

ARTICLE APPROVED
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18 March 1986**TV Reviews****'Frontline' Examines
Nicaragua's Contras**

By JOHN CORRY

CREDIT "Frontline," public television's weekly documentary series, with staying on top of the news. "Who's Running This War?" looks at the Nicaraguan rebels, the contras. Tomorrow the House of Representatives debates whether to give the contras \$100 million in aid, and on Thursday it is scheduled to vote on the issue. Representatives swayed by "Frontline" are likely to vote no. "Frontline," on Channel 13 at 10 o'clock tonight, knows which side it favors.

The one-hour program looks specifically at the Nicaraguan Democratic Front, the largest rebel group fighting the Sandinistas. "Frontline" finds it to be an ineffectual fighting force, with "a notoriously bad record on human rights." Its leaders all seem to be former followers of the dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle, and any legitimacy, or moral purpose, is not apparent. Meanwhile, its United States supporters, some of whom may act illegally, are all rich right wingers.

What's wrong with these findings is that there is nothing wholly right with them. The context is askew. The producer, Martin Smith, has taken a political position, and then selected facts to uphold the position. Journalism is supposed to work the other way around.

Consider, for example, the charge, or insinuation, that the leaders of the Nicaraguan Democratic Front are all former Somocistas. The State Department, trying to rebut charges like that, said last month that only 27 percent of the 153 "most senior military leaders" of the front were once members of Mr. Somoza's National guard, while 20 percent were former members of Sandinista security forces; 53 percent, it said, were civilians with no military background at all.

The State Department figures may be questioned. In citing so many "senior military leaders," the State Department seemed to be reaching down to sergeant and corporal. On the other hand, "Frontline" recognizes no front leader who was not a Somocista. It is walking a very thin line.

Thus it presents Col. Enrique Bermudez and Adolfo Calero as the two principal leaders of the front. Colonel Bermudez did, in fact, sup-

port Mr. Somoza; he was his last military attaché in Washington. "Frontline" shows him as unrepentant, which, presumably, he is. Then it gives us Mr. Calero, a burly man in fatigues, whom it identifies only as the former Coca-Cola distributor in Managua. It neglects to mention that Mr. Calero opposed Mr. Somoza, who then threw him in jail.

We get a selective vision here. Facts that do not fit the political position are ignored, or else brushed off in asides. Clever film editing helps. A former rebel supporter, for instance, denounces the contras. Then President Reagan, fatuously, given the context, says of the contras: "They are our brothers — these freedom fighters."

This is followed by a quick aside by the narrator, presumably because it is not important: Since 1979, he says, the Sandinista Army has grown from 8,000 to 65,000 soldiers, equipped with Soviet tanks and helicopters, and trained by Cuban advisers; there is also a militia of 200,000.

Then back to the main argument: A contra in fatigues shouts, "War! Kill! Blood! Die!" The camera lingers; obviously, the contra is crazed. The narrator tells us then that the contras, managed by the Central Intelligence Agency, were never a military threat to the Sandinistas, and were noted mostly for "cruelty and ineptitude." In 1984, therefore, Congress cut off aid. Then, another aside:

"Despite their lack of military success," the narrator says, "problems inside Nicaragua led to a swelling of contra ranks."

The "problems" are not described; apparently they're not important either. In fact it was widely reported that the swelling of contra ranks was caused largely by Roman Catholic peasants from northern Nicaragua, who fled the Sandinistas. "Frontline" also fails to mention that, inept as the contras may have been in 1984, they still operated in one-third of Nicaragua. They withdrew after United States aid was withdrawn.

"Frontline" does note the existence of anti-Sandinista groups other than the Nicaragua Democratic Front, but declines to say anything about them. Edén Pastora Gómez, the leader of the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance, who has rejected the front, is not mentioned. The attempt by Alfonso Robelo and Arturo Cruz, both former Sandinistas, to introduce a

contra code of conduct is dismissed as inconsequential. Human rights abuses by Sandinistas, meanwhile, are mentioned in only a single sentence.

Indeed, the program reserves most of its scorn for Americans who support the contras, particularly John Singlaub, a retired major general, who raises financial support. He does this, "Frontline" indicates, chiefly among rich Texans and Arizona retirees. The retirees sing "Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here." One rich Texan, who gave \$65,000 to buy a helicopter (a very small, second-hand helicopter, presumably) says that General Singlaub was "undoubtedly sent by the Lord." Contra supporters look foolish.

"Frontline" also explores, correctly, the White House connection to General Singlaub. It identifies Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North, a member of the National Security Council, as the man he dealt with. In its zeal, however, "Frontline" then indicates that a White House request that photographs of Colonel North not be published was part of a cover-up. In fact, when The New York Times first published reports on Colonel North's activities, it withheld his name because the White House said Colonel North's life would be endangered if he were identified. This doesn't suggest a cover-up. There may be a case to be made against financing the contras, but it's not being made here.