agreement will be carried out. Robert Leiken, Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who monitors the rebels, has commented, "This was a tough fight that strengthens the democrats in the UNO, but we have to see now if the agreement is applied."[15] Fundamental political differences may well prevent the accord from being implemented. Cruz and Robelo represent the Social Democratic wing of the rebel opposition. They are willing to consider a negotiated settlement with the Sandinistas and believe that the Nicaraguan revolution has brought some benefits to the Nicaraguan people. In contrast, Calero is an ideological conservative with long-standing ties to supporters of the Somoza regime who believe that the Sandinistas must be overthrown militarily. Because the latter position is closest to that of the Reagan administration, which offers the funding, Calero may well feel little need to go beyond the formality of an agreement which can be used to solicit additional assistance from the U.S. Congress. A new crisis developed in early 1987 when both Robelo and Cruz threatened to resign over the same issues that had surfaced a year earlier. On February 16, under considerable White House pressure, Calero resigned from his UNO post while Robelo and Cruz withdrew their resignation threats. However, few people believe that the leadership crisis has been solved. Calero retains his more important post as the head of the FDN, and the others are only political figures backed by the United States with no army to support them in their bid to return to power in Nicaragua. Even an administration official quoted anonymously was not too optimistic, saying "What is happening now is a necessary first step, but there is no guarantee it will work just because some people were moved around."[16]

It should also be noted that there have been important shifts within the Miskito forces allied with the FDN. The MISURA organization led by Steadman Fagoth was dissolved in 1985 and replaced with a new organization under Fagoth's leadership—KISAN (Union of Coast Indians of Nicaragua). Formed under U.S. guidance in an attempt to end

the internal fighting in the armed indigenous groups, KISAN was openly allied with the FDN to a greater degree than MISURA, becoming a member of UNO in November 1985. KISAN has largely been unsuccessful in bringing unity to the Miskito forces as both Brooklyn Rivera and MISURASATA have remained outside of KISAN. Of greater significance, KISAN underwent a split almost immediately after its formation, with six of its commanders entering into negotiations with the Sandinista government. At present, the Fagoth wing of KISAN has approximately 2,000 soldiers based in Honduras while the breakaway faction commands approximately 300 soldiers and controls nine Miskito communities.[17] The Fagoth forces have carried out very little combat activity within the last 18 months.

On the southern front, in spite of considerable political activity under U.S. direction, there have been few tangible results in the form of renewed contra military capability. In early 1984 the CIA was working closely with Pastora, providing logistical support including a helicopter for the attack on San Juan del Norte.[18] However, at the same time, the CIA was pressuring Pastora to unite with the FDN or lose his funding. In fact, he was given a thirty day ultimatum that expired on May 30, 1984, when Pastora called a news conference at the Nicaraguan border village of La Penca, where a bomb exploded, killing three journalists and wounding Pastora. The source of the bomb attack has never been determined. In any case, the assassination attempt completed the split in ARDE and was followed by mutual denunciations from Pastora and Robelo, each claiming to represent the real ARDE. Robelo went on to sign a joint declaration with the FDN in January 1985 and to become a leader in the formation of the UNO in June 1985. Brooklyn Rivera split from ARDE in 1984 to enter into negotiations with the Sandinista government.

With Robelo and Rivera gone, and the remainder of the opposition group in the UNO, the Pastora forces were instrumental in forming the Southern Opposition Bloc (BOS) in July 1985. However, without significant U.S. government backing the BOS languished, unable to carry out military actions in the months following its formation. Its only visible actions in the period involved the capture of a boat from the U.S. peace organization, Witness for Peace, in August. With the Nicaraguan army in control of former ARDE camps on the Nicaraguan side of the San Juan River, the new formation was unable to maintain a presence within Nicaragua. On May 9, 1986, several discouraged Pastora commanders signed an agreement accepting Fernando Chamorro as chief military commander of the Costa Rican-based rebels. (Chamorro is the leader of a UNO-allied group of about 400 fighters known as the Nicaraguan Democratic Union.) One week later the deserted Pastora announced that he was quitting the military struggle and requesting political asylum in Costa Rica. The demise of Pastora has apparently been engineered by the U.S. government to get the leadership of all the Costa Rican rebels into the hands of people willing to cooperate fully with the agency and with FDN. Pastora was never fully willing to play that role.[19]

Whether the restructuring of the rebels under Fernando Chamorro

will change the military situation on the southern front significantly remains to be seen. Even if new money begins to flow from the U.S. treasury, it is not clear that an effective fighting force can be organized from Costa Rica. A key factor may well be the attitude of the current Costa Rican government. President Oscar Arias has publicly criticized the U.S. government funding of the "contra" and has stated on numerous occasions that he is not interested in seeing Costa Rica used as a base for attacks against Nicaragua. He has also expressed a willingness to cooperate with Nicaragua in policing their common border. However, the will of the U.S. government to re-establish a second front against Nicaragua should not be underestimated. It is probable that the FDN acting alone cannot be successful in achieving American goals. If renewed Congressional funding becomes available, it can be expected that the U.S. will place maximum pressure on Costa Rica to accept the rebel presence and terminate bilateral agreements with Nicaragua. Costa Rica's dependence on the United States for aid to its beleaguered economy will make it hard for President Arias to resist the demands of the Reagan administration.

COSTS OF THE WAR

How can one measure the costs of the war to Nicaragua? One important measure is casualties. the number of victims has been steadily increasing in the last four years. (See Table 1.) In 1981 and 1982 a combined total of 167 people were killed by contra attacks. In 1983 the number of deaths rose sharply to 1,030 and then rose again to 1339 in 1984 and 1463 in 1985.[20] It should be noted that the decline in contra activity in the second half of 1985 resulted in a slowing of the death rate. Approximately three-quarters of the deaths in 1985 occurred in the first six months of the year. As expected the rise in the number of casualties is directly parallel with the increasing number of clashes between Sandinista and counter-revolutionary forces. (See Table 2.) In 1981-82 there were a total of 93 encounters. In 1983 there was a sharp increase to 600 followed by 948 in 1984 and 1637 in 1985.[21] According to government statistics contra casualties have also risen sharply from 377 in 1981-82 to 5469 in 1985.[22] (See Table 3.) The impact of the casualties in Nicaragua, a country of 3.2 million people can be better understood if the numbers are extended to the United States. The equivalent number of dead in the United States would be approximately 1 million.

What has been the pattern of the civilian killings? The contra have targeted a number of specific groups. Government workers, particularly field workers of the Ministry of Agrarian Reform, have been attacked during their trips into the countryside in the northern provinces. Health care workers, Nicaraguan, Cuban and West German, have been another primary target of the contra forces. In 48 months, ending in December 1984, 21 health workers were killed (one in 1981, two in 1982, thirteen in 1983, and five in 1984). In addition 31 others were either wounded or kidnapped. The vast majority of the health care casualties have occurred in the Atlantic Coast region where contra activity has forced the closure or reduction of services in approximately forty clinics and hospitals. One particularly significant loss was the destruction in the summer of 1984 of the

the hospital/clinic at Tasba Pri, the Miskito resettlement village. Overall, it is estimated that up to December 1984 the health care sector had suffered approximately $1 million in direct damage. The greatest single blow to the medical sector from the war was the destruction of ninety tons of medical supplies in the bombing of the port of Corinto in October 1983.[23] By the end of 1985 health services to 250,000 people had been impaired due to damages incurred to 55 health units, including one hospital and four health centers.[24] The effect of the war most difficult to calculate is the amount of resources that has been diverted from the health sector to finance the costs of defense. It is, therefore, inevitable that the impressive gains of the revolution in health care will be slowed in the coming years if the war continues.

Another significant target of the "contra" war has been the area of education. Loss of life among educational personnel has been substantial. In 1984 alone, 98 teachers were killed and another 171 were kidnapped. Over the first three years of the war, 247 members of adult literacy groups have been assassinated and a total of 840 literacy groups have been forced to close. The primary and secondary school systems have also been directly affected by the war, particularly in the Atlantic Coast region where fourteen schools have been totally destroyed and 359 have been forced to close due to dangers to staff and students. The contra have also targeted Rural Infant Service Centers, eleven of which have been destroyed.[25]

Total economic damage to Nicaragua during the contra war is difficult to calculate accurately, but it can be said that the damage falls primarily into three categories:

(1) production losses, as a direct effect of combat or as a result of workers leaving their job sites because of dangers in areas where there has been fighting;
(2) drain of resources from development to defense; and
(3) damages to fixed assets and capital.

According to figures compiled by CEPAD (Evangelical Committee for Development Assistance) covering the period from 1981 through 1984, the total physical damage was $92.5 million, while the production loss total was $300.4 million. In addition, the losses in export and increases in imports needed to replace goods and equipment was $321 million.[26] The accompanying charts break down the physical damage and production losses by year and by sector. The most striking trend demonstrated in these figures is the steady increase in almost every aggregate category. Production losses have grown from $4.3 million in 1981 to $171.4 million in 1984. Physical damage grew from $2.7 million to $41.1 million in 1983 before dropping to $16.1 million in 1984 and $15.7 million in 1985.[27] One spectacular sabotage action at the Port of Corinto in October 1983 did more than $20 million damage alone and tended to skew the figures for 1983. Production losses have risen steadily in all five sectors: agriculture, timber and forestry, fishing, mining, and construction. (See Table 4.) To gain a better understanding of the nature of the economic losses, it is necessary to look more closely at each sector. The principal losses of fixed assets in agriculture occurred in coffee processing plants, basic grain warehouses,

workers' housing, livestock stables, and the loss of machinery in each of these areas. In 1984 $69 million was lost as the result of attacks on eighteen coffee processing plants and the abandonment of 12,000 hectares of coffee due to potential physical danger to coffee harvesters.[28] While exact figures are difficult to obtain, significant losses occurred in the 1984-85 coffee harvest season because the recruitment of needed seasonal workers fell behind due to fear for individual safety in the coffee growing areas, many of which are in northern Nicaragua near the Honduran border, the region of greatest contra activity.[29] The war has also affected the harvest season in other ways. In November 1984 20,000 military reservists who were preparing to harvest coffee had to be transferred to active military status when an American invasion seemed imminent to many Nicaraguans following accusations by the U.S. government that the Soviet Union was supplying the Sandinista government with MIG aircraft. On a year-by-year basis the number of people mobilized into the regular army and the reserves definitely cuts down on the number of volunteer workers available for the harvest. Volunteer labor has always been crucial to the success of the Nicaraguan harvest, and city people have been increasingly fearful of going to the countryside because of the war. President Daniel Ortega presented the Nicaraguan government assessment of the 1984-85 coffee harvest in a speech in March 1985. He reported that approximately 88% of the crop has been harvested in spite of numerous attacks on the harvest by the contra. He reported that 39 harvest workers were killed and that over $1.1 million of damage was done including the destruction of seventeen privately-owned coffee farms. Ortega also reported that more than 13,000 volunteers, 8,000 of them government workers, had participated in the harvest along with hundreds of international volunteers from more than twenty countries including the United States.[30] By mid-1985 a total of 142,980 people, mostly from the agricultural sector, had been displaced as a result of the fighting. In 1984 the Nicaraguan government spent $5.3 million on the displaced persons, but that figure grew to $20.4 in 1985.[31] The emphasis in relocating people has been on the provision of a livelihood not just a refugee camp. This policy has been relatively successful, but the sheer number of people involved, some of whom have been moved more than once, has escalated the costs to the government.

The contra attacks have often been concentrated on agricultural projects that have been initiated by the revolutionary government. The strategy of these attacks is clearly aimed at breaking the Nicaraguan peasantry away from the Sandinista government by sending out a message that participation in government-sponsored projects can be dangerous. Between 1982 and 1984 over seventy state farms were attacked or destroyed. Agricultural cooperatives were singled out for attack at a rate of 10 per month during 1984.[32] The losses in the cooperative and state sector have been considerable. In 1984 alone, 25,000 acres of corn and beans were abandoned in Jinotega and Nueva Segovia as the result of attacks, resulting in a loss of $11 million.[33] In many cases entire agricultural cooperatives have been relocated to safer areas away from the border regions. While such relocations are necessitated by the war, they only serve to add to the financial burden placed on the Nicaraguan government.

The timber and forestry industry has also been damaged by the war. Losses have mainly occurred in Neuva Segovia and Zelaya Norte. In the pine forests of Zelaya Norte alone, 44,000 hectares were burned in 1984, with major effects on reforestation projects in the north-eastern part of the country. The destruction of equipment and the sinking of a lumber boat set back a project to produce construction timber that had been scheduled to begin in 1983.[34]

The fishing industry has been adversely affected in several ways, but primarily through contra destruction of boats and the subsequent diversion of boats to use in coastal defense. Nineteen shrimping and lobstering boats were lost as a result of contra seizures, fires, and sinking by mines. The losses of fishing industry assets total $11 million through 1984 while the total worth of fish not caught is estimated at $34 million.[35]

What is the overall picture of the damage of the war in its first five years? Figures available to the author indicate that close to $525 million in physical damage and production losses occurred between 1981 and 1985. When the figures covering loans denied to Nicaragua in the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank and the effects of the U.S. economic embargo are included, the total comes to $862 million. (See Tables 4 and 5.) Figures are not available for 1986, but based on the level of the 1986 fighting, it is likely the damage has surpassed $1 billion. These figures are somewhat conservative and definitely lower than other estimates that have been offered.

What has been the cumulative effect of this damage in a country whose annual export earnings are now only $375 million? Nicaragua has been running in the red for each of the years of the revolution. In 1985 the gap between export earnings and the import bill was $530 million.[36] This annual gap has been filled by a combination of loans and grants, mostly loans. Nicaragua's indebtedness has gone from $1.6 billion in 1979 to $5.0 billion at the end of 1985. Up till now Nicaragua has been able to justify these debts by the productive use that has been made of the borrowed money (approximately $1 billion for social programs and $1 billion in new productive projects ranging from geothermal energy production to expansion of tobacco and sugar production). However, now it has become necessary to divert government expenditures in larger amounts to the war effort. In 1985 approximately 40% of the regular government budget was spent on defense.[37] Although the Nicaraguan government has not significantly cut back on social services because they represent the heart of the revolution, no new development projects were begun in 1985, a prospect that will clearly slow the long-term development of the country. Growth rates have already begun to slow down at least partially as the result of the war and it will probably be very difficult for Nicaragua to register significant economic growth if the war continues at its present level. In 1985 Nicaragua suffered a negative growth rate of 2.5% after six years of nearly uninterrupted growth.[38] At his inaugural in January 1985 President Ortega was sober about his country's future, promising "beans and dignity." For as long as the war continues against Nicaragua her primary task will be defense and the building of an economy geared to that goal. Only with an end to the war, by whatever

means, will Nicaragua be able to move ahead to attempt to fulfill all of the revolutionary goals set at the time of the triumph in 1979.

This analysis should not imply that Nicaragua's economic woes and particularly its export-import deficit are traceable exclusively or even primarily to the effects of the contra war. Nicaragua's economy suffers from long-term problems growing from lowered commodity prices in agriculture and generally higher prices for imported manufactured goods.[39] At this point it is difficult to judge the prospects for bringing the war to an end in the immediate future. On the one hand the Nicaraguan government has gained the military initiative over the contras in the last eighteen months. and the rebel forces are in some measure of disarray. It is not clear that the rebels can recover from their current state to once again constitute a major threat to the Nicaraguan government. On the other hand, the Reagan administration remains committed to the downfall of the Sandinista government and the maintenance of the contras as a viable force. While the U.S. Congress has been reluctant to grant the monies requested by the President for the contra they have increasingly moved toward the sanctioning of the war effort by restoring so-called humanitarian aid in June 1985 and then outright military assistance in 1986. It is not yet clear what the effect of the Iran-Contra scandal will be on future Congressional funding, but a cutoff is not necessarily imminent given the Reagan administration's undiminished commitment to the contras. While neither the contra leadership nor the U.S. government may have a clear strategy for attaining their mutual goal of removing the Sandinistas from power it is the author's judgment that they will continue to pursue their common goal for the foreseeable future. However, it is also the author's judgment that the Nicaraguan government and its basic revolutionary program will survive, unless the U.S. government chooses the route of an invasion. If it is also true that the contra can be maintained as a viable military threat then the Nicaraguan people are in for a prolonged economic crisis with few new achievements possible.

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF VICTIMS OF THE ATTACKS AGAINST NICARAGUA SINCE 1981, BY YEAR

	Deaths	Wounded	Missing and Kidnapped	Total
1981	53	13	7	73
1982	114	52	91	257
1983	1,030	1,323	1,153	3,506
1984	1,339	1,302	1,085	3,726
1985	1,463	1,852	1,455	4,770
Total	3,999	4,542	3,791	12,332

Sources: Foreign Ministry, 1980-84, *Barricada International,* February 27, 1985, 1986

TABLE 2
THE NUMBER OF CLASHES BETWEEN SANDINISTA AND COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY FORCES

Year	Number of Clashes
1981	15
1982	78
1983	600
1984	948
1985	1637
Total	3278

Sources: *Nicaragua: The Counter-revolution — Development and Consequences* (Managua: Center for International Communication, 1985) and "June-December 1985: The Strategic Defeat of the Counter-revolution (Managua: Center for International Communication, February 1986).

TABLE 3
APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF CONTRA CASUALTIES 1981-1985

Year	Dead	Wounded	Arrested	Total
1981	40	—	—	40
1982	337	—	—	337
1983	1853	372	270	2495
1984	3017	596	197	3810
1985, first half	2006	306	128	2440
Total	7253	1275	595	9122

Source: *Nicaragua: The Counter-revolution — Development and Consequences* (Managua: Center for International Communication, 1985).

TABLE 4
PHYSICAL DAMAGE AND PRODUCTION LOSSES (IN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS)

	Total	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
Total	513.9	7.0	31.3	143.5	187.5	121.0
Physical Damage	108.2	2.7	9.0	41.1	16.1	15.7
Agriculture	10.1	—	—	5.0	5.1	n/a
Lumber and Forestry	29.2	—	—	24.1	5.1	n/a
Fishing	11.0	2.2	1.7	5.4	1.7	n/a
Mining	4.3	0.5	1.7	1.5	0.6	n/a
Construction	14.3	—	5.6	5.1	3.6	n/a
Services	23.6	—	—	—	—	n/a
Production Losses	405.7	4.3	22.3	102.4	171.4	105.3

TABLE 5

FINANCIAL COSTS OF THE WAR

(In Millions of Dollars)

	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	Total
Credit Denial (a)	8.2	38.3	61.3	92.1	73.0	272.9
Commercial Embargo (b)	—	—	11.7	15.0	50.0	76.7

(a) Credit denials by the Interamerican Development Bank and the Third World.
(b) Embargo activities of the U.S. government.

Sources: CRIES, Managua, 1986.

Endnotes

1. For a detailed discussion of U.S. foreign policy during the insurrection and in the first term of the Reagan administration, see William Leogrande, "The United States and the Nicaraguan Revolution," in *Nicaragua in Revolution*, edited by Thomas W. Walker (New York: Praeger, 1982), pp. 63-77 and Leogrande, "The United States and Nicaragua," in *Nicaragua - The First Five Years* edited by Thomas W. Walker (New York: Praeger, 1985), pp. 425-46.
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3. Alexander Haig, quoted in Eldon Kenworthy, "Why the U.S. is in Central America," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists,* October 1983.
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7. *Affidavit of Edgar Chamarro*, International Court of Justice, September 5, 1985.
8. For background on the conflict between the Nicaraguan government and indigenous people of the Atlantic Coast see Phillippe Bourgois, "Ethnic Minorities," in *Nicaragua: The First Five Years*, pp. 201-16.
9. "Who's Who in Nicaragua's Military Opposition," *Nicaraguan Update*, Central American Historical Institute, January 31, 1986.
10. For a detailed description of contra atacks within Nicaragua from February 1982 to June 1985 see *Nicaragua: The Counter-revolution - Development and Consequences* (Managua: Center for International Communication, 1985).
11. James LeMoyne, "Most Contras Reported to Pull Out of Nicaragua, "*New York Times*, January 28, 1986.
12. Stephen Kinzer, "Nicaragua Holds the Upper Hand in Guerrilla War," *New York Times*, September 9, 1985.
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15. For an analysis of these events and this quote see James LeMoyne, "The Contra Shake-up," *New York Times*, February 17, 1987.

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17. "Who's Who in Nicaragua's Military Opposition," p. 10.
18. Associated Press, "CIA Role Reported in Contra's Fall," *New York Times*, May 30, 1986.
19. Figures for 1981-84 are provided by the Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry and appeared in *48 Months of Foreign Aggression—1982-84*, (Managua: Ministry of Social Welfare). 1985 figures appeared in *Barricada International*, February 27, 1986 from a speech by President Daniel Ortega to the Nicaraguan National Assembly on February 21, 1986.
20. Figures for 1981-84 are from Nicaragua: *Nicaragua: The Counter-revolution—Development and Consequences* (Managua: Center for International Communication, 1985). 1985 figures are from "June-December 1985: The Strategic Defeat of the Counter-revolution," (Managua: Center for International Communication, February 1986.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *48 Months of Foreign Aggression—1982-84* (Managua: Ministry of Social Welfare, 1985).
23. *Barricada International*, February 27, 1986, p. 2.
24. *48 Months of Foreign Aggression—1982-84.*
25. Figures from CEPAD quoted in *Nicaragua: The Counter-revolution—Development and Consequences* (Managua: Center for International Communication), p. 21.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
28. Interview with FSLN Regional Director, Ocotal, January 19, 1985.
29. Speech by Daniel Ortega, "We've Won the Battle for Coffee," *Barricada International*, March 21, 1985.
30. *Nicaragua: The Counter-revolution—Development and Consequences*, p. 23.
31. *48 Months of Foreign Aggression—1982-84.*
32. *Nicaragua: The Counter-revolution—Development and Consequences*, p. 22.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
35. *Barricada International*, February 13, 1986.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Barricada International*, March 27, 1986.
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