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The struggle over Nicaragua

A SANDINISTA VIEW

With the crisis deepening in Central America, The Washington Post asked Tomas Borge, a founding member of the ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua, to address American concern about his government's policy — for instance, what it means that the Nicaraguan revolution has not made good on its promises of free elections and whether Nicaragua is so beholden to Cuba or Marxism that it cannot accept restraint for the sake of regional peace. Borge, who was given the title of "Commander of the Revolution" and

serves as minister of the interior, cabled his replies to these and other questions.

By TOMAS BORGE

"A great nation gains in honor and prestige by respecting the sovereignty of small, weak nations, rather than by oppressing those who fight to secure their rights."

— A.C. Sandino, the Nicaraguan general who led the fight against U.S. Marine intervention in Nicaragua, 1927-33, and served as inspira-

tion for the Sandinista National Liberation Front.

It is recognized internationally that Nicaragua is the victim of an unjustified military aggression. This aggression is in violation of international laws and the very laws of the United States. As many facts concerning this aggression are well known by now, there is no need to enter into details about it.

There is another, less apparent form of aggression, an aggression of constant lies, half-truths, accusations based on false premises and interpretations motivated by bad faith.

It is obvious that this latter form of aggression was planned months ago in order to justify to an uninformed public a later military aggression. This is an affront to the intelligence and good will of the people of the United States.

What is said of Nicaragua? That the revolution has altered its original program and that the present government has liquidated democratic liberties to establish a totalitarian regime.

Several political parties covering a broad span of the political spectrum are active in Nicaragua today. We distinguish clearly between legitimate opposition and counter-revolutionary opposition: The latter is based on anti-national premises that seek a return to dictatorship and the forfeiting of our people's needs to the interests of other nations.

We asked our people to give us five years to reorganize a country destroyed by war. Part of this reorganization is setting the institutional bases for elections to be held in 1985. Have the American people, after 200 years, forgotten that the United States required 13 years of reorganization before the first national elections were held in 1789?

Today the process is moving forward. Our council of state is studying the political systems of other countries, including the United States, in order to see what aspects are pertinent to our reality, and to develop our own democracy.

A law of political parties, which guarantees political parties access to power through the electoral process, has been approved by our legislature.

Political pluralism is growing side by side with a strong mixed economy. In 1982, the private sector received 60.5 per cent of the credits approved by the banks. That sector also obtained 68.8 per cent of the authorized foreign exchange. More than 70 per cent of the land and 60 per cent of industrial activities are private. The agrarian reform is not based on whether the land is privately held or not; rather, it is founded on the productive use of the land.

Don't these facts disprove the statements made by the government of the United States concerning Nicaragua's political and economic reality?

In Nicaragua today there is a greater percentage of private enterprise than is the case in countries such as Venezuela, Mexico and Brazil, to state a few examples.

In just four months in 1980 we reduced illiteracy from 51 per cent to 12 per cent and have developed programs to prevent relapse into illiteracy. The entire child pop-

ulation is incorporated into the school system. (Some of these schools have been attacked by the CIA-financed counterrevolutionary forces.) The number of children attending primary school has doubled, and there is an increase of 53 per cent at the secondary level. There has been a 92 per cent increase in university registration.

The achievements in health care during the last four years have been greater than the accomplishments during the previous 150 years. We have eliminated diseases such as poliomyelitis, reduced tuberculosis, virtually eradicated malaria, reduced infant mortality by about 50 per cent and increased the number of vaccinations by 190 per cent. The entire population is incorporated into the program of preventive medicine. Nicaragua is recognized by international organizations to be at the forefront in public health care. Both education and health care are available to our people free of charge.

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Is this not respect for human, economic and social rights? Is the Reagan Administration fighting against this? What other country in Latin America has accomplished so much in such a short period of time, in spite of sabotage and the opposition of the most powerful country on the planet?

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We have been accused of religious persecution. Many religious organizations have stated the contrary.

Since 1979 full freedom of religious expression exists in Nicaragua for the first time in our history. There are 240 priests in the country, most of whom support the revolution. Sixty per cent are foreigners. They offer more than 300 Masses daily in more than 350 churches located in 155 parishes. Catholic orders, including the Dominicans, Calazans, Jesuits and Maryknolls, as well as dozens of Protestant churches including the Moravians, are all represented in Nicaragua. The Protestant and Evangelical churches have quadrupled their memberships since 1979. Several Catholic priests serve as ministers of state, and a Jesuit priest, Father Fernando Cardinal, is one of the leaders of the Sandinista Youth Organization.

Is this reality consistent with the accusations leveled against us by the government of the United States? And if there are doubts as to whether we have freedom of religion, why don't they come to Nicaragua and see firsthand, as have so many honest and open-minded U.S. citizens who have changed their opinion after visiting our country?

Recently we have been accused of anti-Semitism. In Nicaragua no one is persecuted because of his religion, race or political beliefs. Those who participated directly or indirectly in the genocide carried out against the people of Nicaragua by the Somoza dictatorship were punished. Two individuals of Jewish origin had their properties confiscated because of their involvement in the above-mentioned crimes. We are sending documentation to Rabbi Morton Rosenthal, who initiated these charges against us. Moreover, we have invited him to come to Nicaragua so he can see for himself how mistaken he has been.

If, in the process of reviewing the case of the alleged confiscation of a synagogue,

the government finds sufficient grounds to consider that the building — though registered in the name of an individual very much linked to the Somoza regime — is in fact patrimony of the Jewish community, the government will facilitate its return.

To pose the issue of the Central American crisis as part of the East-West confrontation could be considered ridiculous, if it did not have such dramatic consequences.

When we were fighting against Somoza, the Soviet Union gave neither arms nor advice to us Nicaraguans.

Following the revolutionary victory, Nicaragua has established diplomatic and commercial relations with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, within the normal parameters that are the rights of all modern states that are fighting to keep from dying.

Our people are fighting to keep from dying of hunger. Our struggle is against hunger and backwardness. Hunger and backwardness create a conflict between the selfishness of bloody dictatorships and the people. What does the East-West conflict have to do with gastroenteritis, illiteracy and the genocide of repressive military rulers?

I think that this argument is a brutal sophism to deceive the people of the United States to justify the aggression of a powerful, rich country against a small, impoverished, weak country. This argument is a deliberate lie whose only force lies in its constant repetition.

Central America has been victimized by dictatorships, each of which might have provided chapter and verse for the apocalypse. It has been calculated that the National Guard, Somoza's army, in the course of nearly half a century, assassinated more than 300,000 Nicaraguans. Since 1954, more than 10,000 persons have been assassinated in Guatemala, and the Salvadorans since 1979 have offered more than 50,000 victims to the holocaust.

They accuse us of being dominated by the Cubans and the Soviets. All Nicaraguans remember that, in the evil hour of Somocismo, the maximum authority in our country was the ambassador of the United States. We overthrew Somoza, fundamentally, in order to be the masters of our own decisions. This is a Sandinista principle of elementary national pride.

I can affirm, with full knowledge of the facts, that neither the Cuban ambassador nor Fidel Castro, with whom we have frequently conversed, nor the Soviet leader, Yuri Andropov, with whom we have also spoken, has ever told us what we must do. To think the contrary would be to accept that we have no criteria of our own, that we are simply puppets. If we were nincompoops, if we were so dishonorable as to sell out to somebody, there can be no doubt whatever that it would be much easier and much more comfortable to sell ourselves to the government of the United States. We Sandinistas never have been, are not and never will be anybody's satellites. The Manichean concept, that a country which has stopped being a satellite of one country has to become a satellite of another country, is simply inconceivable to us.

Our concept of nonalignment is not inconsistent with our right to establish relations with other countries based on the

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principle of mutual respect. What is more, it is our hope that the United States will become one of those countries. We are not to be blamed that there exist those who maliciously confuse the diversification of our relations with alignment.

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Another accusation that has been launched against Nicaragua is that we are fomenting an arms race in Central America. Let us see what the real facts are:

Nicaragua was first threatened and then invaded. We have the right and the obligation to defend ourselves, as we also have the obligation to not attack other countries. We do not propose to invade Honduras, and neither do we propose — however unnecessary it be to mention this — to invade the United States. Nicaragua has clearly demonstrated over the past four years that it is not a threat to the national security of any country. It is not we who have constructed naval bases in the Gulf of Fonseca, military training bases outside our borders, military air bases from which C130s daily unload munitions. We do not violate the airspace of any country with espionage overflights, nor do we send, against the coasts of any country, powerful naval task forces, complete with aircraft carriers and missile cruisers.

Faced with the escalation of armaments in Central America, clearly directed against us, we have the elemental right of self-defense. In this regard, we are certain that we will receive aid from all around the world, including the American people. The problem of Central America is not the supposed expansionism of Cuba or the Soviet Union in the region. It is not the aggressiveness of Nicaragua with respect to its neighbors. The problem is the philosophy of the big stick: the inconceivable concept that the United States believes it has the right to decide who should govern our countries, and to become irritable if other peoples determine styles and forms that fail to please whatever U.S. president happens to be in office.

We have made numerous proposals for dialogue, for negotiation. The response of the United States has always been either silence or an escalation of threats and aggression. It has responded similarly to proposals launched by such countries as Mexico and France. We always insist that our problems are with Honduras, whose territory is being used as a base of U.S. military operations and attacks against Nicaragua.

Because of that, negotiations must be of a bilateral nature with those two countries. The U.S. response, and consequently that of Honduras as well, is that the so-called "regional problem" that Nicaragua supposedly represents must be negotiated multilaterally.

Very well. In order to avoid pretexts, on July 19 we announced that we are disposed to negotiate multilaterally. We proposed a non-aggression pact with Honduras. We

proposed the absolute end to all supplies of weapons by any country to the forces in conflict in El Salvador, so that the Salvadoran people may resolve their problems without foreign interference. We proposed an end to the militarization of the area and to the use of any territories to launch aggressions against any other country. We

also proposed the non-installation of military bases and respect for the self-determination of each country. Who can doubt that all of these are measures conducive to peace?

This has been recognized by personalities such as Bernardo Sepulveda, foreign minister of Mexico, who stated publicly that the six-point proposal presented by the government of Nicaragua "is a step forward in the process toward peace in the region."

And what has been the response? In the first instance, the dispatch of powerful naval fleets to "carry out maneuvers" along our Pacific and Atlantic coasts. At the same time, statements that the principal obstacle to peace was "the leftist government of Nicaragua."

But the international reaction remains on the side of reason and common sense. The presidents of Panama, Venezuela, Colombia and Costa Rica have stated their opposition, as has the president of Mexico, who warned that a generalized war in Central America "would result in victory for neither side" and called on the international community to take steps "to stop the outbreak of an irrational war before it destroys the legitimate yearning for peace and development."

The foreign ministers of France and Japan have also made similar statements. The Social Democratic Party of Germany and the Labor Party of Great Britain have demanded that their respective governments expressly condemn the policy of the United States toward Central America.

It seems that the unanimous statements in favor of peace and against war have somewhat moderated the U.S. government's language a bit. In its most recent declarations it says that the United States "is not preparing a war" against Nicaragua, and it hopes peace can be achieved "without bloodshed."

But the facts contradict these affirmations. The aircraft carriers are there. U.S. troops are carrying out "prolonged maneuvers" in Honduras. The CIA continues financing the counterrevolution. The Green Berets continue training the Honduran army. And we continue contributing the dead.

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We want peace. We need peace in order to work, to study; in order to sing, to laugh; in order to simply live.

We want peace. Why don't they leave us in peace?

What wrong have we done to the people of the United States? We have offered the hand of friendship. Why does their government respond with a clenched fist?

We want peace, but we are disposed to defend ourselves. Neither our petition for peace nor our determination to defend ourselves is rhetorical.

Our people, like Sandino, prefer "to die as rebels rather than to live as slaves."

George Washington, that apostle of truth, would have applauded this determination of our national hero and this heroic determination of the Nicaraguan people.

Perhaps the gravest error is to believe that the force of arms is superior to the force of truth, or to the force of peoples who have conquered their liberty.