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# NICARAGUA'S U.N. VOICE

By Elaine Sciolino

**S**HE HADN'T BEEN EXPECTED TO attend the reception, but it was her first invitation from the United States Mission to the United Nations, and as Nicaragua's chief delegate, Nora Astorga accepted. When she shook hands with her somewhat bemused American host, Vernon A. Walters, the chief United States delegate, he told her, in impeccable Spanish, how pleased he was that she had come. She complimented him on how well he spoke her native tongue.

After a polite stay, she crossed the street to the Security Council, and two hours later railed against American aggression in Nicaragua. "We hope reason and wisdom will prevail over brute force," she said.

The United States may be waging a war by proxy against Nicaragua, but the two countries still have diplomatic relations. So neither Ms. Astorga nor Mr. Walters see any contradiction in being civil to each other. "We said nonsense," she says, "but it was important nonsense." Mr. Walters, who regularly attacks Nicaragua as a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship that has betrayed its revolutionary goals, speaks graciously of Ms. Astorga's appearance. "It required a certain courage for her to come."

In the male-dominated world of multilateral diplomacy, where protocol does much to smooth the rough edges of political reality, a woman like Nora Astorga has a distinct advantage. The 37-year-old diplomat is much sought after in an environment where charm at evening receptions is often as important as skill in corridor politicking.

Much of Ms. Astorga's time recently was spent sharpening strategy for the just-under-way General Assembly session, at which Nicaragua will figure prominently when the subject of Central America comes up for discussion early in November. She plans to ask for reaffirmation of past resolutions during the session and may introduce new ones, including a call for the United States to abide by a World Court decision and a condemnation of new American aid to the rebels.

Vernon Walters, reflecting the Reagan Administration's vision of Nicaragua as a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship that persecutes Catholics, Jews and ethnic minorities, notably the Miskito Indians, and one that has silenced the opposition press, will campaign vigorously against the resolutions. But Nicaragua, which enjoys the support of the Soviet bloc and that of the 99-nation Nonaligned Movement, can be expected to win easy majorities.

Ms. Astorga serves as her country's only direct point of diplomatic contact with much of the world, as Nicaragua has embassies in only 38 of the 158 member states of the United Nations. Her mission within and outside the meeting halls is straightforward: to win broader support for Nicaragua's revolution and to discredit American policy in Central America. Even those who oppose her goals acknowledge that she applies herself vigorously.

"She goes out of her way to get to know the key diplomats and explain her country's policies," says a State Department

official familiar with her activities. "But," he adds, "even the best diplomat can go only so far with what is clearly a lousy hand."

Some of her critics charge that she is just a pretty face whose role is as a propagandist. "Norita is a resonance box and what is put into it is decided in Managua," says Arturito Cruz, who worked with her in the foreign ministry before he joined his father, the contra leader Arturo Cruz. Indeed, some diplomats who deal with her regularly say she is overprogrammed. "It is hard to cut through her charm," says one third-world ambassador. "I have spoken with her many times but feel I don't know her."

An Asian ambassador thinks that "she's still a little green when it comes to United Nations politics. She's still learning how to handle herself under pressure." At Security Council meetings, she sometimes appears nervous, chain-smoking Mariboros, fingering her jewelry, folding and unfolding her hands.

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EXCERPTED

**I**T WAS ON MARCH 8, 1978, International Women's Day and a year before the Sandinistas overthrew the regime of Anastasio Somoza Debayle, that Nora Astorga, then a corporate lawyer and a divorced mother with two children, lured the top Somozista general, Reynaldo Pérez Vega, a reputed torturer and womanizer, to her bedroom. When he began to undress, she gave a signal and three Sandinista *compañeros* burst out of hiding. They were supposed to kidnap the general for interrogation and exchange him for political prisoners, she says, but when he resisted, they slashed his throat with a knife.

Today, she has no regrets.

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"It was not murder," she says, "but political justice." Sexual intercourse, however, would have been a different matter. "I couldn't have done it, even with all my political conviction," she says. "He was too much of a monster."

Ms. Astorga claims to represent what she calls "morbid curiosity" about the murder. But she acknowledges that had it not been for that one dramatic act of revolution, she might scarcely be noticed. "It's one of the high points of my life," she admits matter-of-factly. "It has not been a disadvantage. But I insist, my life is more than that single act."

The attention showered on Nora Astorga has made some of her female comrades a bit resentful. "Nora is famous outside Nicaragua because of one action," says Sonia Roa-Suazo, a former revolutionary and foreign ministry official who broke with the Sandinistas because she disagreed with the turn the revolution had taken; she now lives in California. "Inside Nicaragua, she's nobody special, and there are many women who have done more than she."

Her role in the general's murder cost Ms. Astorga the job as Nicaragua's Ambassador to the United States two years ago. Although the State Department was ready to accept her nomination, the Central Intelligence Agency let it be known that the slain general had been a valuable C.I.A. "asset," and that his murder was a hostile act. Today there is an admission in Washington that politics played no small part in her rejection.

The Reagan Administration could do little, however, to block Ms. Astorga's nomination to the United Nations.

She was, in fact, a natural choice: four years as a Deputy Foreign Minister and three years as one of Nicaragua's delegates to the United Nations had taught her the ropes of diplomacy, and she is articulate in a way many of her less-educated revolutionary comrades are not. Mr. Ortega denies that the appointment was an effort to tweak Mr. Reagan's nose, telling reporters during his recent visit to New York that the Administration rejected her because "it was afraid of the message she would bring to American public opinion. However, we feel honored that she represents us at the United Nations, a body that is so important to the peoples of the world."

Ms. Astorga, also represents Nicaragua at various overseas conferences, most recently at the Nonaligned Movement's triennial meeting earlier this month in Zimbabwe. But despite her intense campaigning to have Nicaragua named as the site of the movement's summit conference in 1989, a decision was postponed for at least a year. "There is a lot of concern that since Nicaragua's whole domestic and foreign policy is geared against the United States, it might not have the proper focus," explained an Asian diplomat keenly involved in the Nonaligned Movement. The chairmanship falls to the leader of the host country and guarantees high visibility as the movement's spokesman. Disappointed but undaunted, Ms. Astorga means to try again. "It is a very important goal for us," she says, "and we feel we could strengthen the movement."

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MS. ASTORGA'S Attempts at "selling" her nation to America is almost as important for Nicaragua as is her work at the United Nations. In this, she easily upstages her country's Ambassador in Washington, Carlos Tunnerman Bernheim, a reserved 53-year-old former Minister of Education whose speeches sometimes resemble academic lectures. At a speech to students at New York University, Ms. Astorga portrayed Sandinism this way: "Communists we are not; Marxists we are not," adding, "We just don't believe that Communism or Socialism is a contagious disease." At a funeral service for a Dominican sister who had been active in Nicaragua, her eulogy moved the assemblage at Manhattan's St. Vincent Ferrer Church to tears. At a recent opening of Nicaraguan paintings in a chic SoHo gallery, she attracted almost as much attention as the art.

She also actively promotes the "sister city" program that Nicaragua has with about a dozen American municipalities, from Concord, N. H., to Portland, Ore., and she

is planning a speaking tour to some of them this fall.

Much of the publicity about Nicaraguan activities in the United States is handled by a small public relations firm, Agendas International, which was founded three years ago by Darryl L. Hunt and Donald J. Casey, former Maryknoll priests. The two had met Nicaragua's Foreign Minister d'Escoto 30 years ago in Maryknoll College and have been believers in the Sandinistas ever since.

For \$25,000 a month, the duo consult almost daily both with Ms. Astorga and Ambassador Tunnerman in Washington. They plan advance work for official trips in the United States, help write speeches, arrange public appearances and prep visiting dignitaries for press conferences and television appearances.

But even the most sophisticated media campaign cannot help Ms. Astorga to defend some of Nicaragua's positions. When the Reagan Administration accused Nicaragua of invading Honduras with 1,500 troops last spring, for example, she called press conferences and went on national television to charge the Administration with "lies and fabrications."

Although it was not an "invasion," Nicaraguan troops had, indeed, crossed the border to attack contra camps, an admission Ms. Astorga even now is loathe to make. "They say their camps are in Nicaragua," she says. "That's what we say, too. So we have destroyed these camps. That explains why it was not an act of aggression against Honduras."

Some of her fellow diplomats call her evasive on other thorny subjects. She refuses, for example, to explain why Nicaragua abstains every year when most of the nonaligned nations have voted to condemn the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Instead, she refers to a 1980 speech by one of her predecessors in which Afghan rebels were referred to as "mercenaries and counterrevolutionaries." On why her country supports Iran in its war with Iraq, she says, "I don't usually comment on internal things in other countries." She denies that Nicaragua's revolution resembles that of Cuba. When pressed, she claims ignorance: "I just don't know Cuba in detail to pinpoint things that are good or are bad. The Cuban people believe what they have is good for them."

Her responses accurately

reflect the policies articulated in Nicaragua. The closing of the opposition newspaper La Prensa was necessary, she says, because "it was financed indirectly by the C.I.A., and you cannot give your enemies all the possibilities to harm you." Two grants totaling \$200,000 had been awarded to La Prensa by the National Endowment for Democracy, a private American group that channels money from the United States Information Agency to various institutions in countries where democracy is deemed fragile or nonexistent (\$50,000 was withheld after La Prensa was shut down). The closing of La Prensa eliminated the only press opposition to the Ortega regime.

As for recent measures taken against churchmen, Ms. Astorga says that Bishop Pablo Antonio Vega had to be expelled from Nicaragua because "he held many open meetings with counterrevolutionaries and was practically asking for U.S. intervention. Just because he's a priest doesn't mean he's above the law." In a country where the populace is overwhelmingly Catholic, and where a war with the church would undercut the revolution's legitimacy, she is quick to add, "This action is not against the church; it is against an individual who also happens to be a church person."

Pope John Paul II said he "strongly deplored" the expulsion, which he called "an almost incredible act" that recalled the "dark ages" of Latin-American anticlericalism.

A meeting on the church-state rift has been scheduled for this weekend between President Ortega and the Nicaraguan Primate, Miguel Cardinal Obando y Bravo.

As for her own commitment to religion, Ms. Astorga, who attended mass daily until she was 17, says she is no longer a practicing Catholic. But she is raising her children as Catholics, and is herself still religious enough to have received communion this summer at the 25th anniversary celebration of Foreign Minister d'Escoto's ordination as a Maryknoll priest in Ossining, N.Y.

Although the revolution she defends has lost much of its original luster for countries that had hoped it would usher in democracy after decades of dictatorship, Nora Astorga has won the respect of many of her colleagues at the United Nations. "She functions like any good ambassador overseas," says Cavan O. Hogue, Australia's Deputy Permanent Representative at the United Nations, who first met Ms. Astorga in 1982 when he was Ambassador to Nicaragua. "She doesn't rush around slapping backs and thumping tubs. She certainly doesn't act like a Mata Hari."

Even Vernon Walters, a retired three-star general and former Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, has some kind words for an opponent whose debating skills rival his. "She defends the interests of her country very adequately," he says. "And I'm glad she realizes all generals are not alike." ■