

REVIEW ESSAY

“Gringo’s” Central American Revolutions

LaFeber, Walter. *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*. 2nd ed., New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1993.

Walker, Thomas W. ed. *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991.

Reyes, Reynaldo and J.K. Wilson. *Ráfaga: The Life Story of a Nicaraguan Miskito Comandante*. Edited by Tod Sloan. Norman, OK and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.

Central America is no longer the contentious issue that it was during the Reagan/Sandinista era. The Cold War is over. Without the key geo-strategic dimension ensuing from the superpowers’ confrontation, Central America took a dive in the chancelleries of the North’s list of priorities. This shift has had mixed consequences for the region. Among the most beneficial has been the de-escalation of internal conflict and foreign intervention in El Salvador and Nicaragua, particularly its military variant. Thus the central requirement of the 1987 Arias plan has been fully implemented. Conversely, this de-escalation also means that after an extraordinary fifteen year break, the region will sink again into international oblivion, at the very moment when financial support and political pressures from the world community are as badly needed as ever.

Academia is also affected by the fading manichean prism of the 1980s. The political pilgrims crowd is wearing thin in local hotels and *pensioners*, while NGO staffs – most being committed to bettering the people’s lot, not, like the former, to worshiping *comandantes* – are kept afloat by the declining but still sizeable inflow of reconstruction money. Scholars are quietly sneaking into other field/research areas, where fresh money could be found – for lack of other non-material incentives.

And yet, the actual process of democratization in the region is in many ways more intellectually-challenging than the Cold War past. El Salvador now provides a unique example of successful overall transition, from a war-torn and largely undemocratic country to a land of relatively peaceful political competition and democratization. To uproot a long legacy of authoritarianism, sectarianism and violence, epitomized during the 1980-92 internal war, El Salvador has been banking, in the past three years, on extraordinary bilateral, multilateral and international support from North American and European countries, the UN and interamerican organizations, and countless NGOs. Both the UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and the Bush administration brought the belligerents to the negotiating table in 1990, the former eventually becoming, at the belligerents’ request, increasingly involved in the negotiation. Then, the Secretary General and

the El Salvador-based UN Commission for El Salvador (ONUSAL) contributed decisively to drafting, financing (or raising funds), even prescribing plans for demilitarization, land transfer and democratization of political institutions. Though the process could still be derailed by continuing death-squad activities, the prospects remain rather encouraging. In Guatemala, talks between the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity and the new government of President Ramiro de Leon Carpio have yet to gain momentum, but the probability of a major breakthrough is higher than ever. Previously, an elected president (Jorge Serrano) attempted to wage an auto-coup (following President Fujimori in Peru), but his venture was unanimously rejected by both the civil society, which came out strongly and united against the would-be dictator, and the US government. Nicaragua, on the other hand, is engulfing itself in an unprecedented vortex of chaos, suffering and violence. We are witnessing the implosion of virtually all institutions in the country. The Sandinistas, for all their internal bickering, remain the strongest single political organization in the country. However, by constantly straddling the line between legality and illegality, respecting the constitution one day and threatening to rule from below the next (very much like the pre-Menem Peronists in Argentina), the Sandinistas are contributing to the lingering instability that prevents a real reconstruction from taking place. The other parties are little more than fig leaves for cabals of intriguers and would-be *caudillos*, whose very existence seems to prevent the emergence of a strong and unified alternative to the Sandinistas. Finally, though enjoying some level of credibility and legitimacy, domestically and abroad, the Chamorro-Lacayo team is pushing a drastic reconstruction plan which, in the absence of a meaningful political pact truly respected by the main actors, brings little more than misery to the masses. In Nicaragua, land of excommunication and pilgrimages for a decade, ideology is no longer the main underpinning factor of instability and polarization: former *contras* (*re-contras*) and ex-Sandinistas (*re-compas*) have at times united for armed operations (the *revueltos*) against the government of both Violeta Chamorro and Humberto Ortega! Finally, Costa Rica, for all its economic difficulties, has continued on its extraordinary democratic path, while Honduras is managing to survive in a mix of post-oligarchic, highly dependent, and quasi-civilian rule.

Needless to say, problems of poverty, corruption, social injustice and underdevelopment still plague the region. Internal wars have wrought even more poverty and suffering to both the Nicaraguan and the Salvadoran poor. Military officers, except in Costa Rica, still exert a veto power on policies and remain largely beyond the law. Nevertheless, civilian leaders have been brought to power, either through relatively honest electoral contests, or, in the special case of Guatemala, through a popularly acclaimed parliamentary nomination. Violeta Chamorro is no Somoza, Carpio Leon is no Rios Montt, Cristiani is no D'Aubuisson, and Bill Clinton is no Ronald Reagan.

For an understanding of the current transition in Central America, scholars now have access to a growing body of literature. Most of them having been written in the 1980s, are mostly *engagé*, sympathetic to the Central American revolution,

and hostile to US policy in the region. In the US, Central America rapidly became an obvious case study where Yankee imperialism could be unveiled and denounced. One finds no shortage of indicators of Uncle Sam's arrogance, brutality, unlawful interference, bribery, violation of international law; and this, since long before the 1980s. But in the last decade, the "Great Satan" was matched by true revolutionaries, fighting to establish a "New Society," so the stage was set for an historical confrontation between "Right and Wrong." A striking example of this type of work is to be found in Thomas Walker's edited volume *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua*. Walker has a tremendous advantage over most other specialists of this country: his scholarly interest in Nicaragua started years before the Sandinistas seized power in 1979. So his early work, as he recalls, made him "by default, one of only a handful of U.S. specialists on Nicaragua at the time." (p. ix) During the 1980s, he was virtually the owner of Nicaragua in the Latin American Studies Association (US), presiding over the Task Force on Nicaragua and organizing political pilgrims in the land of Sandino. It is fair to say that Walker is passionately pro-Sandinista, and no less passionately anti-US policy in the region and beyond. If the essays edited in Walker's book are generally well-documented, informative and easily accessible, most are inordinately uncritical of the Sandinista record. The Sandinistas are apparently more eager to admit mistakes. Last summer, this reviewer saw Tomas Borge, former minister of Interior and founding father of the FSLN, explaining quietly on TV that the dynamic of mass participation under the Sandinistas was too "vertical" (meaning the orders were coming from above), that errors were committed against the Miskitos, and that the economy was poorly managed. The Sandinistas have to be commended for their willingness to admit mistakes, and adapt to new realities. But their "gringo" admirers, (who comprise the majority in this volume), most of whom would have preferred a much more radical regime in Nicaragua, just don't want anybody breaking their toy, not even the Sandinistas, who from 1988 to their electoral defeat in 1990, proved to be not sufficiently Sandinista.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the only two chapters in Walker's *Revolution and Counterrevolution* that are not frantically apologetical are written by non-gringos! They stand out for their sympathetic but honestly critical and calm assessment of the Sandinista record. The "Agrarian Reform" is analyzed by Eduardo Baumeister (an Argentine sociologist), starting with a balanced and original description of the "inherited structure" of production and social relations in the countryside during the 1970s. Then, he highlights the reform's achievements in the early 1980s (43% of all peasant families receiving lands), but also its shortcomings: essentially, "agrarian policy that was excessively centered on state farms, state control of commerce, and the authoritarian methods of government technocrats had embittered relations between a segment of the peasantry and the revolution." (p. 243) This chapter has to be read not only by students of Nicaraguan politics, but also by whomever is looking for an efficient, fair, and progressive way of reforming the unjust and largely inoperative pattern of land-tenure in too many Latin American countries. Equally interesting is Luis Hector Serra's piece on

“Grass-Roots Organizations.” Serra shows the low priority placed on these organizations by a highly centralized and omnipotent state, and unveils the “centralism and vertical structure of the FSLN.” Again, in spite of the overall favorable assessment of the Sandinista experience, Serra does mention some “political errors of the government” (p. 64), thus enhancing his credibility in a book conceived as an act of war rather than as a truly academic instrument.

The remaining chapters comprise a stunning apologia for the Sandinista government. One finds the occasional ideological twist, cover-up, or outright distortion committed by the authors to paint their heroes in the best possible light. In “The Evolution of Government Institutions,” Andrew A. Reding maintains that non-Sandinista elements during the war against the Somoza dictatorship, and in the first Revolutionary Junta, were “nonrevolutionary forces.” (p. 16) When after the triumph, the Sandinistas arbitrarily increased the number of seats anticipated for the new Council of State, so they could enjoy an automatic majority in this new body of “broad participation,” they were merely “insist[ing] on a council that would more accurately reflect their popular support.” (p. 17) Summary trials and execution of Somozistas, or presumed Somozistas, seem to have never occurred: “For the first time in the history of major social revolutions, the ancien régime was spared violent retribution.” (p. 18) Reding’s ebullience sometimes reaches Swiftian proportion: “[...] Sandinista marxists tended to set aside ideological orthodoxies in favor of a return to the empirical, more genuinely ‘scientific,’ method of Marx, deriving working hypotheses from the experience of efforts at revolutionary transformation.” (p. 20) Likewise, though Sandinista leaders were probably not as greedy as their Central American or Mexican counterparts, one cannot understand why Michael Dodson (in “Religion and Revolution”) has to proclaim that Sandinistas leaders espoused “ascetic, responsible lives and work hard” (p. 181) – especially after the infamous Piñata.¹ In keeping with this apologetic tone, Dodson’s presentation of the conflict between the Miskito people and the Sandinista government (1981-82) is a truly fantastic (in the sense used by Jorge L. Borges) exercise in absolving the revolutionary regime, to a point that Sandinistas themselves, now openly apologetic on this issue, would certainly find embarrassing. (pp. 174-75) In a chapter on “Human rights,” Michael Linfield warns us in his introduction that

from the standpoint of a country at war, Nicaragua’s human rights recorded under the Sandinistas was in full compliance with the standards imposed by international human rights treaties. Its record on civil rights and civil liberties compared favorably with that of many Western European nations and even that of the United States in time of war. (p. 275)

The purpose of this chapter is thereby to inform “gringo” readers that the violation of human rights was a non-issue in Sandinista Nicaragua. To make this case, the author formulates the distinction between “fundamental” and “secondary human rights.” That proves salutary: what could appear as violations of the freedom of speech and association (censorship, persecution of non-violent opposition), or the

absence of due process of law (People's Anti-Somocista Tribunals) becomes "secondary" peccadillos, keeping untarnished the "fundamental" record "in time of war." (Of course, the idea that the war was in part a product of the early limitation of civil and political liberties is not explored here.) In international relations, some have been led to believe that Sandinistas and Soviet officials had a close relationship, based on mutual interests and ideological affinities. Careful, warns Harry E. Vanden in a chapter discussing the Sandinistas' "Foreign policy": "Indeed, Soviet government officials were highly critical of the Nicaraguan economy (sic). Likewise, in *private conversation*, Sandinista leaders frequently criticized the Soviets for being unresponsive to popular needs and shackled by dogma." (p. 312 - emphasis added) The author recognizes that moderate Latin American countries who first supported Nicaragua grew disenchanted with the *comandantes*. The early Leninist orientation of the regime had little to do with this policy shift, needless to say. Instead, this was caused by the US, who launched "a cleverly orchestrated press campaign to discredit the Sandinistas." (p. 315) All in all, Nicaragua's foreign policy was nothing less than "fresh, unique, and independent." (p. 316) In a Chomskian essay on "The U.S. Intervention in Nicaragua and Other Latin American Media," Angharad N. Valdivia offers interesting insight on CIA involvement in the media. Unfortunately, the case appears to be blown out of proportion, for the author's implicit assumption is that no genuine, autonomous and legitimate criticism of the Sandinistas was possible. True, "many Nicaraguans expressed their wishes that they could have a 'real' opposition newspaper, as it was obvious that *La Prensa* was extremely manipulated and full of half-truths." (p. 363) This chapter is pivotal to understanding a common mind-set in this book: for most of its contributors, criticism/opposition to Sandinistas from outside the Washington establishment or Wall Street – that is, not based on material interest – had to be caused by disinformation. The author of the chapter seems to regret that the Sandinista police could not control all the press agencies: "Although leading Sandinistas such as Tomás Borge and Ernesto Cardenal were acutely aware of the importance of the mass media system in a changing society, they were largely unable to control activities outside Nicaragua's borders. It was precisely from this arena that the counterrevolution operated." (p. 352) He then laments that "domestically the Sandinistas exercised a bit more influence, but their control was by no means total." (p. 363) The Sandinista regime was neither hell nor heaven: hopefully, the 1990s will provide the kind of intellectual climate amenable to more balanced appraisals of its achievements and failures.

Walter LaFeber's *Inevitable Revolutions* proposes a thorough investigation of United States policy in Central America. For all its qualities (well-researched, highly readable), the effort is based on simplistic assumptions and is constantly biased by the Cold War syndrome. The book reads like a chronological, journalistic critique of US foreign policy in Central America, from the nineteenth-century idea of "manifest destiny" to (in this new revised and expanded edition) the Iran-Contra scandal. In episode after episode, LaFeber adopts a common, rather basic assump-

tion (for an historian): “Revolutions in such areas as Central America were inevitable.” He continues: “The only choice was whether North Americans would work with those revolutionaries to achieve a more orderly and equitable society, or whether – as occurred in Guatemala and Nicaragua – Washington officials would try to cap the upheavals until the pressure built again to blow the societies apart with even greater force.” (p. 16)

In this book you get two LaFebers in one. First, there is LaFeber the conscientious historian who claims, for example, that “the motive for Washington’s policy in Central America was not to stop upheavals, but to promote U.S. interests. [...] Interests and imperial rivalry, not morality and consistency, drove U.S. policies.” (p. 39) This LaFeber is careful to highlight geo-strategic concerns as well as the relative autonomy of domestic actors in Central America. This allows him not to yield completely to deterministic explanations on the inevitability of Central American revolutions. Nevertheless, the story of US domination in Latin America is played *forte*. The pages on Honduras strike me as the most impressive, perhaps because little has been published on this country. For example, he explains that in the 1920s, “North American power had become so encompassing that U.S. military forces and United Fruit could struggle against each other to see who was to control the Honduran government, then have the argument settled by the U.S. Department of State.” (p. 64)

Then there is the other LaFeber, more opinionated, who too often sounds like he is preparing himself to rebuke Alexander Haig in some public debate. Proving that the most absurd and simplistic right wing assumptions (ie. the whole thing was cooked up by Moscow and La Havana) are bogus, LaFeber stretches on the other side and becomes the victim of his own parody. Hence, the Sandinista “economic team” is praised, through skillful use of quotations, for its “high quality.” (p. 328) Yet, as noted earlier, if there is one thing the Sandinistas would readily admit, it is that they hardly knew how to manage a real economy after taking power.² Violeta Chamorro and Alfonso Robelo resigned not because they had no power in a powerless Junta: instead, it was because the Sandinistas “had moved too far to the left.” (p. 240) The Sandinistas had no choice but to entertain close relations with Moscow (p. 241), and did support self-determination in Afghanistan, though they were obviously right in “refusing to vote for a U.S.-sponsored U.N. resolution that condemned the Soviet invasion.” (p. 237) An FMLN terrorist action – named “Yankee Aggressor, Another Vietnam Awaits you in El Salvador” (19 June 1985) – during which four US Marines, and eight innocent civilians were machine-gunned at a San Salvador café (an action condemned by human rights organizations and recently by the UN Commission of Truth) is referred to succinctly as a commendable military feat: “[...] the FMLN had extended its operations throughout the country and had even carried out raids in the capital of San Salvador that took the lives of U.S. military personnel.” (p. 313) Setting aside the question of ideological bias, one also finds an astonishing hypothesis about the emergence of guerrilla groups in El Salvador, involving the oil embargo: “The repercussions of the 1973

oil embargo added to the crisis. An inflation rate of 60 percent in 1973 and 1974 led desperate Salvadorans to join guerrilla groups that robbed banks and carried out bombings.” (p. 244)

In *Inevitable Revolutions*, the author’s game-plan too often is to reproduce “sound bites” from his ideological enemy to build up his prosecution, and to nuance his heroes’ shortcomings, while not moderating any of his critiques against his enemy. LaFeber is an accomplished historian, but too many of his assertions are hidden behind anonymous paraphrases, with no reference attached, from “an officer,” a “key U.S. official,” a “top army officer,” “one participant” who “later recalled”, etc. Sometimes one wonders if the author is actually quoting or interpreting (e.g. “William Bowdler and Assistant Secretary of State Vaky flew to San Salvador and asked Romero for *at least cosmetic* human rights reforms so Carter could resume sending assistance.” [p. 247 - emphasis added]).

In summary, though this book provides much information about US foreign policy in Central America, including some sound and welcomed critiques of American misdemeanours, his scholarly demonstration is plagued by a constant desire to win a political battle. Why does he have to be so partisan? Is it so difficult to write about revolutions without becoming a propagandist for one side or the other?

Ráfaga, the life Story of a Nicaraguan Miskito Comandante is the reconstruction of Reynaldo Reyes Davis’ life story (Ráfaga is a nom de guerre), based on two years of face-to-face interviews, with the collaborative effort of J.K. Wilson and Tod Sloan and the approval of the council of Miskito elders. In contrast with the previously mentioned true believers, Ráfaga hardly comes across as a model of political consistency. First he fought against Somoza in the Eastern front, along with “university kids who had gone from the classroom, the cinema, and the stadium to the jungle” and who “tired easily.” He was sent to Cuba for three months in March 1978, and his “good relations” with the Sandinistas lasted until 1980. (p. 35) Then he became a Contra, because the new revolutionary government was treating his people “like lower animals.” In 1981-82, displacement of the East-coast Indian population occurred, officially to protect the Indians from the fighting between the Sandinista and Contra forces along the Honduran border. According to his estimates (much higher than those usually cited), “probably between one thousand and fifteen hundred Miskito were killed [...] simply because they believed each one of us to be their enemy. But that was not true.” (p. 58) Subsequently, he “gradually became disillusioned by the corruption of the leaders of the ‘Contra’ counterrevolution; and began to work for peace and autonomy through dialogue with the Nicaraguan government” (quoted from Tod Sloan’s preface). He misses no occasion to slam the US, the Contra leadership in Miami, as well as Indian leaders such as Brooklyn Rivera, Steadman Fagoth, and Wycliffe Diego, who “have all been under the direction of outsiders.” (p. 174) However, he does so for specific reasons (which may or may not be valid), not because he adheres to a rigid ideological game-plan. Finally, around the mid-1980s, he reconciled himself with

the Sandinistas, helping to create an organization amenable to dialogue with the government: KISAN (*Kosta Atlantica Indians ka nani Sut Aslatakan Nicaragauza* – Atlantic coast Indians united in Nicaragua). He accepted a “handsome gold and silver pistol” from Tomas Borge, then minister of Interior, and travelled anew to Cuba, along with some Miskito elders (who, unlike Ráfaga, were totally misled by Castro’s technique of hospitality).

Ideological depth and coherence is replaced in his testimony by a sense of identity as a Miskito, coupled with the usual *caudillo*’s attributes: courage, loyalty to the men under his command and pragmatism. True, he sometimes indulges in self-laudatory recollections: about soldiers singing his praise and writing poems glorifying his courage (p. 63); nurses falling in love with him (p. 105); and some comparison between himself and Moses (p. 129); not to mention his wrestling exploits with alligators! (p. 179) His recollection might be a useful, though not an essential, addition to the meager material available on the Miskito Coast and, more generally, the Contras. Incidentally, a top Sandinista official (Alejandro Bendaña) recently published a book called *Una tragedia campesina, testimonios de la resistencia* (Managua, Editora de Arte, 1991), in which the former ambassador to Cuba explains that, though manipulated by the Yankees and deceived by former Somozistas, the Contra War was also a real peasant mobilization, revealing real peasant grievances. Does this mean that the US-sponsored Contra War was not solely an American creation? If this is true, then it is possible to appreciate in light of its intended objectives, how disastrous the American management of this popular discontent had been. Since the crusades seem to be over, this is one among many questions that could now be explored and debated in a scholarly way. Let us hope that the next decade will be one of peace, democracy and development for Central America, and also one of probably fewer but better publications on the complex problems that assail the region.

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Endnotes

1. Refers to the transition period from February to April 1990, when before leaving office, Sandinista leaders “treated” themselves with legal title to posh homes, luxury cars and ranches.
2. See for example Alejandro Martínez Cuenca, *Sandinista Economics in Practice, an Insider’s Critical Reflections* (Boston: South End Press, 1993).