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'Disinformation — manual of lies'

By Tom Diaz
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A briefing book on Central America given to U.S. congressmen by opponents of aid to Nicaraguan resistance fighters contains major errors of fact favorable to the Sandinista regime, a former member of the post-Somoza Nicaraguan coalition government has charged.

The book, "Central America 1985," distributed on Capitol Hill by The Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy and the Commission on U.S.-Central

American Relations, was endorsed by many liberal church and peace activist groups.

But the former cabinet minister, who asked not to be named, said the chapter on Nicaragua is "pure propaganda." During an interview with The Washington Times, he cited alleged errors in economic and social data, and misstatements about key personalities in the Nicaraguan struggle.

"There are a lot of things here that even the Sandinistas will not claim," he said.

The minister served in the post-Somoza coalition government, before power was consolidated by the Marxist-

oriented Sandinista National Liberation front. He left when he learned that his name was on a "list" of persons accused of being "counter-revolutionaries."

He currently has access to data filed by the Sandinista regime with international organizations, and said those data contradict the book's description of Nicaragua under the Sandinistas.

For example, the book claims that "in recent years, the country's economy has expanded remarkably, showing a 5 percent rate of growth in 1983."

In fact, said the minister, Nicaragua's gross national product has declined under the Sandinista regime and the country suffered a negative rate of growth last year.

"If you look at the real salary of most of the population, [it] has declined by 90 percent since 1980," he said.

John Blacken, a State Department official familiar with Central American affairs, confirmed some of the former minister's criticisms.

Mr. Blacken called the 5 percent growth rate cited in the book "nonsense."

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"Their economy has had a negative growth this past year," Mr. Blacken said. "The per capita income is lower now than it was under Somoza."

The former Nicaraguan minister also criticized the book's biographies of several leaders.

For example, he pointed out that the book's biography section states that Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega was "arrested and spent seven years in jail" during the "mid-1960s through the mid-1970s," without revealing that Mr. Ortega was arrested because he gunned down an unarmed bank guard during a bank robbery.

A Nov. 6, 1984, New York Times article the book cites as its source for Mr. Ortega's biography includes the shooting incident.

The minister said the book downplays the importance of defense minister Umberto Ortega, who he said has more power than Daniel Ortega and close ties with Cuba and Moscow. The book also omits Umberto Ortega's flight from Costa Rica after being involved in the killing of a Costa Rican policeman.

The minister noted that the book consistently uses economic and social data from the time of the coalition government, not the Sandinistas.

"They are trying to present them [the Sandinistas] in the best possible light," he said. "How can they pretend to give the reader a balanced view when they fail to report figures that incorporate the dismal economic performance of the Sandinistas?"

For example, the book includes a 1980 budget which shows only 11 percent being spent for defense. In fact, he said, the Sandinista regime may be spending as much as 60 percent on arms.

Staff members at The Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy referred a reporter to an editor of the book for comment. The editor did not return the reporter's call.

The minister said that according to Sandinista government figures he has seen Nicaraguan exports have fallen since 1977 from "in excess of \$1.1 billion" to "the Sandinista government's predicted" 1985 figure of \$380 million.

"The import figure for 1985 is about 1.5 times what it was in 1977," he said. "That tells you that production has gone down substantially — consumption has gone down, imports have increased and exports have declined."

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He said the country's economic decline should be blamed on Marxist economic policies and an arms buildup, not on fighting with resistance forces.

"The Contra effort has affected only the northern part of Nicaragua, which is a coffee growing region, and coffee exports have declined the least," he said.

Among other data in the book the minister criticized were:

- **Budget figures.** The briefing book includes 1980 budget data — a period before the Sandinista consolidation of power — showing modest military expenditures. But the minister said that military expenditures have actually soared under the Sandinista regime. At the same time, he

said, health, education and social expenditures have declined in "real terms" (after adjustment for the country's spiraling inflation) to a third of the same expenditures under the Somoza regime.

- **Infant mortality.** The book shows a 1980 infant mortality rate of 37 deaths per thousand births. The minister says infant mortality has increased substantially under the Sandinista regime, because medications are not available, doctors have fled the country and there has been a general decline in the economy.

- **Unemployment.** The book claims a national unemployment rate of 8 percent. "That's completely false," said the minister. He said the Nicaraguan government itself estimates unemployment as about 30 percent, and that the rate is around 60 percent if so-called "underemployed" persons — those who work only a few hours a day or on make-work assignments — are counted.

He said "liberals" should "beware" because Sandinista leaders openly called liberal members of the U.S. Congress "tactical friends, but strategic enemies" in his presence.

"By that, they mean that they [the Sandinistas] can walk with them [liberal congressmen] one step, two steps, three steps," he said. "At some point, they will not walk with them farther and they will oppose them. They [the congressmen] are useful, and as long as they are useful, the Sandinistas will use them for their tactical objectives."