

NICARAGUA

Conversion of a Timely Kind

A liberal analyst fans controversy with his pro-contra views

Some Americans see Nicaragua drenched in a dangerous sea of red. Others view the country as bathed in a brilliant aureole of white light. Forget gray. Much as in the debate that polarized Americans during the war in Viet Nam, cool heads and dispassionate judgments seldom prevail in a discussion of U.S.-Nicaraguan relations. The Sandinistas are either hard-core Communists with a cruelly totalitarian agenda or committed revolutionaries with a uniquely Latin American vision of the future. The U.S.-backed con-



Rebel forces march at a training camp

tras, on the other hand, are either brave freedom fighters or treacherous mercenaries. WARNING: entry into the debate may be hazardous to your reputation.

No one knows that better than **Robert Leiken**, 47, a Central American analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington. For years he toiled anonymously on the intellectual left, pursuing liberal causes and scholarly studies. While working at a succession of jobs, including posts at some prestigious think tanks in Mexico City and Washington, Leiken produced papers on Soviet strategies in Latin America. His work, however, rarely received much public notice. In early 1984 he edited a collection of essays called *Central America: Anatomy of a Conflict*, which took the Reagan Administration to task for promoting con-



Robert Leiken gives an unexpected message

frontation rather than negotiation in Central America. It aroused notice among Democratic Congressmen who opposed Reagan's policies, but Leiken's reputation remained limited mainly to the specialized world of Latin American policy.

Then came the deluge. In October 1984 Leiken (rhymes with bacon) published an article in the *New Republic* titled "Nicaragua's Untold Stories." It was a searing indictment of the Managua regime that accused the Sandinistas of repression, corruption, political manipulation and fealty to Moscow.

The idea that a well-respected liberal analyst would launch such a strong attack on the Sandinistas caused considerable stir in Washington. Leiken's apparent conversion was seen by the entrenched left as a betrayal and by Reaganites as a vindication of their long-held views. Most important, many Democrats who had relied on Leiken's analyses began to reconsider their Sandinista sympathies. Senator Edward Kennedy had the article read into the *Congressional Record*. Suddenly, Leiken became as controversial as Nicaragua itself.

Since then, Leiken has assessed the Sandinista issue in other articles, including two pieces in the *New York Review of Books*. After two trips this year to Nicaragua, the most recent with Democratic Congressman Les Aspin of Wisconsin, he has changed his assessment of the *contras*. He argues that while the rebels were initially a small mercenary force made up of supporters of ousted Dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle, they have, as a result of widespread disenchantment with the Sandinistas, grown into a diverse army of 20,000 that is now a popularly based vanguard for a widespread and growing re-

bellion. Most scholars in the field reject Leiken's assessment, but he argues that popular perception of the *contras* in both the U.S. and the cities of Nicaragua has not yet registered this change because the rebels have failed to embrace "democratic leadership."

Leiken says his conversion was not of the light-blinding sort experienced by St. Paul on the road to Damascus. Rather, he claims, it was based on numerous trips to Nicaragua, during which the true nature of the Sandinista regime gradually became apparent even as his study of the *contras* convinced him of their potential. The changes in the Nicaraguan situation, he feels, have not been adequately reported by the U.S. and international press.

The analyst is now urging the *contras*



The Sandinistas inaugurate a new battalion

to shed their "CIA-imposed leadership." He says that it is resented by the combat troops, considered "hostile to democracy" and is damaging to the unity of the various *contra* factions. He believes that if the *contras* unite under a common political banner, with such respected democrats as Arturo Cruz and Alfonso Robelo at the top, Nicaraguans and Americans will support the rebels as a legitimate democratic resistance force.

If his condemnations of the *contra* leadership do not please White House officials, his calls for "military pressure" to force the Sandinistas to the bargaining table do. Thus Leiken has been accused of being a mouthpiece for the Reagan Administration. Yet he has condemned Reagan's failure to forge a bipartisan consensus. "I think the Administration has

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chosen to divide the country rather than unite it by using inflated, hyperbolic rhetoric," he says. "The struggle within the elite in the U.S. has taken precedence over what's going on in Nicaragua."

The charge that he is a turncoat particularly rankles Leiken, who still considers himself a member of the left. His credentials are impeccable. In the 1960s he joined the ban-the-Bomb movement and agitated against the Viet Nam War. In 1975, briefly interrupting an eight-year period of work and study in Mexico, he weighed in with the pro-busing factions in Boston. "No one is going to force me out of the left," Leiken vows. "They may call me a defector and an impostor, but they're not going to force me to change the things that I believe."

Many liberal scholars and journalists have come down hard on their former ally. Alexander Cockburn has charged in the *Nation* that Leiken's writings are packed with "calumnies and falsehoods." Kevin Kelley of the *Guardian*, a small radical newspaper in New York, fumed in an article that "Leiken has clearly perfected a political formula that appeals to neoliberal publications." Leiken has been called a press agent for various *contra* leaders, and his willingness to testify before congressional committees has brought charges of opportunism. Even analysts who respect Leiken's knowledge of Nicaragua are disturbed by his strong advocacy posture. Says Peter Bell, president of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation in New York City: "I don't believe that anyone who presents himself as an analyst ought to be as involved as he is in a partisan way."

Leiken has vocal supporters. Mark Falcoff of the conservative American Enterprise Institute in Washington defends Leiken's analysis and argues that his colleague is attacked because he has deviated from the leftist line popular among academics. Others who know Central America well defend Leiken, if not always his point of view. "Bob probably knows more about Nicaragua than any other non-Nicaraguan," says Nina Shea of the New York-based International League for Human Rights. "He's tireless in his pursuit of the facts and lets the chips fall where they may."

Whatever others think of him, there is no denying that Leiken is, as Elliott Abrams, the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, puts it, "an important player." This week the House of Representatives reconsiders the Reagan Administration's *contra* aid package. If it is passed, the White House will owe a measure of thanks to Leiken. Through his testimony on the Hill and his published arguments, he has played a significant role in developing the compromise bill that was passed three weeks ago by the Senate. The Reagan Administration hopes that this bill will be similarly palatable to Republicans and Democrats in the House. —By Jill Smolowe. Reported by Barrett Seaman/Washington

"There Is Deep, Deep Opposition"

After Robert Leiken returned last week from a five-day trip to Nicaragua with Les Aspin, a Democratic Congressman from Wisconsin, he spoke with TIME White House Correspondent Barrett Seaman. Excerpts from his remarks:

On the Sandinistas. It is now clear to me that from the beginning the overwhelming majority of this group was not just Marxist-Leninist but strongly pro-Soviet and particularly pro-Cuban. In the *contra* camps we visited, they used the term *engaño*, which means "we were tricked, we were hoaxed." The Sandinistas have not only lost popular support, I think they are detested by the population.

On *contra* support within Nicaragua. I have gone to a number of towns in Nicaragua where I have found that the youth are simply not there. I ask their parents where they've gone, and they say they've gone off to join the *contras*. We stopped at a breadline in Managua. There were about 250 people. We asked them how long they had been there. About three hours. Had they had breadlines like this before the Sandinistas? No, just in the past two years. We asked who was responsible, and finally one woman said, "Come on, tell the truth: the Sandinistas are responsible." And everyone said, "That's right." It is very, very clear there is deep, deep opposition to the Sandinistas.

On the size of the *contra* force. Despite their shortcomings, the *contras* are an authentic army of Nicaraguans, mainly peasants, fighting for their liberty against a repressive tyranny supported and maintained in power by the Soviet Union. The *contras* are many times larger than the Sandinistas ever were. If you put the major leftist insurgencies in Latin America together, they still wouldn't add up to as many as the *contras*.

On why the *contras* need U.S. support. They're facing a military machine that, after the Cubans, is the most sophisticated and best trained in Latin America, far and away the biggest in Central America. You need people, but you've also got to have equipment. Another way of looking at it is that it's stunning that they've done as well as they have in the face of a very sophisticated state security system. There's a morale factor too. They feel the other side has got a superpower committed to it, whereas the U.S. is ambivalent.

On *contra* reform. Right now, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force [F.D.N., the largest *contra* army] and United Nicaraguan Opposition [the main *contra* political organization] are a little bit like the tail wagging the dog. The military has to become subordinate to U.N.O. It's also important that the military be represented, so it's not just a bunch of politicians running the army. There is also a need for unity with other groups. One reason for the success of the Sandinistas is that they've been fighting a one-front war.

Reform is most important in the F.D.N., which has been accused of human rights violations. Reform would have a very practical military and diplomatic effect on a lot of Nicaraguans who left the country. These are middle- and working-class people who have expressed a desire to fight but who are afraid that the F.D.N. would create another dictatorship. Beyond Nicaragua, if the *contras* were acceptable to Latin Americans, then the Latin Americans would stop using Central America as their way to express anger at the U.S.

On the Roman Catholic Church. The church has been a traditional refuge for national patriotic sentiment in Nicaragua, but it is now in deep trouble. The Sandinistas have taken over their welfare office and shut down their radio and press.

On a possible U.S. invasion. It would be an enormous historical mistake. It would completely polarize the U.S. It would set back the American image in Latin America and in Europe. But I don't think the Sandinistas would put up the kind of resistance most people think. This idea that we're getting dragged into a military situation that can't be won is based too much on historical analogies. It's understandable: the U.S. went through a real trauma over Viet Nam.

On the analogy to Viet Nam. More and more, my sense is the Nicaraguans feel that the outside imperialist powers are the Soviet Union and Cuba. This is a popular struggle, but the people are on the U.S. side this time. Plus you've got rugged terrain, and you've got countries on two borders that supply sanctuaries. Finally, the geopolitical situation is favorable to the U.S. It's the Soviets who have long logistical lines, not us. I think the *contras* have a chance of winning if we have a stable, bipartisan policy of support.