

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 19A

MIAMI HERALD
20 August 1984

Eden Pastora: A way out is being wasted

By SANFORD J. UNGAR

SHORTLY before the Fourth of July, Eden Pastora, the hero of the Nicaraguan revolution who feels it has been betrayed by Sandinista extremists, came to Washington. He was seeking American support — more political and rhetorical than material — for his democratic program for Nicaragua's future, a middle ground that is neither pro-Soviet nor pro-American.

Pastora, recovering from wounds he suffered in May when a bomb exploded at his clandestine camp in the jungle along Nicaragua's southern border, seemed a shadow of his former charismatic, macho self. He was pale, his voice was weak, and he leaned heavily on a cane. His news conference was well-attended, but the journalists there either found little to report or treated him as a curiosity. He saw officials at the State Department, members of Congress and their staffs, but there was no obvious, or even subtle, benefit for Pastora's cause.

A FEW days after the Fourth of July, Pastora had to delay his departure from Washington for Europe, where he also planned to spread his message, because he could not scrape together enough money to pay the hotel bill for himself and his entourage. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), having long since decided that Pastora was too independent, had no interest in helping.

Finally Pastora asked one friend in the capital where he might go to pawn his fine gold watch — an especially poignant symbol, since the watch had once belonged to a relative of dictator Anastasio Somoza and the Sandinista directorate had presented it to Pastora as a trophy of victory.

Pastora's experience in Washington is a metaphor for the problems of U.S. policy in Nicaragua and perhaps all of Central America.

It is no secret that the leftist Sandinist government has become unpopular among many of the

same people who helped overthrow the repressive, feudalistic Somoza government in 1979. Even if the current Managua regime is not guilty of all the offenses that the Reagan Administration has charged — such as being the main arms supplier to leftist guerrillas in El Salvador — by many accounts, it has pursued ideological purity at the cost of economic decline. Nicaragua's free press has been virtually squelched, and many citizens live in fear of party militants. It is not clear whether elections scheduled for the fall will be meaningful and democratic.

But the guerrillas fighting the Sandinistas in the northern part of Nicaragua, until recently with substantial American help, have hardly emerged as a viable alternative. Because of their leaders' ties with the despised Somoza, many of them are feared and distrusted by ordinary Nicaraguans, and some of their more-extreme, American-supported tactics, such as mining Nicaragua's harbors, have been condemned the world over.

Under the circumstances, Pastora would seem to be the ideal solution, the perfect "third force" who might achieve a historic compromise in Nicaragua. Flawless he is not, but he has great credibility from the days when, as "Commander Zero," he played a key role in the insurrection that brought Somoza's downfall. Ever since breaking with the Sandinistas, he has refused to cooperate with the contra forces in the North, a stance that cost him CIA support.

Pastora's own military effort in the southern part of Nicaragua has apparently lost momentum, but the political platform he embraces, in conjunction with other former Sandinista officials and supporters, such as Arturo Cruz and Alfredo Cesar, is reasonable and, from an American standpoint, appealing. It criticizes Nicaragua's military buildup, urges the removal of Eastern-bloc and Cuban advisers from the government and economy, and advocates political

pluralism at home. It has the support of leading Latin American intellectuals and statesmen, including former Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez.

Yet Commander Zero seems to score zero on the American political scene. Conservatives shun him because they think he is too revolutionary and because he refuses to make the obligatory, obsequious pro-American statements characteristic of those who usually get aid from Washington. Liberals are afraid to support him because his achievements are primarily military. The liberals confuse his motives with those of his Somocista counterparts, and they are understandably worried about being accused of meddling in another country's affairs.

WHAT is more, Pastora suffers from a bad sense of timing. He came to Washington while Congress was in recess, and every would-be foreign leader is supposed to know that nothing important is allowed to happen then.

Eden Pastora thus is left very much out in the cold, a tragic figure who seems unlikely to attract the American and other external support he needs if he is ever to achieve his objectives. But he is proud and defiant. As he told one gathering that he addressed in Washington, "If necessary, we will go back to the jungle, and if necessary we will die with our boots on."

If that is the case, Pastora and his cause will not be the only losers. For he represents just the sort of alternative that Americans ought to be able to support and encourage openly in the Third World, without necessarily undermining our own system and values. Finding a way to do so is a real test of our political maturity.

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