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The Escalating War of Words

Nicaragua launches a rhetorical counterattack against the U.S.

Easter Week is a major holiday throughout Latin America. But in revolutionary Nicaragua there were a few differences in the seasonal festivities. The Sandinista government announced that it would ban all radio broadcasts of Easter Masses unless the regime could censor pastoral sermons. Then, as half the country prepared to flock to the beach after their religious observances, the others girded for war.

While there were reports of fighting in the area near the border with Honduras, much of the struggle seemed to be a battle of words, chiefly directed against the U.S. Declared Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto Brockmann: "The United States is waging war against Nicaragua." That kind of provocative rhetoric drew a sharp response from U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick. Said she: "The United States isn't invading anybody."

The Nicaraguans were trying as hard as they could to appear beset, but the reality was somewhat different. A campaign organized by opponents of the regime was indeed under way. And it was an open secret that the *contras*, as they are known, were receiving advice and logistical assistance from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Yet, by Western diplomatic estimates, only 2,000 to 3,000 rebels were involved in the insurgency, far too few to oust the increasingly unpopular Marxist-led Sandinista government, which is named after a Nicaraguan nationalist rebel of the 1930s, Augusto César Sandino, and took power in 1979 after the overthrow of Dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle.

Although the overall results of the *contra* campaign are difficult to determine, it is having a dire effect in some areas. Rancho Grande, a hamlet of wooden and tin-roofed dwellings in the coffee-growing region of Matagalpa, 35 miles from the Honduran border, was struck by the rebels last week. Two members of the local militia force, numbering about 25, were killed, along with a French microbiologist, Pierre Grosjean, 32, who was visiting the area to study leishmaniasis, an ulcerating skin disease. After the Rancho Grande assault, Nicaraguan Defense Minister Humberto Ortega Saavedra, whose brother Daniel is coordinator of the Nicaraguan junta, declared confi-

dently that "the counterrevolutionary forces are in serious difficulty."

From the *contra* side of the shifting battlefield, the opposite seemed to be true. TIME has learned that, for the first time last week, members of the rebel Nicaraguan Democratic Force (F.D.N.), a grouping of conservative and moderate Nicaraguans combined with former members of the Somoza National Guard, began coordinating their northern actions with another group operating in the country's south. Meanwhile, more than 175 Miskito Indians from Nicaragua's Atlantic coast have completed a rebel training course that will help them to lead as many as 8,000 of their alienated fellow Indians into battle against the Sandinistas. The F.D.N. also plans to send some of its members to Argentina for instruction in the use of shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles.

Whatever the actual military situation, the Sandinistas were trying to make the most of their uncomfortable circumstances. They demanded an emergency Security Council debate in the United Nations that eventually lasted five days. Nicaraguan Deputy Foreign Minister Victor Hugo Tinoco warned darkly that the conflict could turn into a war with neighboring Honduras, where many of the anti-Sandinista rebels have been based.

The Nicaraguan charges drew scathing replies from U.S. officials, who declared that there were many good reasons for the Nicaraguans to rebel against their Sandinista rulers. According to recent human rights reports, the regime has systematically violated the rights of local Miskito Indians, undermined religious freedom, and continued to practice arbitrary arrest and detention. Said State Department Spokesman Alan Romberg: "It is not surprising the Sandinistas are trying to convince their public and the outside world that there is not an internal problem in Nicaragua, when there is." Reagan Administration officials refused to discuss charges that the U.S. is covertly supporting the Nicaraguan insurgents. In a newspaper column, however, Ambassador Kirkpatrick implicitly defended the idea of such an operation, saying in effect that if Nicaragua and Cuba could arm and train revolutionary insurgents, it was wrong to think the U.S. could not do so.

Many of the 55 countries that took part in the U.N. Security Council debate felt that the U.S. was being disingenuous. Replying to a predictable Soviet diatribe about incidents of U.S. intervention in Latin America, Kirkpatrick said that such actions were past history. On the other hand, she added, a computer would be required to keep track of Soviet interventions in the affairs of other countries, the most recent example being Afghanistan.

Despite the show of support for Nicaragua, there were some important exceptions. Italy, Holland and Belgium, all NATO allies, remained quiet during the Security Council debate, as did France, which earned Washington's ire in January 1982 by selling \$90 million worth of military equipment to the Sandinistas.

While Nicaragua is eager to urge other nations to condemn the U.S., it is far less anxious to consider many of the suggested peaceful solutions to Central America's political troubles. Even though the U.S. is aggrieved at the extremist nature of the Nicaraguan regime, it is far more concerned over Nicaraguan support for leftist insurgents in nearby El Salvador. Last October the U.S. endorsed the idea of an agreement with the Sandinistas that would have included an end to cross-border support for guerrillas, a ban on foreign military advisers in the region, and guarantees of local political pluralism. The Sandinistas dislike that Central American initiative, but the Reagan Administration says that it is still eager to pursue the earlier proposal.

Discussions are under way in Central America to hold a meeting of five Central American countries (Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Costa Rica), with five other Latin countries from the region as observers. Said Secretary of State George Shultz two weeks ago: "Nicaragua should be engaged in the process. Its good faith, or lack of it, will be tested." So far, however, no date has been set for that meeting, and Nicaragua is apparently refusing to participate.

—By George Russell.
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