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Nicaragua

AMERICA'S NEW VIETNAM?

by Karl Grossman (Permanent Press: \$10.95; 227 pp.)

SOLIDARITY WITH THE PEOPLE OF NICARAGUA

by James McGinnis (Orbis Books: \$7.95; 162 pp.)

The British newsmagazine *The Economist* concluded recently that the current wars in Central America—a region that by itself is not strategically important—have aroused more political passions than any “minor” world crisis since the Spanish Civil War.

That perhaps explains why so many words have been written in

Reviewed by Frank del Olmo

the last few years about Nicaragua. Despite being one of the smallest nations in Latin America, with fewer than 3 million people, Nicaragua has become the focus of an incredible amount of attention by Americans of all political stripes, not least among them President Reagan. Sadly, that surge of interest has resulted in very little that is new being written about the country. Instead, it has generated only heated words of doom, or praise, for Nicaragua's Sandinista government.

In keeping with this trend, both “Nicaragua: America's New Vietnam?” and “Solidarity With the People of Nicaragua” offer more passion than information. Neither will be of use to the general reader

who wants to learn the basics about Nicaragua and the roots of its revolution. Both books are aimed at people already convinced that Reagan's effort to overthrow the Sandinista government is wrong.

“Solidarity,” written by St. Louis peace activist James McGinnis, is a primer that outlines steps that opponents of the Reagan Administration can follow in setting up activities to support Nicaragua against the pressure it is getting from the U.S. government. His suggestions range from buying Nicaraguan coffee through food co-ops to joining activist groups that will carry out nonviolent protests in the event of U.S. military action against Nicaragua. At the heart of McGinnis' book are people-to-people projects, like U.S. fund-raising drives to build playgrounds for Nicaraguan schoolchildren, efforts that will contribute to understanding between the two countries by bringing individual U.S. citizens into contact with individual Nicaraguans.

McGinnis' book is also not as completely oriented to politics as it might at first sound, for the author is a devout Christian, and his writing is infused with references to prayer, meditation and even

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fasting that may put off non-religious readers. But McGinnis' desire to put religious beliefs to work in a meaningful way is so sincere that it comes across as constructive, rather than simply naive. At least McGinnis' proposals for dealing with Nicaragua are more charitable than those espoused by some of the more strident spokesmen for the religious right in this country.

Karl Grossman's book, on the other hand, is a quickie tract written by an activist-journalist who ran off to Nicaragua chasing a hot story and couldn't quite find it.

Grossman's disagreement with the Reagan Administration policies is clear from the start, which has him arriving in Honduras looking for CIA agents and U.S. military advisers, who he claims he can recognize by shoe styles. The book is written with a breathless “I-was-there” approach that may be explained by the fact that Grossman is an anchorman for a television station in New York.

Not least among the book's faults is the fact that it is badly organized, reading as if Grossman simply transcribed his notes upon his return, then supplied chapter headings wherever he thought they would be convenient. Only a chapter on the history of U.S.-Nicaraguan relations, which provides a concise summary of that sad story, is worth reading. But that is not enough to recommend this book to anyone except readers who can't get enough about Nicaragua.

Times editorial writer Del Olmo specializes in Latin America.