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6 September 1985

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

VIA: Deputy Director for Intelligence

FROM: John L. Helgerson  
Director of African and Latin American Analysis

SUBJECT: Nicaragua Insurgency Conference Summary

1. Attached is a summary of the principal presentations made at the July 1985 Agency-sponsored conference on the insurgency in Nicaragua. Although there were few issues on which there was a consensus, several conclusions did receive strong support from a majority of those present.

- The anti-Sandinista insurgents have demonstrated an encouraging capacity to overcome many of their organizational and logistical difficulties.
- The rebels' greatest need now is to develop a political program that provides the people of Nicaragua with a viable alternative.
- The insurgents have made the war costly for the Sandinistas and their continued growth over time will pose an increasingly serious threat to the regime.
- There is a limit to Soviet and Cuban willingness to provide military and economic support to the Sandinistas. Neither will send combat troops to intervene militarily.

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2. Again, thanks for your opening remarks. The participants were obviously pleased that you would join them, and at the signal that their work is important and appreciated.

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John L. Helgerson /

Attachment:  
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23 August 1985

## MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Nicaraguan Insurgency Conference: A Summary of the Proceedings,  
2 July 1985: Headquarters Building, Central Intelligence Agency

Opening Remarks (Mr. William Casey, Director of Central Intelligence)

Mr. John Helgerson, Director of the Office of Africa and Latin American Analysis, introduced Mr. Casey. The Director underscored the importance of the meeting and hoped that the discussions would generate new approaches to the Central American problem. He emphasized the importance of the region to the administration and suggested a number of issues he believed needed to be addressed, including: the viability of the insurgency in the face of the Sandinistas military buildup; popular support for the resistance; how long it might take to win; Soviet and Cuban strategy; and what lessons could be learned about insurgencies in general and what ideas about other insurgencies might be applied to Nicaragua. [REDACTED]

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The Historic and Comparative PerspectiveThe Geographical Context of the Insurgency ([REDACTED] CIA)

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Media coverage notwithstanding, Nicaragua is not all jungle, and significant portions of it, including the core area in the western part of the country, are not conducive to guerrilla warfare. That is, they lack sufficient cover and food

sources to support the insurgents. The most suitable--albeit less populated--area is in the east and the insurgency has gradually moved in that direction. The far south, where Eden Pastora's forces operate, is also well suited for guerrilla warfare and helps explain the longtime survival of his forces. The Indian guerrilla operating areas in the marshlands along the east coast also afford good protection because the terrain hinders counterinsurgency efforts. Indeed, the east would always be a problem for the Sandinistas. The only anomaly in Nicaragua is in the region around Boaco, which geographically is not especially suited for guerrilla warfare but yet is an area of intense insurgent activity. [REDACTED]

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The Evolution of the Insurgency ( [redacted] , CIA)

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The insurgents have evolved into a force that can challenge and perhaps eventually defeat the government. The resistance, however, suffers from: a lack of self-sufficiency; an image problem in that it is widely viewed outside of Nicaragua as a creation of the US, dominated by former members of the National Guard; and the absence of long range strategic and political plans. [redacted]

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The evolution of the insurgency can be divided into three periods:

--The Formative Years (1979 to late 1981): The insurgency was launched by scattered groups composed mostly of former guardsmen. [redacted], who advised the rebels, forced the disparate bands to form the FDN in 1981. The Miskitos under Steadman Fagoth also began anti-government operations as the regime began resettlement programs along the northern border. [redacted]

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--The Insurgency Ascendant (Early 1982 to mid-1984): By the end of 1982 [redacted] the insurgency was still operating largely along the northern border. By 1983, penetration into Nicaragua had increased and Pastora began operating in the far south. By yearend FDN forces stood at about 8,000. The FDN undertook some internal reforms to enhance the image of the resistance, including the formation of a civilian leadership and the reorganization of the general staff. Ties with the internal political opposition increased, and the Catholic Church became increasingly vocal in its criticism of the regime and in its calls for a national dialogue. In September 1984, the Nicaraguan Unity for Reconciliation (UNIR) was formed. It was composed of the FDN and two other rebel groups, but Pastora refused to join. Regime leaders saw the creation of UNIR and the Church's activism as a direct challenge to their rule and these events encouraged them to intensify repression of internal political opponents, to increase forced conscription to bolster counterinsurgency efforts, and to undertake resettlement of Indians and pro-FDN peasants away from border areas to create free-fire zones. Managua also became more aggressive in pressing its case internationally. [redacted]

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--Prolonged Popular War (mid-1984 to present): The FDN has expanded--to at least 15,000--and has not yet suffered a military defeat. Insurgent unity has also grown, but the resistance has not been able to translate its gains and declining internal support for the regime into increases in its own popularity in urban areas. For its part, the regime has decided to slow consolidation because of the insurgent threat. [redacted]

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A Generic Approach to the Insurgency ( [redacted] , CIA)

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On one hand, the Nicaraguan armed opposition shares characteristics with other insurgencies. It is a rural-based movement that stresses military over political action and hopes to translate popular unrest into broader support for the resistance. Further, the FDN suffers from the same weaknesses as other insurgencies that lack a well-developed political organization, including: decentralization, unreliable logistical support, and the lack of an economic and political program. Moreover, the Sandinistas are playing the traditional role of the repressor state. [REDACTED]

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On the other hand, the Nicaraguan insurgency is unique because it represents a reversal of the traditional relationship between regime and resistance. In Nicaragua, a leftist government faces a rightwing insurgency; that is, leftists, who historically have led revolutions, now must fight a counterinsurgency campaign, including a political program to win the hearts and minds of the populace. The regime has adopted no new counterinsurgency strategies but rather is following the US pattern as established in Vietnam. For their part, the insurgents are operating without the benefit of the well-established support network that has aided leftist insurgents and, therefore, they have had to create their own. [REDACTED]

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Indicators of how the war is progressing include:

--International support.

--Domestic support: control of population and territory; willingness of the people to take risks to oppose the government; perception by the population that they feel secure in the areas controlled by either side; and the ability of either side to deliver services in the areas it controls militarily. [REDACTED]

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### Discussion

Two points were made in subsequent discussions:

--We have a tendency, according to one member of the audience, to look at this insurgency in terms of its weaknesses and at the regime in terms of its strengths. This is because we have inherently more confidence in leftwing insurgencies to achieve their goals. We should be mindful of such biases in presenting our analysis. Moreover, the commitment of the West to provide long term support for an insurgency is untested.

--Most insurgencies fail, and this fact also shaped our thinking about the FDN. [REDACTED]

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### Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Objectives

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The Insurgents ( [ ] CIA)

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Understanding insurgent objectives is complicated [ ] that is, making distinctions between the rebels' objectives [ ] is difficult. The FDN is very conventional in its political program and is hardpressed to generate enthusiasm. Based on a survey of the backgrounds of rebel leaders, the FDN chiefs are in the center of the political spectrum, with the southern rebels more to the left and those in the north more to the right. The rank and file is almost exclusively drawn from the peasantry--only a total of 30 former National Guardsmen are in the FDN. [ ]

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[ ] The peasants joined because the Sandinistas somehow hurt them or their families or because of the regime's anti-Church positions. Most recently, they have joined because they see the regime as a threat to the peasant economy; that is, forced collectivization and cooperatives undercut traditional landholding and social patterns. Some urban residents are now protesting the draft; these recruits could become pivotal in taking the insurgency into more highly populated areas. [ ]

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The Insurgency ( [ ] DIA)

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The resistance is more appropriately viewed as a civil war rather than a traditional insurgency. By definition, an insurgency comes from within, whereas in this case it is externally based and has no political or military space inside Nicaragua. The opposition is active only outside the country. The rebels still occupy the same ground they did in 1982, and there is no activity in populated areas. The war does not touch the majority of the population. [ ]

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Internally, the population must be willing to defy the regime, and coordinate its actions with the insurgents. [ ]

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The Sandinistas ( [ ] CIA)

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While assuming the role of a member of the Sandinista directorate, Mr. [ ] reiterated the regime's basic strategy.

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--Accept no compromises that would betray revolutionary objectives as outlined in the "72-hour document" of September 1979.

--The US and the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie are the regime's most important enemies.

--By proclaiming a moderate political program, holding elections, and participating in Contadora, the regime has retained Western support and bought time for the consolidation of power. The West has helped to build Sandinismo.

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--Export of revolution to neighboring countries is essential to protect the Nicaraguan Revolution.

--Cuban and Soviet support is crucial.



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Counterinsurgency Strategy (  DIA )

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The Sandinistas, as well as the insurgents, continue to view overcoming the resistance in military terms. This could be fatal to the regime, if it forgets the socio-economic aspects of fighting the war. Regime goals and progress thus far include:

- Neutralizing forces in the south and east to avoid a multi-front war. The Sandinistas have weakened Pastora in the south, but efforts to placate east coast Indians are as yet unsuccessful.
- Reduce external support for insurgents, especially by eliminating sanctuaries in Costa Rica and Honduras. The regime has had some success here but could opt for a Contadora agreement to seal the borders.
- Concentration of forces against the FDN in northwest. More Sandinista troops have moved into the area, but they have not yet decisively defeated the rebels in combat.

As a result, the conflict has become a stalemate.



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#### External Support

The Cuban Role (  CIA )

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Under current conditions--US troops in Honduras, US ships in the Caribbean Sea, and the lesson of Grenada still fresh--Castro remains concerned about the willingness of Washington to use force. Castro sees the Sandinista revolution as a repetition of his own, and he wants Managua to avoid his mistakes. After Grenada he warned the Nicaraguan leadership to stay united because the US would be looking for internal divisions. Castro also told them that he would not be able to assist them in the event of a US invasion. Further, if the Contras began to win he would not send combat troops. He does not want to be in a position where he is seen to be helping Nicaraguans to kill other Nicaraguans, and he does not want to trigger US intervention. Nevertheless, the Cubans will continue to provide technical support, radar operators, special training contingents, and military hardware to the extent they calculate tolerable to Washington; that is, no MIGS will be supplied during the next 12 months. Further, the Cubans are well aware of the political dimension of the

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counterinsurgency effort and will help build international leftist solidarity for the regime. Castro also sees Latin American unity as important and will use other issues, such as the debt owed to Western banks, to strengthen regional ties that the Cubans calculate can then be redirected toward opposing US policy in Central America. [redacted]

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The Soviet Role ([redacted] CIA)

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The Soviets believe that the Sandinistas will remain in power and, therefore, Moscow will remain committed to supporting the regime. They believe that US popular opinion currently is working in their favor in Central America, and they want to avoid building a national consensus in the US in favor of a hard line. Gorbachev currently sees Nicaragua as a worthwhile investment for Soviet interests and therefore agreed to supply 80 percent of the Nicaraguans' oil needs in 1985. Long term economic assistance to Nicaragua is likely because it is a small amount relative to the political gains. The Soviets will reevaluate the terms of their commitment to the Sandinistas if the Contras appear to be winning. Because their power projection capabilities in Central America are low, the Soviets would most likely avoid military confrontation with the US over Nicaragua. [redacted]

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The Honduran Role ([redacted] CIA)

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Honduras has traditionally been a crossroads for insurgents in Central America, and Tegucigalpa has tolerated their presence. Only after the fall of Somoza did it become actively involved in supporting any insurgency. While strongly anti-Sandinista and pro-FDN, Honduras will not commit troops. Nicaraguan political pressure and cross-border raids have forced some changes in Honduran policy, but the government continues to lend support to the resistance. Long-term support, however, should not be taken for granted. Honduran attitudes toward the FDN could shift: if the insurgents fail to make real gains against the regime; if the Sandinistas increase their cross-border raids; or if there are Honduran casualties. Domestic political developments--factionalism within the armed forces and the upcoming political campaigns--could also prompt a change. [redacted]

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Regional Implications ([redacted] INR)

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Regional governments favor the removal of the Sandinistas. Honduran support has been the most critical to the FDN, but Guatemala and El Salvador have filled the gaps when necessary. Costa Rica's support has been generally passive, consisting largely of ignoring insurgent operations along its northern border. The continued support for the Contras within these countries will depend upon several variables:

--Success of the insurgency.



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--Internal political dynamics.

--Other diplomatic objectives. For example, Guatemala may balance its support for the insurgents against the need for good relations with neighboring Mexico, which is pro-Sandinista. Pressure from the UN or other specialized agencies could also lead to diminished support. [REDACTED]

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### Discussion

There was some questioning of the reassuring message on the potential for expanded Soviet and Cuban support for the Sandinistas in the event that the Contras begin to win. Some in the audience argued that Soviet limits--both in terms of willingness to expand or reduce assistance--is less certain than presented. Another commented that perhaps the Hondurans could do more than they have and that the limits of their support had not yet been reached. [REDACTED]

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Popular Support ([REDACTED] CIA)

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Popular support is critical to both guerrillas and the regime. There is considerable data underscoring discontent, but thus far this has not been translated into support for the insurgents. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] The State surveys of socio-economic conditions in different regions is also useful. Other indicators of anti-regime attitude include the 25 percent abstention rate in the November elections and the large turnout for the return of newly elevated Cardinal Obando y Bravo from Rome. The draft, forced relocation, economic shortages--especially in Managua--and Marxist indoctrination in the schools have also alienated the populace. Indians and blacks are hostile because of regime policies on the east coast, and in heavy combat areas the behavior of Sandinista troops has further undercut support. [REDACTED]

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On the other hand, the regime still commands some genuine support. Some in the lower class have benefitted from health and education programs and peasants from land reform. [REDACTED]

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Discussion

Discussion focused on what might tip public opinion against the regime. Possible developments might include: more agricultural collectivization; a sharp military defeat for the regime; the assassination of Cardinal Obando; widespread atrocities; intense political repression. The FDN must develop a comprehensive psyops program to exploit regime activities. [redacted]

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The Net Assessment (Robert Vickers, NIO/LA; George Allen, CIA; [redacted], CIA; [redacted], CIA)

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[redacted] noted that in assessing anti-Sandinista prospects, it is important to keep in mind whether the analyst considers it the contras' war or Washington's. As analysts, we also tend to focus heavily on the negative, when the positive often deserves as much attention. We need to look at the opportunities as well as the problems the contras face. For example, we should be asking:

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--What would cause the Soviets to cut off oil supplies to Nicaragua?

--How might increased Sandinista repression jar the Nicaraguan people into active resistance?

--Could the amnesty program provide a convenient means for infiltrating the urban areas with contra supporters?

--Given the difficulty of operating in the cities, could block leaders be bought off easily by the contras?

--How might current difficulties with the Hondurans be turned to the contras' advantage, forcing them to develop greater self-sufficiency inside Nicaragua?

--What are the prospects for a growing regional commitment to the contra struggle? [redacted]

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Mr. Allen emphasized the importance of external support both in terms of providing supplies and maintaining sanctuaries in Honduras and Costa Rica. Developing urban operations is also crucial. [redacted]

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[redacted] underscored the constraints on Sandinista troops. There is a growing sense that conscripts serve as "cannon fodder" in an army intended to keep the regime in power and not defend national interests. The war is a strain on popular morale. [redacted] concluded that there may be limits to the regime's ability to sustain the war. This would be especially true if the Cubans or Soviets limited arms sales. [redacted]

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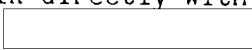
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Mr. Vickers stated that events over the past year pointed to the viability of the insurgency. The rebels face problems, but none of them are critical. He predicts an increase for the insurgents in the next 12 months, but still no real gains. The Sandinistas will tough it out and continue their military buildup. The regime will look for more support and may seek shelter in a Contadora agreement. 

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Discussion

Additional points made include:

- There is some question about which side can better sustain casualties. One audience member opined that casualties will not be a factor for the insurgents because recruitment has been easy. Time, therefore, is probably with the insurgents.
- The issue of a negotiated settlement to the conflict is still open, but the regime will never talk directly with the rebels. There was general agreement on this point. 

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