

**Inside  
the  
Volcano:  
A Curriculum on Nicaragua**

Edited by  
William Bigelow and Jeff Edmundson

**Teaching for Change**  
Washington, DC

**About the readings:**

We are grateful to the Institute for Food and Development Policy for permission to reproduce **Imagine You Were A Nicaraguan** (from **Nicaragua: What Difference Could A Revolution Make?**), **Nicaragua: Give Change a Chance**, **The Plastic Kid** (from **Now We Can Speak**) and **Gringos and Contras on Our Land** (from **Don't Be Afraid, Gringo**).

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**About the artwork:**

The pictures by Rini Templeton (pages 12, 24, 26, 29, 30, 31, 38, 57, 60, 61, 66, 74, 75, 86, 87, 90, 91, 101, 112, and the cover) are used with the cooperation of the Rini Templeton Memorial Fund and can be found in the beautiful, bilingual collection of over 500 illustrations entitled **El Arte de Rini Templeton: Donde hay vida y lucha - The Art of Rini Templeton: Where there is life and struggle**, 1989, WA: The Real Comet Press. See **Appendix A** for ordering information.

The drawing on page 15 is by Nicaraguan artist Donald Navas. The Nicaraguan Cultural Alliance has the original pen and ink and others for sale. See **Appendix A** for address.

The illustrations on pages 31, 32 and 52 are by Nicaraguan artist Leonicio Sáenz. An artist of considerable acclaim in Central America, Sáenz is a frequent contributor to **Nicaráuac**, a monthly publication of the Nicaraguan Ministry of Culture. A colorful poster of his artwork is available from the Nicaraguan Cultural Alliance. See **Appendix A** for ordering information.

**About the graphs:**

The graphs on page 35, designed by Kevin Rocap and Jere Trout, are based on tables from **The Central America Fact Book** by Tom Barry and Deb Preusch.

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## Acknowledgements

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Millie Thayer, currently an editor with the journal, **Envio**, in Managua, Nicaragua, created the lessons **Before the Revolution: Land Distribution in Nicaragua**, **Imagine You Were Nicaraguan**, **Sandinista Policy Dilemmas**, and **The Plastic Kid**. Indeed, as founder of the Teachers' Committee on Central America, this entire curriculum was originally the brainchild of Millie Thayer.

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## Publisher's Notes

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### Scope

One area which we plan to include in the next edition of this publication is the Atlantic Coast. Meanwhile we recommend the Atlantic Coast as an area of further investigation for students.

"The inhabitants of sparsely populated Zelaya [Atlantic Coast] are culturally and racially distinct... Unlike the original inhabitants of western Nicaragua, who were largely of Meso-American origin, the pre-Columbian peoples of the eastern coast were descendants of immigrants from South America. Later, during the colonial period, when the region fell under the control of the British, English-speaking Black slaves were introduced into the region. As a result of these factors, most of the people of the Atlantic region speak English and/or Indian languages rather than Spanish, are Protestant rather than Catholic and have a variety of cultural traditions distinct from those of the country's Hispanic majority."<sup>(1)</sup>

Initial problems between the new Sandinista government and citizens of the Atlantic Coast were addressed in the Autonomy Law in the new National Constitution. Nicaragua is one of the few countries in the Americas to include indigenous people's ethnic rights in its Constitution, guaranteeing the preservation of their cultures, languages, religions and customs.<sup>(2)</sup>

An examination of the history of the Atlantic Coast and the development and implementation of the Autonomy Law will contribute not only to students' understanding of Nicaragua, but also to their understanding of the autonomy movements of ethnic groups in other countries.

### Notes

1. Walker, Thomas. Nicaragua: The Land of Sandino, 1986. CO:Westview Press, p.82.
2. Nicaragua Information Center. Nicaragua's Revolution: A Look At the Achievements, 1987. CA: NIC, p. 7.

# Teaching Nicaragua: The Choices We Face

In some respects this curriculum arrives after the tardy bell. No foreign policy issue was more divisive in the 1980s than the question of Nicaragua. Nicaragua stayed on the nightly news and the front pages for what seemed like every day of the Reagan presidency. Television viewers witnessed the astounding spectacle of the U.S. Congress openly debating whether or not to vote money to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. Contras and Sandinistas became household words.

Delayed arrival notwithstanding, the lessons in this booklet still have relevance and urgency. The tension between rich and poor nations is growing, and regional challenges to U.S. power and influence will persist. Nicaragua's recent history holds fundamental lessons about the relationship between the United States and all of Latin America.

As we write, Nicaragua prepares for elections, attempts to cope with economic crisis, and negotiates the demobilization of the contras. Whether events in Nicaragua continue to capture headlines, the social drama there will not have ended. It will remain a story that raises important questions for students about underdevelopment and social change.

We have tried to design a curriculum as exciting and provocative as the history on which it draws. Calling for active student participation and critical thinking, these lessons prompt students to examine their own lives so they can understand the experiences of Nicaraguans. Rather than presenting a string of names and dates to memorize, we've designed lessons that challenge students to dig for explanations, to dissect official doublespeak and to project how change might occur. As the title indicates, these lessons take students inside the social volcano of Nicaragua: Why was there a revolution? What were the revolution's goals? Who are the supporters and opponents? And what difference does Nicaragua make in our lives? Virtually every lesson is structured as a kind of visit to Nicaragua.

In preparing this guide, we investigated several global studies and world history textbooks to see what students learn about Nicaragua from traditional sources. What we discovered was discouraging, so much so that it seems to us these books actually promote a type of social and historical illiteracy. We believe the content and teaching methodology in our curriculum stands in sharp contrast to the learning-as-spectator-sport approach taken by most of the books we reviewed. Throughout these introductory pages we tour a number of popular textbooks to indicate some of the problems and possibilities in teaching Nicaragua.

## Nicaraguan Voices

Textbooks don't allow Nicaraguans to tell their own stories. Instead, Nicaraguan society and Nicaraguans' experiences are interpreted for students. Nicaraguans may be quoted, but their ideas are clipped; no one is allowed to express a complete thought. In **Global Insights** (Merrill), a widely used high school textbook, the section on Nicaragua is excerpted from an op-ed piece in the **New York Times** written by the Peruvian novelist and politician, Mario Vargas Llosa.<sup>(1)</sup> This twice-removed account of Nicaraguan society is riddled with innuendo and half-facts, but the first question we asked ourselves was, Why did this excerpt appear at all? Perhaps the editors at **Global Insights** felt that fluency in Spanish was sufficient qualification to speak on behalf of Nicaraguans. The

simple fact that Nicaraguans don't speak for themselves communicates to students at least as much as what actually appears in the article. As Adrienne Rich reminds us, "Lying is done with words and also with silence."<sup>2</sup> And the silence of Nicaraguans in textbooks suggests many lies to students: Nicaraguans aren't capable of interpreting their own social reality; outsiders know best what is good for Nicaragua; Nicaraguans are unable to make political choices regarding the direction of their own society. Of course, many textbooks totally ignore Nicaragua — which is an even simpler way of silencing a people.

Throughout this curriculum, Nicaraguans speak for themselves. The stories, poems, and interviews give students the chance to hear what some Nicaraguans think of events in their own society. Perhaps even more importantly, the implicit message of these lessons is that the people of Nicaragua can think and speak for themselves. Through role play and imaginative writing, the lessons call on students to empathize with the choices facing Nicaraguans — through their imaginations, to "become" Nicaraguans. In this way, students give voice to Nicaraguans in the classroom discourse itself.

However, we've been careful not to "homogenize" Nicaraguan consciousness. There is no one Nicaraguan voice. For example, in Lesson #6, **Dialogue Poem: Two Women**, we encourage students to imagine how people of different social classes would experience and understand the same event or action. One of our students used the point/counter-point style of the poem, "Two Women," to show conflicting views of a young Sandinista organizer prior to the 1979 revolution:

... who wanted people to get enough to eat,  
to sleep with a roof over their heads,  
who wanted to overthrow the government  
and give power and money to the peasants,

but that meant taking from the needlessly rich  
and giving to the needlessly poor.  
and that meant stealing from the wealthy  
and giving to the worthless beggars...

Lesson #11, **A Plastic Kid**, shows how the literacy crusade was a once-in-a-lifetime educational experience for young Rene Escoto, although for his parents it was a communist campaign to brainwash the campesinos. Bringing Nicaraguan voices into the classroom means breathing life into the conflicts in Nicaraguan society.

### **Social Choice**

Too often, textbooks offer a tidy world of conclusions and facts to be memorized and regurgitated in end-of-the-chapter 'check ups'. In the pages of their textbooks students find the world finished; decisions made, deeds accomplished — and thus unchangeable. Nicaraguan society — indeed, every society — is far from finished. In these lessons students learn some of the context within which Nicaraguans have maneuvered to create their society. For example, in Lesson #8, **Sandinista Policy Dilemmas**, students assume the role of Sandinista organizers who have just come to power in 1979. The new government confronts defeated, yet still armed national guardsmen, tremendous physical destruction and widespread economic sabotage by certain sectors. What should the



new leaders do? Through role play, students begin to understand that the direction Nicaraguan society took, after the overthrow of Somoza, was not inevitable. Some students-as-Sandinistas may propose to shoot all the former national guardsmen, others may counter that this path violates the generous and forgiving premises of the revolution. By stepping into the positions of Nicaragua's new leaders, students can see that consciousness and human choice play a significant role in history; events do not march on inexorably without people having something to say about them. From this activity we hope students will realize that what happens in their society depends in large part on the collective role they play in analyzing and changing it.

### **A People-centered Curriculum**

The empathy we're aiming for in these lessons is not simply intellectual. We want to touch students' hearts. What has occurred in Nicaragua since William Walker declared himself president in the middle of the last century has been a sometimes-agonizing, sometimes-inspiring drama. It would be unfair not to give our students the opportunity to involve themselves emotionally as well as intellectually. This is one of the reasons we frequently use poetry. (See Lessons #6, 7 and 13.) Through poetry students enter aspects of Nicaraguan life and describe them with economy and passion. One of our students addressed a poem to Ben Linder, the U.S. engineer killed by the contras in April of 1987, and read it at a city-wide peace festival:

You measured  
the stream's depth,  
while the hidden ones  
measured your time.  
While you sat  
on your porch,  
sipping morning coffee,  
these men  
were... in a  
military camp  
learning to kill,  
learning to cut  
all the flowers of spring.(3)

Textbooks are much more likely to encourage empathy with policymakers in this country than with policy-recipients in the Third World (see below.) We turn this tradition around and ask students to imagine the struggles of those on the periphery of power. Sergio Ramirez's story, "**Nicaragua is White**" (Lesson #5), exposes students to a sardonic allegory about cultural domination, about people who measure themselves against foreign standards. In a follow-up writing assignment, students draw on their own experiences for a more intimate understanding. In Lesson #13, **The Honduran Connection**, students meet Elvia Alvarado, a passionate and articulate Honduran peasant leader. She describes life in a country occupied by two sets of foreign soldiers: contras and *gringos*. The reading and subsequent activities help students see how the war in Nicaragua has spilled into the lives of people in other Central American societies.

Ironically, a number of textbooks virtually ignore the fact that there are people living

in Central America. In **Latin America and Canada** (Allyn and Bacon), aimed at a middle school audience, students are offered an almost animistic account of Central American social development: “Coffee growing began in Costa Rica in the 1700s. By 1850 coffee had begun to dominate the country’s economy. Plantations then sprang up in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala.”(4) In this textbook, action is undertaken not by people, but by things. “Coffee” dominates economies, not the wealthy landowners who grow rich off the cheap labor of their workers. It’s as though the coffee beans themselves had consciousness and will. Plantations “sprang up” all on their own. Our students will be forgiven if they have difficulty grasping how and why societies change when they are confronted with this kind of mystification. About Nicaragua today, students learn only that the country is Central America’s leading cotton exporter. That’s it. The book reports nothing about the conditions of people’s lives, their struggles, their conflicting interests. We seek to challenge this kind of presentation by putting people at the center; in this curriculum people feel, think and choose — not coffee beans.

### **Description or Explanation?**

An account such as the one above eschews explanation in favor of description. There is not even an attempt to account for why the society changed, only a few lines reporting that it changed. We encourage students to probe beneath the surface, to ask why. In the very first lesson, **Before the Revolution: Land Distribution in Nicaragua**, our goal is to engage students in a simulation where they confront first-hand the social conditions producing the alienation and outrage which led to armed revolt. Lesson #2, **Imagine You Were a Nicaraguan...**, asks students to put themselves in the positions of poor Nicaraguans under the Somoza dictatorship and to visualize the social changes they would like brought about in their country. Most textbooks make no more than passing effort to account for why the revolution occurred — if they even bother mentioning it. Without a sense of the causes for and objectives of the revolution students are poorly equipped to evaluate its accomplishments or shortcomings.

Often, by using the word “because,” a textbook will lead students to think they are getting an explanation. Listen to **Global Insights** tell students why there is a war in El Salvador: “There’s no peace because of those... automatic weapons...”(5) [ellipses in original]. In other words, there is violence because there is war — or, if you prefer, there is war because there is violence. This tautological silliness is often what passes for explanation in textbook-speak. Notice, too, the consistent absence of human agency: in the earlier excerpt, coffee beans had brains, in this excerpt, automatic weapons are the social actors.

### **United States Policy in the Region**

When it comes to describing and analyzing the recent United States role in Central America, the textbooks we have examined are uniformly inadequate. **Global Insights** opens its section on Nicaragua with the following:

The Sandinistas promised to put an end to the civil war that was raging, revive the economy, and hold free elections. By 1984, however, conditions had worsened rather than improved, and a rebel group known as Contras were trying to overthrow the Sandinista government.(6)

This is an historically twisted passage, made unavoidably so by the authors' refusal to discuss the role of the United States. First, the contras are portrayed as if their activities were a *response* to civil war rather than a *cause*. The passive construction, "conditions had worsened" allows the authors to ignore the causes for worsening conditions: What role did the contras have in sabotaging economic and social development? The contras appear as if by magic in the passage, their origins never questioned. Who were the contras? Who organized them into an army? Who paid their salaries and supplied them with weapons, uniforms, food and medicine? To answer these questions would necessitate a discussion of the United States role in the war in Nicaragua, and textbook publishers seem unwilling to initiate such a discussion. It may be that publishers simply want to avoid controversy, but whatever the reason, this avoidance results in a deficient and misleading historical portrait.(7)

A premise of this curriculum is that the United States has been so deeply involved in events in Central America it would be impossible to understand Nicaragua outside of its relationship with the United States. We've attempted to be both descriptive (as in Lesson #3, **The United States in Nicaragua: Timeline**) as well as explanatory (see Lesson #4, **Reasons for United States Involvement in Latin America**.) Instead of telling students what we think are the roots and purposes of U.S. involvement, we present conflicting interpretations from a number of scholars and officials and allow students to decide for themselves. For example, according to then-Secretary of State George Shultz, the United States "will honor our commitment to promote economic growth and social justice in the region." But the writer, Eduardo Galeano, counters that "when economic crisis in the United States begins..., the pillage of poor countries must be intensified to guarantee full employment, public liberties, and high rates of development in the rich countries" (from Student Handout #4-B.) Well, which is it? Together, students poke through contradictory claims to arrive at hypotheses. In Lesson #9, **U.S. Policy Towards Nicaragua**, we present sharply opposing viewpoints on recent U.S. involvement in Nicaragua. However, as often as possible we've tried constructing the lessons to offer students a 'view from the South': putting them in the positions of Nicaraguans.

In the rare instances when U.S. textbooks do discuss U.S. policy in the region, students are asked to identify with the U.S. government, rather than with people in other lands who are affected by that policy. **Geography and World Affairs** (Rand McNally) admits that during the "early 1900s" the U.S. military landed in Nicaragua in order to "help collect debts and to maintain order..." (certainly a sanitary description of the long U.S. occupation and bloody counterinsurgency) and that some Latin Americans have been left suspicious of U.S. intentions in the region. The book concludes, "In view of these past events, the United States has found it hard to convince Latin Americans that we do have good intentions toward them. We are trying hard to erase the bad feelings created by our past behavior."(8) The unexamined assumption is that the United States government does have "good intentions" toward Nicaraguans and other Latin Americans. But apart from this questionable starting point, the repeated use of the pronouns "we" and "our" demands that students identify with the actions of their government. Students are not offered the option of choosing to critique and then oppose, if they so decide, the policies of U.S. political leaders.

Our concluding lesson, **A North American in Nicaragua: The Life of Ben Linder**, is about just such a person who chose to question his country's foreign policy. Linder was recently graduated from the University of Washington in Seattle, when he decided to move to Nicaragua and put his engineering skills to work in the young revolution.

Linder was killed by the contras while working on a small hydro-electric project in a sparsely populated, mountainous region of the country. We think this is an important lesson, not because we judge Linder to be one of the most significant people in Nicaraguan history, but because his life allows U.S. students to think through their relationship to government policy and social change. Even more, the lesson asks students to reflect on their life goals and to consider the work and involvements that can help them realize those goals.

We risk contributing to our students' already-substantial cynicism if we expose them to conditions of war and poverty in Nicaragua and then indicate no possibilities for involvement in change. The U.S. government and U.S. corporations have been and still *are* deeply entangled in the affairs of all Latin America. Students have a right to examine critically the character U.S. activities and to act on what they discover. The textbook silence on the U.S. role in Nicaragua contributes to disabling student critique and action. The lesson on Ben Linder is not meant to encourage students to pack up and move to Nicaragua, although, in fact, some of them might be interested in student/teacher tours to the region, or coffee picking and construction brigades (see Appendix A: **Sources for Further Reading and Activity**). Our hope is that through the lesson, students gain permission to adopt an independent, critical outlook on foreign policy and are encouraged to act on that judgment when conscience dictates.

### **The Question of "Bias"**

Because discussion of Nicaragua in the United States has been sharply polarized, the question of bias will inevitably arise. The easy answer is: Of course this curriculum contains bias, all text material is biased; there is an infinity of facts and any presentation must necessarily be partial. However, the question then becomes, which criteria guided the selection of readings, activities and discussion questions included in the curriculum? Underpinning all these lessons is an assumption that countries, no matter how small, have a basic right to self-determination. Ideologies and practices which violate this right are anti-democratic, frequently racist, and always deserving of rigorous critique. Hence, the readings we've selected demonstrate people's potential to direct their own lives and are critical of inequities in political power. Beyond this essential bias in favor of democracy, is the understanding that a central obstacle to Nicaraguan autonomy has been its historic subordinate relationship to the United States. A glance at our table of contents shows that we think the United States government has been a key player in Nicaraguan history and politics. However, we have made efforts to provide students with conflicting interpretations of this involvement. There is no attempt to silence voices in defense of U.S. policy.

Our democratic bias also has a broader meaning. A truly democratic education entails more than teaching students that they can vote every few years. It means helping them develop the tools to be effective, active participants in society. This obviously includes the ability to question assumptions and to make reasoned judgments. But democracy also requires courage: the courage to act on one's convictions, to challenge authority when necessary, to take unpopular stands. We hope these lessons offer students some new ways to think about this kind of commitment. People *can* understand their society and they can change it: a democratic education ought to show our students that they can do both.

## Notes

1. Global Insights, Merrill Publishing Co., Columbus, OH, 1987, pp. 524-526.
2. From Adrienne Rich, **On Lies, Secrets and Silence**, quoted in Michelle Fine, "Silencing and Nurturing Voice in an Improbable Context: Urban Adolescents in Public School," in Henry A. Giroux and Peter McLaren, eds., **Critical Pedagogy, the State, and Cultural Struggle**, State University of New York Press, Albany: 1989, p. 156.
3. Chelsea Campbell, "Measuring Distances," **Central America Update**, June 1988, p. 9.
4. **Latin America and Canada**, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1983, p. 184.
5. **Global Insights**, p. 526.
6. **Global Insights**, p. 524.
7. Some texts acknowledge a U.S. role in the region, but describe rather than explain: "The Sandinista government also faced opposition from the United States, which sent military aid to the anti-government rebels. In 1983 the United States cut its imports of Nicaraguan sugar, charging the Sandinistas with aiding anti-government forces in El Salvador." [**A History of the World**, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1985, p. 819.] What motivated U.S. actions? Was the alleged Nicaraguan support of Salvadoran guerrillas really behind U.S. hostility or was something else at work? Even texts which admit U.S. involvement offer students no way to analyze and evaluate the reasons behind that involvement.
8. **Geography and World Affairs**, Rand McNally, Chicago, 1976, p. 181. Early U.S. involvement in Latin America, while often presented as a bit heavy-handed, is almost always cleansed with the lofty assertion that the troops had landed "to restore order": "The United States also stepped into Nicaragua and Honduras to set finances in order and to protect American investments. In 1915, internal trouble broke out in Haiti. American marines were sent to restore order." [**History and Life: The World and Its People**, Scott Foresman, Glenview, IL, 1984, p. 544.] "...between 1912 and 1916, the government sent American soldiers to Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti to restore order. After the soldiers left, the United States government still kept financial control and took charge of elections." [**Human Heritage: A World History**, Charles E. Merrill Publishing, Columbus, OH, 1985, p. 600.] What does it mean to "set finances in order," "to restore order," to keep "financial control," or to take "charge of elections"? This gobbledygook seems almost intended to prevent students from understanding what the United States actually did in these interventions.

## **Note to the Teacher**

The lessons in this curriculum are designed to be used sequentially. Several of them depend directly on understandings developed in previous lessons. Together, they provide a multi-faceted examination of Nicaragua's history and relations with the United States.

The issues raised here go far beyond Nicaragua. These lessons cover such areas as U.S. involvement in the Third World, economics in underdeveloped countries, and the causes and nature of revolution. Thus, we urge you to teach the entire curriculum if at all possible. While the time required will vary from class to class, you should allow between four and five weeks to finish the booklet.

Since some of you may not be able to spend that length of time, we offer our suggestion for shortening the period spent studying Nicaragua. For a two week (or so) curriculum, we recommend the following:

**Lesson #1: Before the Revolution: Land Distribution in Nicaragua**

**Lesson #3: The United States in Nicaragua: Timeline**

**Lesson #4: Reasons for United States Involvement in Latin America**

**Lesson #7: My Personal Revenge**

**Lesson #8: Sandinista Policy Dilemmas**

**Lesson #9: Face to Face**

**Lesson #14: A North American in Nicaragua: The Life of Ben Linder**



Ask these students what choices they have if they want to stay alive. Students should be able to generate at least the following:

- work for someone who owns land
- turn to crime: steal from the people who have property, sell drugs, engage in prostitution
- flee the country to seek better conditions elsewhere
- work to change the inequalities through legal means (land reform legislation, welfare programs, etc.) or illegal means (revolution)

5. *(optional)* Explain that in this simulation m&m candies will represent money and that two m&ms are required to live at a bare subsistence level. Give two packets of candies to the large landowner. One packet should contain 10 to 12 m&ms. This packet is for the owner's personal consumption. Encourage the owner to eat the candies at his or her leisure. Give a second packet of candies to this large landowner. This packet should contain a number of m&m candies roughly equal to the number of students not in the rectangle. This is the owner's wage packet. With the other students listening, tell the owner that these m&m candies may be used to hire the landless to do whatever work the owner needs to have performed. (For the purpose of the simulation the landless might move or clean desks, sweep the floor, or simply pretend they are doing agricultural labor for the owners.) Remind students that everyone needs at least two m&m candies in order to avoid starvation. Competition should be sharp for jobs offered by the large landowner as the landless are starving and the owner

doesn't have enough work to go around. Give two m&m's to each of the small farmers. They are surviving — barely.

6. If you decide not to use the m&m candies, simply tell students the owners are not able, or willing, to hire all the landless. Ask: Of the options we talked about earlier, which would you choose? If some of them say they would try to work for change, ask the small farmers whether or not they would support the efforts of the landless or if they are unwilling to rock the boat. Which changes might they support and which would they oppose?

7. Some discussion questions could include:

- (To the landless): Why did you make the choice you did? e.g., to flee the country, to turn to crime, etc.
- How did you feel about the treatment you received from the large landowner? from the small farmers?
- How did you react when you saw there wouldn't be enough work for all the landless and that you might starve?
- Was there competition between the landless or did people pretty much stick together? Why?
- Why would some people tolerate these conditions? (Do they lack trust in each other or in their ability to work together? Do they believe the money of the owners will be able to corrupt some people? Don't they deserve any better conditions? Do they think the government will side with the rich against the poor?)

(To the small farmers): What would convince you to help the landless try to

make conditions in your country more fair?

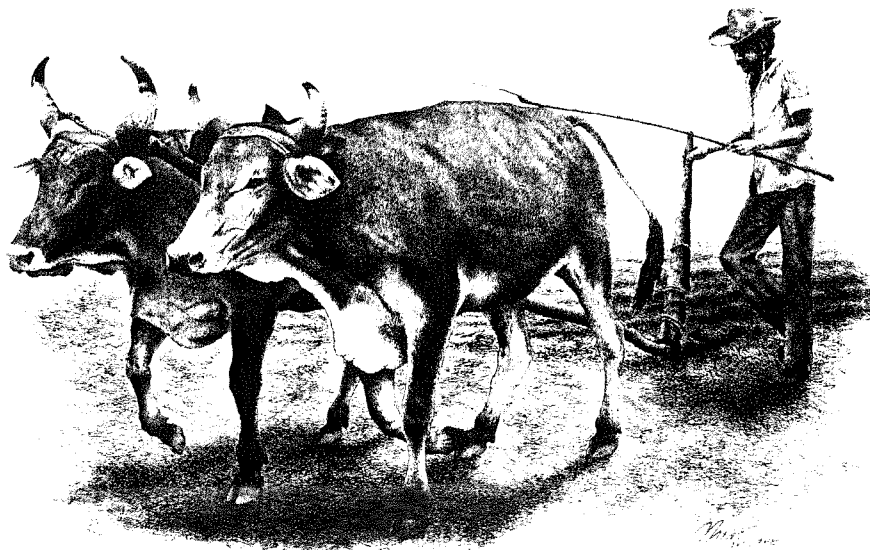
- How do you feel about the rich? Do you resent them? Are you envious and want to be one of them?
- (To the large landowner): When you hired people to work for you, what did you take into account?
- Were you worried the poor might unite against you, either to demand higher wages or even to take away your property and redistribute it?
- Did you use any techniques to prevent the landless from uniting with one another or with the small farmers?
- What would you have done if the poor had attempted to take your land from you?
- How can you justify benefitting from such a grossly unequal distribution of land?
- To all students: What do you think is the history to this system of unequal ownership of land and wealth — how did a few people come to own so much?

8. To help students answer the above questions thoughtfully, you might first ask them to remain in their roles and to write interior monologues from the point of view of their characters: What are they thinking and feeling? What fears and hopes do they have? [**Note:** An interior monologue is simply a first-person narrative of what's going on in a particular person's mind. Students should be encouraged to write quickly, without worrying about punctuation, grammar or spelling.]

9. Explain that the country the class simulated in the exercise was Nicaragua before 1979. Review the charts and statistics included in Handout #1: **Inequality in Nicaragua.**

10. Discuss or ask the class to write on the following questions:

- Based on our demonstration, why do you think there was a revolution in Nicaragua in 1979?
- What social groups do you think supported the revolution?
- What do you imagine were the major goals of the revolution?







## Imagine You Were a Nicaraguan...

*In the last lesson students experienced the unequal distribution of land and wealth in pre-1979 Nicaragua. With this lesson students begin to learn the history and to understand in greater detail some of the human consequences of this inequality.*

*This reading helps strip away a number of myths about poverty in the third world. One common myth is that people are poor because they don't work as hard as those in the industrialized North. Another is that there are just too many people in underdeveloped countries for available resources. An examination of how Nicaragua was historically linked to the world economy can begin to reveal the roots of poverty and revolt. This kind of study can also help students see connections to other poor countries today.*

### Goals/Objectives

1. Students will understand some of the historical roots of poverty and rebellion in Nicaragua.
2. Students will confront some of the human effects of the unequal distribution of land and wealth in pre-1979 Nicaragua.

### Materials Needed

- Handout #2: **Imagine You Were a Nicaraguan...** (From **What Difference Could a Revolution Make?** by Joseph Collins)

### Procedure

1. Read aloud or assign students to read for homework, Handout #2: **Imagine You Were a Nicaraguan...** As students read, they should use their imaginations to put themselves in the position of the person in the reading. You may want to tell students that you will "interview" them after the reading as if they were that person.
2. The following questions can be adapted for a written assignment or for discussion:
  - Nicaragua (1977) can't be all that poor, the country exports so many crops this must indicate there is lots to go around. The country also imports food crops. How could there possibly be much poverty?
  - How could it actually be in the interest of the wealthy landowners who grow export crops (cotton, coffee, sugar) to have a large number of people on the brink of starvation? (Because most of the labor required on the export crop plantations is seasonal, the landowners need a large pool of workers who will leave their homes at harvest time. If everyone in Nicaragua had an adequate amount of land, the export crop growers could not count on a plentiful supply of labor.)
  - If, as the reading indicates, there was so much hunger in Nicaragua, why was twenty-two times more land planted with export crops than with food crops? If the theory of supply and demand were true, there would be an obvious demand for food.

### Imagine You Were a Nicaraguan...

Imagine it's 1977 and you are a 17-year-old Nicaraguan. Your family, like two-thirds of all rural families, has either no land at all or not enough to feed itself. If yours is "lucky" enough to have a little plot of land, half or even more of what you grow — or a steep cash rent — goes to the landowner in the city.

Last year you watched, helpless, as your little sister became repeatedly ill with diarrhea. Your parents saw her losing her strength but there was no one to help. In all of rural Nicaragua there are only five clinics with beds. The first few times your sister pulled through. But by then she was so weak that when measles hit, you watched her die after four painful days. The year before, your brother died right after birth; your mother and father have lost five of their children.

You cannot remember a day when your mother was not worried about having enough food for your family — and, of course, you never really did have enough or your little sister wouldn't have died from measles. You heard once on a neighbor's radio that Nicaragua was importing more and more corn, beans, and sorghum. And you've heard about the incredible *supermercados* in Managua. But without money you can't buy food no matter how much there is.

The seven people in your family share a single-room shack, divided by a thin partition. The floor is dirt, there is no electric light, no toilet, no clean drinking water. You are outraged when you hear Somoza\* boast to some American reporters that "Nicaragua has no

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\* Anastasio Somoza, the Nicaraguan dictator

housing problem because of its wonderful climate."

You hardly know anyone who can read and write — except the priest, of course, but he's from Spain. You'd like to learn but there is no school. Anyway, you must work.

To buy a few simple tools, some cooking oil, sugar, salt, and kerosene, your father has to borrow money. But the only source of credit is the local money-lender who makes him pay back half again as much and sometimes much more. Not surprisingly, your family is forever in debt.

Locked in debt and without land to grow enough food, your family is forced to labor on the coffee, cotton, or sugar estates. But such work is available only three to four months a year at harvest time. Since the pay is miserable everyone in your family must work to try to bring in enough; your mother, your grandmother, your older sister — about 40 percent of the coffee and cotton cutters are women — and your father and brother. You had to start picking coffee when you were 6. For filling a 20-pound bucket you earn only 16 cents. Working sunup to sundown, you might earn a dollar.

Your "home" during the harvest is a long, windowless barrack built out of unpainted planks or plywood. With the other exhausted workers — men and women, old people and children, sick and well — you sleep on plywood slabs, called "drawers" because they are stacked four or five high with only a foot and a half of space between them. There is no privacy for there are no partitions. There is no flooring, no window, not a single light

bulb. The only toilet is the bushes. Filth all the day long. For three to four months a year this is home for you and for over 400,000 other Nicaraguans.

Working on the coffee estates is bad, but picking cotton is even worse. You found that out one year when your family had to travel even farther, down to the Pacific coastal cotton estates, to find work. At least coffee grows in the cooler regions. But on the coastal lowlands the blinding tropical sun hangs in a cloudless sky, bringing temperatures to well over 100 degrees. You had nothing to protect you from the cotton branches, the pesticide-saturated fields, and the maddening swirl of gnats and jiggers.

Placing your baby sister on the edge of the hot, dusty field, your mother picked cotton as fast as she could, filling her sack and rushing to the weighing station so she could hurry back to nurse. She didn't know that the tests would probably have shown that her breast milk had over 500 times the DDT considered safe for consumption by the World Health Organization, a frightening contamination due to 20 to 40 aerial DDT sprayings a year of the cotton fields.

In the harvests too, hunger is a constant companion. All you get are small portions of beans and fried bananas and, rarely, some rice or corn tortillas or a bit of cheese in place of the bananas. Yet for this food, about three hours' wages are deducted from your pay. Even here, you're sure the owner makes profits. You only see meat on the final day of the harvest when the *patrón* and his family put on a "feast."

As you grow older, you realize that even though your family has no land, it is not because your country lacks land. You learn — quite likely through a Catholic priest — that there are more than five agricultural acres for every Nicaraguan, and potentially twice that. The problem is that most of the land is owned by the few

big landowners. The richest 2 percent own over 50 percent of the land, while the poorest 70 percent of landowners — and that doesn't include your father, who only rents his miserable plot — own only 2 percent of the land.

Not only do the rich own most of the land, you discover, but clearly they've got the best land. Their soil is most fertile and flat. Yet they waste its potential, using it mostly to graze cattle. By the 1970s, in fact, 10 out of 11 million acres used for export production were being devoted to cattle grazing.

While you are constantly hungry, you discover that 22 times more land goes to produce for exports than to grow food for Nicaraguans. And much of the food-growing land is so poor and hilly that it should be in pasture.

While you are growing up your grandmother tells you stories of how things got to be the way they are now, stories she heard from her parents back in the 1880s.

In those days, the powerful people had large cattle *haciendas*, but they were less concerned about producing beef and milk than they were in just holding on to the land. For many who traced their descent from the *conquistadores*, land was the primary source of their status.

Because they needed few workers, these land barons were content to let people like your great-grandparents work parcels of land, although, of course, they never got legal papers for it. So, while your great-grandparents were poor *campesinos*, at least they could feed themselves from their small farm, called a *tierra*. They grew corn, beans, and some vegetables, had some bananas and other fruit trees, and kept a few pigs and chickens.

Then, somewhat before your grandmother was born — in the 1870s and 1880s — the Nicaraguan countryside began to change rapidly.

The demand for coffee in foreign countries was booming and Nicaragua's

landowning elite, as well as new immigrant investors, were quick to respond. With visions of coffee trees as money trees, they broke up scores of cattle ranches, planting pastures with coffee trees.

To give a law-and-order veneer to pushing your great-grandparents and tens of thousands of *campesino* families like them off their *tierras*, the coffee entrepreneurs pushed through a “Law of Agrarian Reform” and other legislation. It put up for auction indigenous people’s communal lands and much of public and church land. Although your great-grandfather and other *campesinos* had worked the land for years, they stood no chance of getting it. They were easily outbid by the coffee interests.

When the poor refused to get off the land they had worked for decades, the new owners drove cattle onto the *tierras* to trample and eat the crops. Your great-grandfather was almost killed in 1881 when thousands of dispossessed *campesinos* rebelled. Five thousand were massacred.

The new coffee barons needed not only land but labor, especially at harvest time. Robbing your great-grandparents of their self-sufficient farms insured that they would have to go to work on the big estates. How else could your great-grandparents’ family survive? And as if necessity were not enough, laws were decreed requiring *campesinos* to show proof on demand that they were employed during the coffee harvest.

To survive between harvests, your great-grandparents migrated toward the central part of the country, the “agricultural frontier.” There a cattle rancher allowed them to slash and burn some virgin land in order to plant corn and beans. But once they had their first crop or so, the owner put cattle on the land, telling your great-grandparents they’d have to clear more land if they wanted to eat. It was in one of those clearings, your

grandmother tells you, that she was born.

You understand now that the history of your family, like tens of thousands of Nicaraguan *campesino* families, is tied to coffee. But you wonder where all the endless fields of cotton came from.

Your father explains that while he heard some talk of cotton when he was a boy, it was only in 1950, just ten years before you were born, that “white gold fever” hit Nicaragua. In only a few years the white puff balls took over the Pacific plain as far as you could see, north to south and right up to the base of the volcanos. The cotton plants wouldn’t hold down the rich volcanic soil and soon the region became plagued with dust storms.

By the mid-1950s, cotton topped coffee as Nicaragua’s biggest export. Somoza saw to it that the cotton investors got cheap bank credit, for he personally reaped millions of dollars on the cotton boom. It’s completely unfair, your father tells you, that the rich export farmers don’t even risk their money; he and the other *campesinos* grow what people really need most — basic foods — yet they can’t get even the smallest bank loan.

In the cotton bonanza, *campesinos*, most of whom did not have any papers for their lands, were bought out for next to nothing; failing that, they were forced off the land. Absentee landowners returned to evict their *campesino* tenants and rent out their lands to cotton entrepreneurs.

When *campesinos* resisted, the National Guard burned their homes and crops and pulled up the fences. Indeed, some of the cotton speculators themselves were high officers in Somoza’s National Guard, Nicaragua’s army and police set up by the U.S. Marines. You understand more than ever why your father and all his friends hate the Guard.

Cotton took over the land that had been growing corn and beans, rice and sorghum, all the basic food crops of the people. The tens of thousands of displaced

peasant producers at best wound up as sharecroppers and cash renters on plots of earth too small and poor to support them.

Some of the *campesinos* run off the land by the cotton invasion pushed east and north into the “agricultural frontier.” There, just like your great-grandparents had done, they cleared trees and brush on the huge cattle haciendas only to be forced onto new uncleared land by cattlemen seeking to cash in on the next export boom — the 1960s boom in beef exports in the United States.

Pushed even deeper into the mountainous interior, these tens of thousands of *campesinos* are even poorer than your

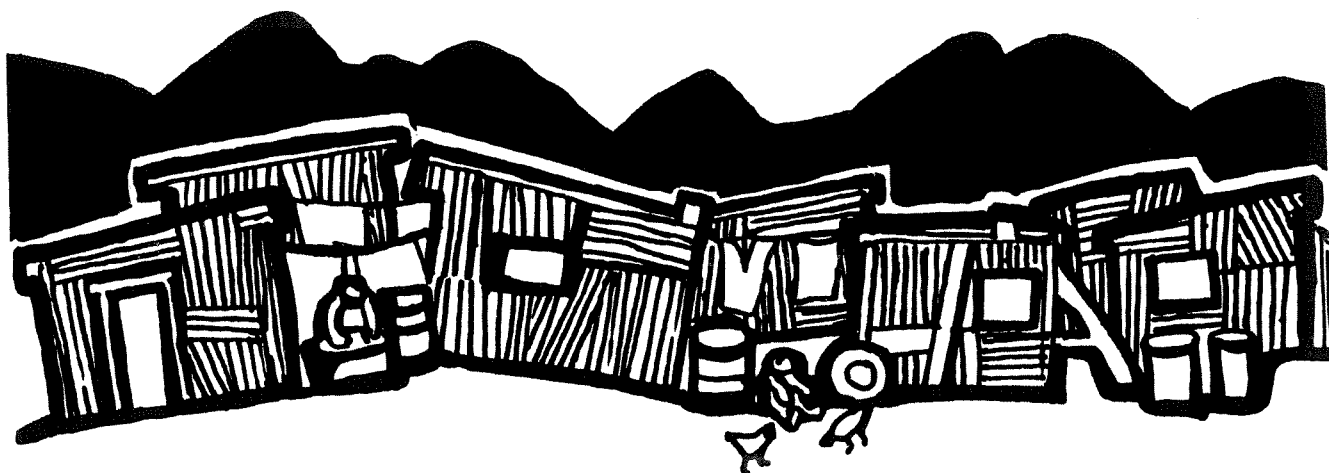
family. Almost half the year they are entirely cut off from the rest of the country; even a *burro* can’t get through the muddy trails and dirt roads. Few have ever seen a doctor, even though the area teems with disease, including malaria and adult measles.

You think about all of this — what the priest says, your sisters and brothers needlessly dying, the stories of your grandmother and of your father, and what Somoza claims — everytime you look down from your family’s little hillside cornfield at the cattle grazing on the fertile valley plains of Somoza’s lawyer.

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**Writing Assignment:** Imagine you are the Nicaraguan described in the reading. A foreign journalist comes to your home to interview you and your family about your lives. His question is: What changes would you like to see happen in your country and why? He says he will not use your name in his story so you decide to be completely honest. Write a response to his question.

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## The U.S. in Nicaragua: Timeline

*Little of what students read in the newspapers or hear on television about Nicaragua equips them to understand the history of U.S. involvement. Cut off from this important background, actions taken both by Nicaragua and the United States can appear puzzling. This lesson seeks to provide students with an overview of the long and rocky relationship between the two countries. The history sketched in the timeline will be crucial as students grapple with the whys of recent and current U.S. involvement and look for recurring patterns.*

### Goals/Objectives:

1. Students will learn the outlines of the United States/Nicaragua relationship to the 1979 revolution.
2. Students will consider the causes and consequences of U.S. involvement.

### Materials Needed

- Handout #3: **The U.S. in Nicaragua: Timeline**

### Time Required

- One to one and a half class periods, homework and follow-up discussion.

### Procedure

1. Ask students what they know about U.S. involvement in Nicaragua. List their responses on the board. If they respond with comments like, 'We support the contras,' ask them if they know how long the U.S. has supported the contras. Try to get students to think historically. Even if they have little idea how long the U.S. government has been involved this, too, is important for them to realize. Also, ask students to be cautious with pronouns: if they say 'we' support the contras, were they, in fact, participants in the decision to send military support? And do they wish to identify with all actions of the U.S. government? Whether or not the answer is 'yes', it is important that students come to see this identification as a choice and not as a given.
2. Distribute Handout #3: **The U.S. in Nicaragua: Timeline.**
3. We suggest going over the timeline aloud as students will surely have comments and questions as you review the history. Often, we may not be able to answer all of our students' questions, simply because we don't have the background. But it is also important for students to realize that diplomacy is frequently carried on in secret, so key details of this or that policy or action may not always be known.
4. Here are some questions raised by the timeline:
  - What are some of the attitudes which seem to underlie U.S. involvement in Nicaragua?
  - Besides certain attitudes towards the country, what else seems to motivate U.S. policy in Nicaragua?

- What explanations do you think were offered to citizens in the United States when the U.S. military first intervened in Nicaragua?
  - The group which organized in the early 1960s to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship called itself the Sandinista National Liberation Front. What was the significance of using Augusto Sandino's name in the title of this organization? What might this choice tell you about the group's attitude towards the U.S. presence in Nicaragua?
  - In 1936, the U.S. Minister in Nicaragua reported to the Secretary of State that Somoza was a murderer. Why did the U.S. government continue to support Somoza?
  - One memo about Somoza written in the U.S. embassy in Managua speaks of Somoza's "expressions of friendship" towards the United States. What does this indicate the U.S. government looks for in a "friend"? For his part, why is Somoza so friendly to the United States?
  - In her February 1978 statement, Sally Shelton refers to U.S. military aid to Somoza as providing "a sense of security". What does Shelton mean by "security"? What kind of security did Somoza provide? For whom?
  - Had the State Department followed through on its proposal to send a "peacekeeping" military force to Nicaragua in 1979 what kind of government would likely have been set up? What characteristics would the United States government have wanted in a new Nicaraguan government?
  - What further questions does the timeline leave unanswered about the history of U.S./Nicaraguan relations?
5. Ask students to think about "choice-points" in U.S./Nicaraguan history: times when a different decision could have profoundly changed that history. For example, what if the United States had forced Somoza out of office when our government first learned he was having political opponents murdered? How would this have changed Nicaraguan history? For homework, ask students to list a number of these choice-points and to imagine, in writing, how Nicaragua might have developed had the U.S. government made different decisions.

In follow-up discussion, review some of the choice-points students listed. Ask whether they think the U.S. government considered the same alternatives the students considered. Why or why not? If more U.S. citizens had been aware of events in Nicaragua, what difference might this have made?

This assignment aims to show students that history is not strictly inevitable: at all times there is a range of possible choices with very different outcomes; ordinary people can play a part in influencing decisions.





### The United States in Nicaragua: Timeline

**1821:** Nicaragua and the rest of Central America declare independence from Spain and form a federation: the United Provinces of Central America.

**1838:** The Central American union is dissolved and Nicaragua becomes a republic.

**early 1850s:** California gold rush: Lake Nicaragua is a major route for prospectors on their way to the gold fields of California. U.S. shipping magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt constructs a ferry system across Nicaragua.

**1850:** The United States and Great Britain sign Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, which declares that both nations shall share rights to a trans-Nicaraguan Canal. The Nicaraguan government was not consulted.

**1855:** William Walker and 58 other Americans arrive in Nicaragua.

**1856:** Walker has himself “elected” president of Nicaragua. His government is immediately recognized as the legitimate government by the United States. Walker legalizes slavery, which had been abolished in 1824. Walker’s flag carries the inscription “five or none” indicating his quest to spread slavery throughout all of Central America.

**1857:** Walker is defeated by a combined Central American force.

**1867:** The United States violates an 1850 treaty with Great Britain and makes an

agreement with Nicaragua granting the U.S. exclusive transit rights across the country.

**1909:** The Liberal government of Jose Santos Zelaya in Nicaragua defies the United States, negotiates a loan with a British company and opens negotiations with the Japanese over a canal through its territory. The United States backs a revolt against Zelaya. When the revolt looks as though it will fail, U.S. Marines land on the Atlantic coast to save it. Zelaya is overthrown. Conservative General Estrada becomes president. The U.S. commander in Nicaragua writes: “[T]he present government. . . is in power because of United States troops. . .”

Nicaragua agrees to sell a canal zone to the U.S. for \$3 million dollars, though Nicaragua is only allowed to use the money with U.S. consent. Nicaragua is forced to replace British loans with loans from U.S. banks. As “security,” these banks take half the national railroad, full control of customs duties, and the currency system.

**1912:** President Taft says: “The day is not far distant when three Stars and Stripes at three equidistant points will mark our territory: one at the North Pole, another at the Panama Canal, and the third at the South Pole. The whole hemisphere will be ours in fact as, by virtue of our superiority of race, it already is ours morally.”

Thousands of U.S. Marines and sailors go ashore in Nicaragua to save the Conservative government of Adolfo Diaz. A “legation guard” will remain in Nicaragua for the next thirteen years.

**1914:** The Nicaraguan government signs Bryan-Chamorro treaty giving the United States exclusive canal rights.

**1925:** U.S. Marines leave Nicaragua, feeling that the present government is pro-U.S. and stable.

**1926:** U.S. troops return as attempts are made to oust the pro-U.S. government.

**July 1927:** An officer in the Nicaraguan military, Augusto Sandino, decides to fight against the U.S. presence and influence in his country. Four hundred men join him in the mountains.

The U.S. sends more Marines to fight Sandino's guerrillas. There is one U.S. soldier for every one hundred people in Nicaragua. Many Nicaraguans join Sandino, others are outraged at the behavior of U.S. troops in the country. One U.S. lieutenant is photographed holding a human head. A Marine Corps historian admits that the Marines shot and abused prisoners, used the "water torture" and mutilated the bodies of their victims. U.S. planes attack Sandino's troops in the first dive-bombings in history.

**Sandino says:** "We have taken up arms from the love of our country because all other leaders have betrayed it and sold themselves out to the foreigner... What right have foreign troops to call us outlaws and bandits and to say we are the aggressors?... We are no more bandits than was [George] Washington... If their consciences had not become dulled by their scramble for wealth, Americans would not so easily forget the lesson that, sooner or later, every nation, however weak, achieves freedom, and that every abuse of power hastens the destruction of the one who wields it."

Many in the U.S. protest the war in Nicaragua. Protesters are arrested in front of the White House. Petitions are circulated; one national committee collects medical supplies for Sandino and his supporters.

**1928:** U.S. troops are increased from 2,000 to 6,000.

**January 1929:** After U.S.-supervised elections, a new president, Moncada, is sworn in. Sandino promises to recognize his presidency and lay down arms if Moncada demands the immediate withdrawal of all U.S. forces from the country. Sandino also insists on a series of reforms: an eight hour day for all workers, equal pay for equal work for women, regulation of child labor and the recognition of workers' right to organize unions.

Moncada ignores Sandino's demands and steps up repression in the country.

U.S. economic involvement in Latin America continues to grow. In 1914 United States companies held 17% of all investments in the region; by 1929 the figure is 40%.

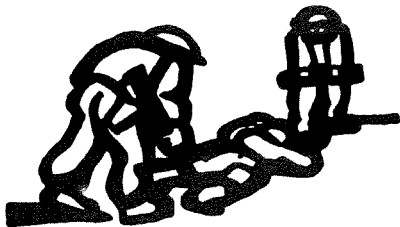


**1930:** Sandino's support grows as government repression increases and the worldwide Depression brings hard economic times.

**1931:** The U.S. Minister in Nicaragua worries that Sandino's movement is attaining a "revolutionary character." Nonetheless, opposition to U.S. policies at home and the bad economic conditions in the United States force the government to begin a gradual withdrawal of troops from Nicaragua. But first the U.S. creates a local Nicaraguan military force, the National Guard. It is trained, equipped, and advised by the United States.

**1933:** A new president, Juan Sacasa, is sworn in. The U.S. military withdraws from Nicaragua, having failed to defeat Sandino. The National Guard's commander, Anastasio Somoza, is selected to carry on the fight. The United States had lost over one hundred marines in fighting Sandino's rebels.

**February 21, 1934:** Sandino comes to Managua in good faith to negotiate with President Sacasa. Sandino is picked up by Somoza's National Guard and machine-gunned to death in a field. Somoza soon feels confident enough to brag about the murder. He claims it was done with the knowledge of the U.S. Minister in Nicaragua. The U.S. denies involvement, but takes no action against Somoza.



**1936:** Somoza forces President Sacasa from office and takes over as president after fraudulent elections. Votes for Somoza: 107,000; votes against Somoza: 169. The U.S. Minister reports privately to

Secretary of State Cordell Hull that Somoza is murdering opponents and plundering the country, but is friendly to U.S. investors.

**1939:** President Roosevelt invites Somoza to the United States. Somoza is greeted personally at the train station by Roosevelt and is treated like royalty. In preparing for the visit Roosevelt was said to comment about Somoza: "He's a sonofabitch, but he's ours."

**1941-1945:** During World War II Nicaragua produces mahogany for U.S. PT boats and other naval vessels. Other raw materials like rubber and citronella oil are used in the war effort. By mid 1943, 95% of Nicaraguan exports are going to the United States.

The U.S. builds air bases in Managua and Puerto Cabezas as well as a naval base in Corinto, Nicaragua.

Through widespread corruption Somoza is amassing tremendous wealth. By 1944 he personally owns fifty-one cattle ranches. After ten years in office he has become one of the wealthiest men in Latin America, worth an estimated \$120 million.

**1947:** In another blatantly fraudulent election, Somoza's hand-picked candidate wins. Somoza's National Guard counted the ballots. There was no secret ballot. Those who voted for Somoza's candidate were given a pink card, la magnifica, which people carried as a safe-conduct pass.

**1952-1954:** The U.S. continues to provide lavish military support to Somoza's National Guard. In a memo to the State Department urging more aid, the embassy in Managua wrote: "[Somoza] appears to have an insatiable thirst for money and a considerable love of power. Nevertheless, the Embassy believes in his expressions of friendship for the United States. During the last war he virtually offered to turn this

country over to us. He says (and we believe him), he would do so again... He has repeatedly said that he would do exactly as we say, and we know of nothing in his record that shows any inclination to fail us in international matters.”

**1956:** Somoza is shot and killed by a young Nicaraguan poet, Rigoberto Lopez Perez. He is succeeded by his elder son, Luis Somoza. Three thousand opponents of the government are rounded up.

**1961:** President Luis Somoza permits Nicaragua to be used as a staging area for the CIA-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.

The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) organizes with the goal of overthrowing the Somoza dictatorship.

**1967:** At an opposition political rally of 60,000 people in Managua, the National Guard attacks the crowd. Forty are killed and more than one hundred wounded.

Luis Somoza's brother, Anastasio, who had been serving as head of the National Guard takes over as president.

**1969:** Between 1959 and 1969 foreign investment in Central America rose from \$388 million to \$888 million. In Nicaragua, U.S. corporations account for between 70% and 80% of total foreign investment. In the past decade, U.S. firms have invested in food processing, fisheries, tobacco, textiles, chemicals and pesticides, forest products, packaging, steel rolling and fabrication, oil refining, household goods and ceramics, as well as tourism and banking.

**December 23, 1972:** A terrible earthquake hits Managua. Perhaps 20,000 or more die, three-quarters of the city's population of 400,000 are left homeless.

Somoza steals millions of dollars of relief money that pours in from around the world.

The Sandinistas begin to attract more support in the cities in response to Somoza's outrages.

**1976-1977:** As opposition organizing grows, so does Somoza's repression. A letter from the Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference accuses Somoza's regime of "widespread torture, rape and summary execution of civilians." According to the bishops' letter, two mass executions totaling eighty-six civilians, including twenty-nine children, had occurred in the previous weeks.



**late 1970s:** Half of the entire Nicaraguan population lives on an average yearly per capita income of \$286 dollars.

**August 1977:** Congress approves \$3.1 million in military sales credits for Somoza for fiscal 1978. The State Department offers assurances that the money will not be released unless human rights abuses are curbed. Somoza lifts the "state of siege" that had been in effect since 1974. This "reform" does not stop the tortures or disappearances, but U.S. military aid is resumed.

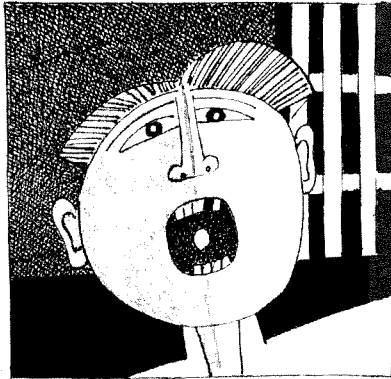
**October 1977:** The Sandinistas begin a series of coordinated attacks in various regions of the country. Opposition political, business and church leaders call for the complete overthrow of the dictatorship and the inclusion of the Sandinistas in any political solution.

**February 1978:** State Department official, Sally Shelton, testifies before Congress that continued military aid for Somoza is justified because it helps provide a "sense

of security which is important for social, economic and political developments.”

**August and September 1978:** With uprisings throughout Nicaragua increasing, the Carter administration appears confused. Some aid is approved, while other money is held up.

In putting down the rebellions, the National Guard kills an estimated 3,000 Nicaraguans.



**October 1978:** The New York Times reports that the Carter administration has decided to pressure Somoza to resign “to keep reformist elements out of power.” The paper later reports that Carter believes that when Somoza goes, support for the Sandinista guerrillas will disappear. Somoza refuses to resign.

**January 1979:** Talks break off between the conservative opposition and Somoza. The U.S. shows disapproval by canceling its remaining aid programs and cutting its embassy personnel in half.

**May 1979:** The U.S. supports a \$65.6 million International Monetary Fund loan for Somoza.

**May 29, 1979:** The Sandinistas begin their final offensive. A series of coordinated attacks, supported by insurrections in the cities, show tremendous support for the revolution against Somoza.

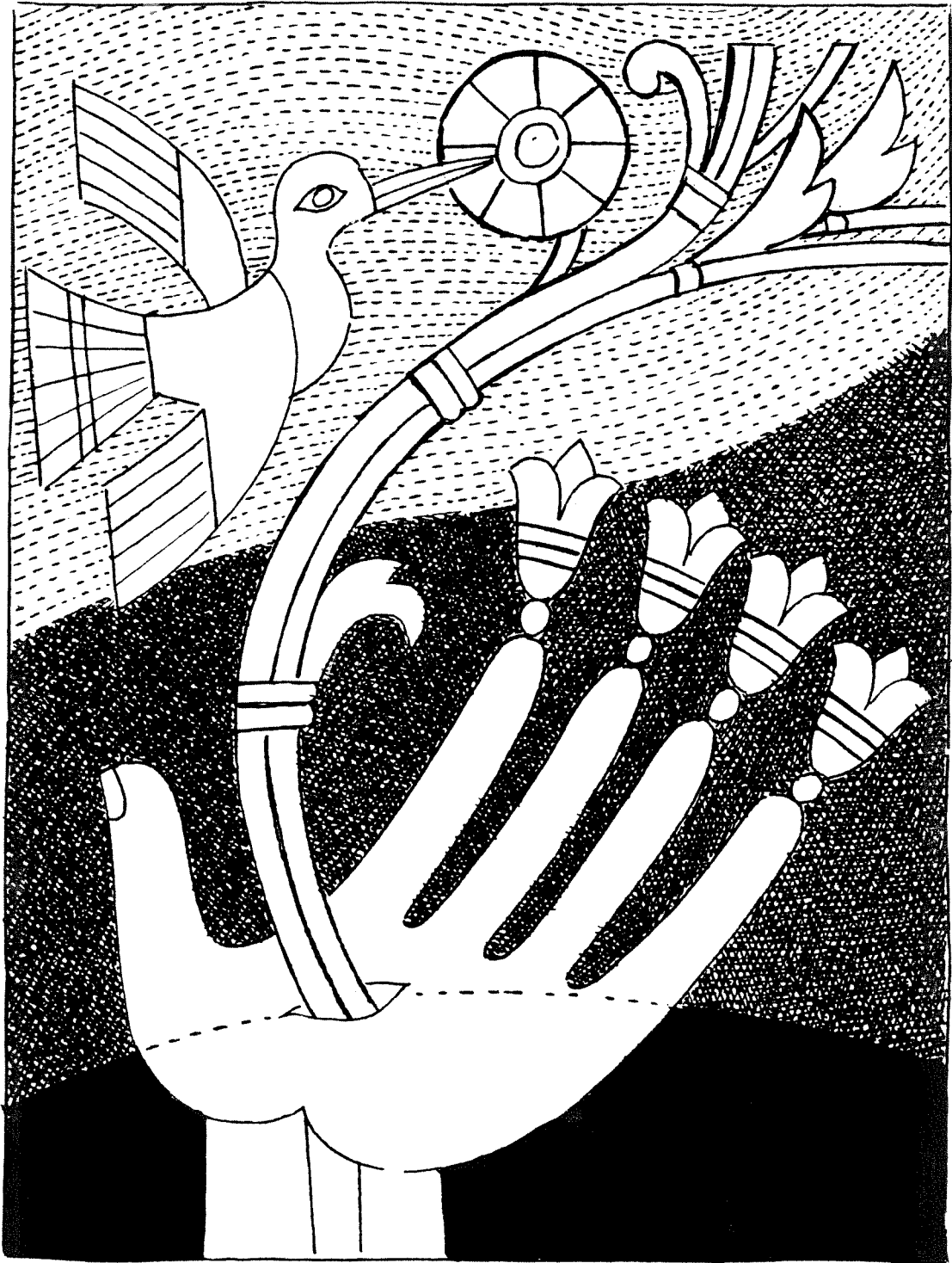
**June 1979:** The U.S. government fears the Sandinistas coming to power. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance proposes a military intervention in Nicaragua. The U.S. proposes sending an Organization of American States “peacekeeping” force to the country. Panama recognizes the new government the Sandinistas have formed. Mexico opposes outside military intervention. The Sandinistas also oppose OAS intervention. The U.S. fails to get a single OAS member to support its proposal.

**July 11, 1979:** In Costa Rica, the provisional Sandinista-led Government of National Reconstruction proposes that Somoza resign; all civil rights of National Guard members would be respected; officers and enlisted men not found guilty of “serious crimes against the people” would be allowed to join a new national army.

**July 17, 1979:** Somoza resigns and leaves for Miami. His successor calls for the Guard to keep fighting the Sandinistas, but it’s too late. After a night of heavy fighting the Guard falls apart; many leave for Honduras.

**July 19, 1979:** Sandinista guerrilla fighters march into Managua and are greeted by thousands upon thousands of demonstrators.





L. Saenz 80

## Reasons for United States Involvement in Latin America

*The question of the purposes served by the United States presence in Nicaragua is a critical one. The traditional explanation given in media and textbooks is that the main U.S. foreign policy goal is to encourage freedom and democracy throughout the world. All current policy debates on Nicaragua rest, at least implicitly, on competing interpretations of past foreign involvements. Historical understanding, thus, has tremendous importance as students sort through contradictory claims about U.S. policy today.*

*This lesson focuses on the entire Latin America/Caribbean region. Students are presented with a number of quotes from different sources about U.S. policy objectives. They are asked to read the quotes critically, probing for unstated assumptions and the sources of contradiction. Students are also provided relevant economic data to help evaluate the role of the dollar in diplomacy.*

### Goals/Objectives:

1. Students will evaluate different explanations for U.S. involvement in Latin America.

### Time Required

- One and one-half to two class periods.

### Materials Needed:

- Handout #4-A: **U.S. Economic Interests in Central America**
- Handout #4-B: **What is the United States Really Concerned About in Latin America?**

### Procedure

1. Remind students that the previous lesson (**The United States in Nicaragua: Timeline**) showed that the United States has been deeply involved in Nicaragua for over one hundred years. Ask students to generate some hypotheses about the reasons for this involvement. They needn't believe these theories to be true. They can be explanations students have heard from parents, friends, government leaders, news reports, and the like. List these on the board. If students don't mention "the protection of freedom and democracy," add this as an additional hypothesis.
2. Tell students they are going to evaluate these hypotheses based on what they already know together with

some new information. Distribute Handout #4-A: **U.S. Economic Interests in Central America**. Make sure students are able to interpret the bar graph and understand what the chart on U.S. corporate involvement indicates.

3. Distribute Handout #4-B: **What is the United States Really Concerned About in Latin America?** Tell students this reading combines quotes from U.S. government leaders and other close advisors with those of scholars who have studied Latin America. Point out that some of the statements from government representatives were not made publicly, but come from declassified secret documents. Ask students to consider each individual's priorities — what appears to be the most important

goal for each? Read the quotes aloud with students. Tell them they may find Handout # 4-A: **U.S. Economic Interests in Central America** useful in sorting through each person's statements. Questions for discussion include:

- [US Businessman]: How might this man's freedom come into conflict with other Latin Americans' ideas of freedom?
- [George Kennan]: Why might Kennan not have made this opinion public?
- Based on what you know about U.S. policy towards Latin America, have government leaders followed Kennan's advice? Explain.
- [Theodore Roosevelt]: What does Roosevelt have in mind when he uses the phrase "stable, orderly and prosperous" or "decency in social and political matters"?
- In plain English, what is Roosevelt telling Latin American countries in this quote?
- [Chomsky and Herman]: Do you agree that democracy is not helpful to a favorable business climate?
- [LaFeber]: LaFeber says that the U.S. government's quest for stability in Latin America has led to U.S. support for dictatorships. Do you believe Roosevelt foresaw supporting dictators in order to maintain "stability"?
- [Coolidge]: Do you agree with Coolidge? Are there limits to the kind of "protections" the government should offer?
- [Galeano]: Contrast Galeano's quote with Kennan's. Do they agree?

- Simply from reading this brief excerpt, why would you say Galeano titled his book, **Open Veins of Latin America**?
- [Shultz]: To whom are these commitments made?
- Who gets to decide what kinds of "economic growth and social justice" are desirable for Latin America?
- [Beveridge]: What kind of behavior does Beveridge expect from Latin Americans?
- [Klare]: Evaluate Klare's quote in light of the statements by government leaders included in the reading.
- [Lappé and Collins]: The quote by Lappé and Collins assumes that the U.S. government fears "revolutionary movements of the poor and hungry." What evidence do you have either to support or refute this claim?
- Is stopping "revolutionary movements" a legitimate goal of U.S. foreign policy? What do the statements by government leaders have to say about this?

4. Ask students to complete the following in writing:

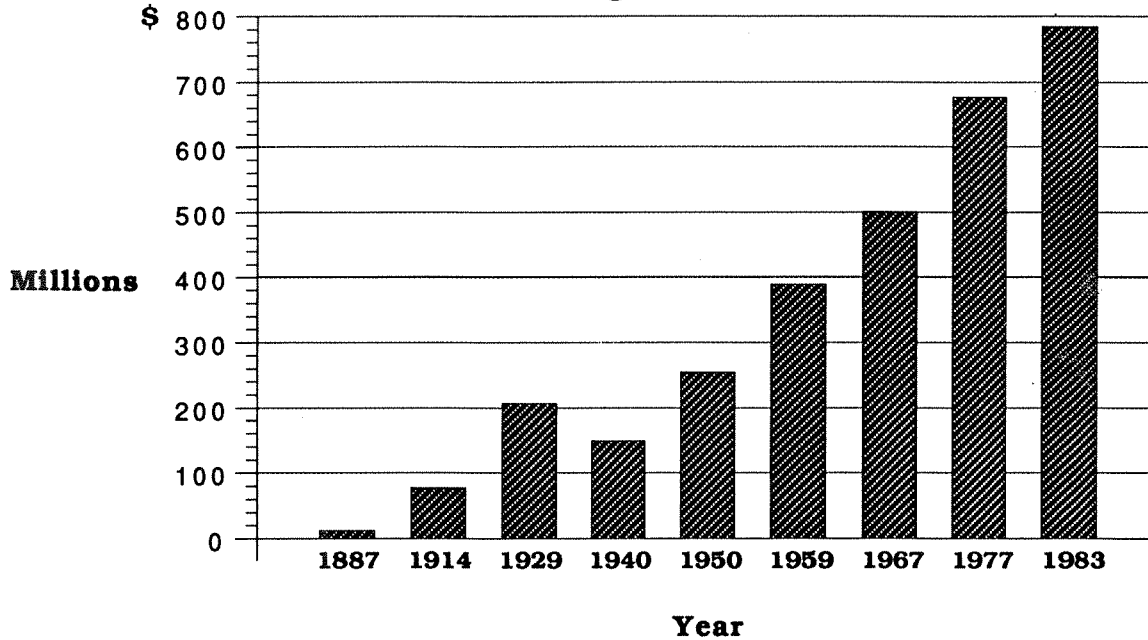
1. Combine the quotes to arrive at what, in your opinion, is the best explanation for why the United States is involved in Latin America.
2. Which of the quotes is least convincing and why?

Have students work in groups to compare their answers and to develop, if possible, a common explanation or working hypothesis for U.S. involvement in Latin America. Give them an opportunity to share their conclusions with the entire class.



## U.S. Economic Interests in Central America

**U.S. Direct Investment in Central America  
(excluding Belize and Panama)**



Sources: CEPAL; Survey of Current Business, 1984.

### Selected U.S. Corporations with Subsidiaries in Central America

FORTUNE RANK	PARENT COMPANY	COSTA RICA	EL SALVADOR	GUATEMALA	HONDURAS	NICARAGUA
1	Exxon					
4	Texaco					
8	IBM					
13	ITT					
19	US Steel (USX)					
36	Goodyear					
38	Xerox					
48	Monsanto					
56	Coca-Cola					
64	Colgate-Palmolive					
72	Ralston-Purina					
74	Johnson & Johnson					
89	General Mills					
97	United Brands					
108	NCR					
128	Standard Brands					

Sources: *Fortune*, 1985; *Who Audits America*, 1984; *1984 World's Directory of 51,000 Largest U.S. Corporations* The Resource Center, "Compilation of Corporations," 1985.



## What is the United States Really Concerned About in Latin America?

“Here (in South America) you have freedom to do what you like with your money; for me, this freedom is worth more than all political and civil freedoms put together.”

• *U.S. businessman, 1953, quoted from Time, Sept 11, 1953*

“We have about 50% of the world’s wealth, but only 6.3% of its population... Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this big difference... To do so, we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming... We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction [doing things only for the good of other people]... We should cease to talk about vague and ... unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards and democratization... The less we are hampered by idealistic slogans, the better.”

• *George Kennan, U.S. State Department classified memo, 1948*

“It is not true that the United States feels any land hunger or entertains any projects as regards the other nations of the Western Hemisphere save such as are for their welfare. All that this country desires is to see the neighboring countries stable, orderly, and prosperous. Any country whose people conduct themselves well can count upon our hearty friendship. If a nation shows that it knows how to act with reasonable efficiency and decency in social and political matters, if it keeps order and pays its obligations, it need fear no interference from the United States.”

• *President Theodore Roosevelt, Message to Congress Dec. 6, 1904*

“Democracy is clearly not helpful to a favorable business climate. As noted by Edward Jessor in a speech to bankers, ‘Quick and tough decisions can be made in a relatively short time in a country such as Brazil compared to the difficulty there is in reaching agreement on what actions to take in a democracy.’”

• *Quoted in Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism*

“For American foreign policy, the idea of requiring Central American governments to pretend to have democratic elections...gave way to the higher priority of stability. As long as the regimes maintained order and protected private property, they were perfectly acceptable. The United States thus accepted, and soon welcomed, dictatorships in Central America because it turned out that such rulers could most cheaply uphold order.”

• *Walter LaFeber, Inevitable Revolutions*

“Americans and their property are a part of the general area of control of the nation, even when abroad. There is a distinct obligation to provide protection to the persons and property of our citizens, wherever they may be.”

• *President Calvin Coolidge, 1925*

“When economic crisis in the United States begins..., the pillage of poor countries must be intensified to guarantee full employment, public liberties, and high rates of development in the rich countries.”

• *Eduardo Galeano, Open Veins of Latin America*

“We will honor our commitment to promote economic growth and social justice in the region [Central America]. We will work to involve others in this effort. And we will uphold and strengthen our commitment to protect our democratic friends from attack or subversion.”

• *Secretary of State George Shultz (under President Reagan), from speech published by State Dept., July 1988*

“... today we are raising more than we [the United States] can consume. Today we are making more than we can use. Today our industrial society is congested; there are more workers than there is work; there is more capital than there is investment... Therefore we must find new markets for our produce, new occupation for our capital, new work for our labor.”

• *Albert J. Beveridge, Speech, Sept. 16, 1898 (subsequently elected United States Senator from Indiana)*

“... the United States has forged an “invisible empire” secured by financial arrangements, business operations, military and economic aid agreements, and the creation of client regimes... Although the specific content of these relationships is constantly [changing], it is possible to identify three major goals of American business operations in the Third World today. The United States needs unhampered access to and control of overseas trade to serve as a market for the products of American industry (and of American-owned plants located abroad), as an outlet for the surplus of U.S. investment funds, and as a source of key raw materials and cheap labor.”

• *Michael T. Klare, author, War Without End, 1970*

[Why does the United States government find Nicaragua so threatening?] “What if Nicaragua does develop differently from so many other revolutions? What if the budding elements of democracy we have

identified... do flower? And what if at the same time the Nicaraguan revolution succeeds in meeting the basic needs of the poor majority for food, housing, and health care? What if the Sandinistas help to teach us all that there could be more than two models of development, that it is possible to make profound structural changes which allow for both democratic participation and justice?

“Perhaps the U.S. government realizes that the potential threat of Nicaragua is not military or economic: it is the threat of a good example which could inspire the majority in so many countries throughout the world who still suffer impoverishment and tyranny similar to that under Somoza. It is the threat of a good example, an example desperately awaited from El Salvador to the Philippines to Poland. Perhaps the U.S. government fears that if the Nicaraguan revolution were allowed to flower it might make it that much harder to defeat revolutionary movements of the poor and hungry throughout the world.”

• *Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins, Now We Can Speak: A Journey Through the New Nicaragua, 1982*



## Short Story: “Nicaragua is White”

*United States influence in Nicaragua has been profound. A few of the more obvious incidents include: William Walker’s invasion and presidency, the U.S. military occupations, the war against Sandino, Somoza’s installation as head of the National Guard. The nature of Nicaragua’s economy was — and still is — heavily influenced by the U.S. economy and decisions made in North American corporate boardrooms. It is also important that students understand some of the more subtle, cultural, effects of domination: attempts by the oppressed to mimic the dominator, an idealizing of the cultural practices and objects of the dominator, and a devaluing of one’s own culture.*

*“Nicaragua is White” is an allegory about the power of cultural domination. As a piece of Nicaraguan literature, this story depicts the pathos of people desperately pursuing the trappings of U.S. culture, to the point of ignoring the reality of their own climate and culture.*

*The author is Sergio Ramirez, current vice-president of Nicaragua.*

**Note:** *It may help students to know that the parts of Nicaragua referred to at the end of the story are primarily inhabited by indigenous people and poor peasants who eke out a living from agriculture.*

### Goals/Objectives

1. Students will begin to understand the power of cultural domination on small, dependent countries — in this case, Nicaragua.

### Materials Needed

- Handout #5: “Nicaragua is White” by Sergio Ramirez

### Time Required

- One class period to read and discuss the story, one period to read and discuss student writing.

### Procedure

1. Students should read the story.
2. Questions for writing or discussion:
  - How is the President described?
  - Why does the President want to give the U.S. credit for discovering the coming snowfall?
  - Why was the meteorologist at first imprisoned by the President?

- Who are the “smart” people? How are they different from other Nicaraguans?
  - How do Nicaraguans normally celebrate Christmas, according to the story?
- Explain that an allegory is a story not meant to be taken literally, but is intended to illustrate an underlying message:
- What is the author saying by having the “smart” people buy fur coats, chim-

neys, and skis and sing Christmas carols?

- What is the significance of smart people wearing fur coats in hot weather?
  - How does the President respond when it fails to snow in Managua? Why?
  - Where does it actually snow? What happens as a result?
  - What is the author's point in this final twist?
- 3.** Have students recall times when they wanted so much to be like another person (or group) that they found themselves imitating the other person(s), thereby losing some of their own personalities. Begin by sharing an example or two from your own experience. Give students a few minutes to jot down ideas for possible writing topics. Afterwards, ask for volunteers to tell brief descriptions of their experiences. For homework, students choose one of these to write about. Papers should be in story-form rather than as essays. Tell them to write from inside the experience; to paint a picture with words for their audience.
- 4.** The next day, seat students in a circle and encourage them to read their work aloud. As each student reads, ask the class to listen for, and write down, common characteristics, including:
- Did the admired person have greater power or status?
  - What did you gain by imitating that person? What did you lose?
  - Did the admired person encourage you to imitate her or him? If so, why would she or he do this?

- 5.** After the read-around, tell students to look over notes for common characteristics in their papers and to write a paragraph or so on this "collective text": what can be learned from the collected experiences of students in the class? Discuss students' observations. Relate the questions back to Nicaragua. What generalizations can be made about the causes and consequences of cultural domination?

*Alternative assignment:* Imagine that some country (such as Nicaragua) has become very powerful, dominating the United States economically. Many people in the United States wish their country were more like Country X. Write a story showing how some people begin imitating the culture of that country.

### Nicaragua is White

by Sergio Ramirez

The book by Bruckner must be around somewhere, buried perhaps under the piles of old weather reports that had been accumulating ever since the Observatory had been founded, lost among the mounds of pink sheets typed on the same Remington and then telegraphed each day to villages throughout the country for distribution to local farmers before nightfall. The messengers rode from ranch to ranch, through sugar fields and coffee plantations, to deliver the forecasts of wind and rain: unless that is, they never bothered to deliver them at all, but simply made paper boats of the bulletins and sailed them off down the rivers, or threw them onto their fires once the mailbags slung across their horses' flanks were crammed to overflowing.

*The Cyclical Theory* by Bruckner was the only one that contained the scale of wind speeds perfected by Beaufort in 1869. Once he could check that they were equivalent to 0.12 on that scale, the calculations he had been busy with since dawn would be complete. He hadn't bothered to draw up the usual daily weather report: it was December, everybody knew it wasn't going to rain, and that the temperature would still be dropping at sea level on the Pacific coast, just as it did every year at this time. But nothing in the current climatic conditions of atmospheric configuration could have predicted what he was so anxiously trying to prove on the weather chart spread out over his work bench. He had drawn in purple pencil over the regions involved all the isotherms and isobars he was so familiar with since his days at the Norhausen Geographical Institute on a grant from General José Santos Zelaya's government to study meteorology. It was there he had acquired his knowledge of hurricanes and squalls in the tropics, learned to plot the course of storms and polar winds, and to measure taigas and tundras, all of which experience he distilled in his daily half-page bulletin.

His professor at Norhausen had been none other than Marcus Bjerknær, who had presented him with a signed copy of his *Analysis of Air Masses*, which must also be somewhere in the Observatory, though he had no particular need of it at this moment. No, it was Bruckner's book he was looking for, chiefly out of a sense of scientific scrupulousness, because his calculations were perfectly clear, the arrows copied out precisely on his map of Nicaragua. This was a curiosity printed in Belgium at the time of Justino Rufino Barrios' military campaigns in which the Ptolomeic system had been used to trace all the hydrographic details, with all the rivers being charted according to astronomic projections. Though he knew he could always rely on Kaeppen's classification to double-check his results, the margin of possible error would be much greater than if he could find the Beaufort scale.

It was past midnight by now, and he could hear the winds sweeping across the bare cornfield. He could pick each of them out, like someone who can identify each bird by its song in the dark before dawn; to him, they were tame objects which he could not only trap, decipher, and keep track of, thanks to the weather-vane on the Observatory roof, but could also measure the modulation of in his wind-pressure tubes. He was still making a determined search for the book, but now he had set himself the deadline of two in the morning, after which he would reconcile himself to using Kaeppen.

For the first time in many years he turned out all the drawers of his desk, on which stood an anemometer he had brought back from Norhausen that he'd never been able to use because a part was missing. He had written to ask for a spare, but this must have been lost in the vagaries of the war that broke out around that date, and led not merely to the closure of the Institute but also to his finding himself blacklisted and having all his belongings confiscated. It took until 1922 for him to recover his rights and to be appointed the official meteorologist. The Ministry of Education sent abroad for all the instruments needed to set up the Observatory, including a Barren rain-gauge and the biggest hygrometer in Central America; but this the Minister had installed in his own living room, in the belief that it would play music.

From that day to this, the Observatory had been housed in the same pavilion in the middle of a cornfield on the eastern outskirts of the capital. From the outside the wrought-iron spikes of its balcony and the bronzed dome made it look like a refreshment kiosk, while inside it was just like a telegraph office with its signal tappers and belinographs, especially with him standing there in shirt-sleeves with elastic arm-bands, a green eyeshade, and his shirt done up at the neck with a bone collar-stud. At some point, a gravel landing strip for Panairé airplanes had been laid out alongside the building.

At about two the next morning the telephone rang in the guardroom of the presidential palace. A guard cranked the handset to reply.

"This is the meteorological office," said the voice on the line. "Put me through to the President."

"Crazy idiot," the guard muttered. "Can't you find a better time to call?"

"It's very urgent," he insisted.

"Do you realize the trouble you cause for yourself by disturbing the government?" the soldier warned him, gesturing to an orderly to come over.

"I don't want it said afterwards that I didn't phone him first." The idea of a plot suddenly flitted through the guard's mind. He turned pale. He stammered an excuse and, putting his hand over the mouthpiece, whispered to the orderly to go and fetch the corporal.

"Hold on, don't hang up."

"I'm not going anywhere," came the calm reply.

The corporal was roused from the guard-post. He was convinced right from the start it was something serious.

"Give me your address," he said, "we'll send someone to question you. And whatever you do, stay put."

"But it's the President I want to talk to," the old man insisted impatiently. So then the matter was passed on to the duty officer, and from him to the chief adjutant.

"Look here, whoever you are, there's no question of waking *el hombre* at this time of night; if you have something to say, tell me. I'm his right-hand man."

"The President," he gasped out, "get me the President or I won't be held responsible."

With his chiefs-of-staff, his aides, and his bodyguards clustered around him in the bedroom with its Moorish windows shrouded in muslin curtains, its mirrored wardrobes and tiled floor, the President sleepily stretched out a hand to take the receiver. His tunic was draped over the back of a cane chair next to the bed, and his three-cornered hat and military gaiters lay on the seat.

"Hello, who is this speaking?"

"Is that you, Mr. President, sir?"



"Hello?" he repeated, coughing and spluttering into the linen handkerchief held out to him.

"Mr. President, sir, I'm so pleased that you are the first to hear the news."

"Aha," was the only reply, as the President raised his eyebrows at everyone round him.

"Are you still there?"

"Yes, yes: what's all this about?"

"It's going to snow in Nicaragua."

"What?"

"Right now — in December. A cold front with snow is heading for Nicaragua."

The President flung the telephone to the floor and furiously pulled shut the curtains around the four-poster. Then, as though in a Chinese shadow play, he shouted to his guards from behind the lace: "Bring him in."

The bedroom chandeliers snapped out. As he scurried past the print of David's *The Coronation of Napoleon* in the corridor, the adjutant caught the words: "...on bread and water."

He had completed the calculations soon after two, but it had been closer to four o'clock by the time he got through to the President. At first when he had been cut off he thought it must be a fault on the line, and rang back to the operator. By now day was dawning in Managua: newspaper boys were shouting to sell *La Estrella de Nicaragua*; beggars were already sifting through the garbage for food down by the lakeshore; butchers' shops were opening their shutters, and horse-drawn carriages were drawing up in front of the railway station. A delicate smell of bread filled the air, and section after section of the street lighting clicked off. Daylight was pushing its way into the greasy stalls of the Eastside market, into brothels and gambling dens. It touched Dambach hill, the houses in the block halfway up near the tree, and the carts filling the square; reached the Candelaria neighborhood, with marimba music on the *Voz de la Victoria*, the telephone wires outside the dollar exchange thronged with swallows, and the deserted Hotel Lupone — all the while he stood there clutching the typed pink form to read to the President. "...Northwesterly winds averaging 0.12 on the Kaeppen scale will combine with the effects of the winter solstice in the region of the equator to produce a fall of snow due to the rapid cooling of the lower levels of the atmosphere and an increase in the diameter of the ice crystals in the upper cirrus clouds. Despite being approximately 30 degrees from the equator, parts of Nicaragua will receive considerable amounts of snow around Christmas. More precise details will become available as the winds from the polar regions draw closer...." The whole report took up two typed pages.

It was after a cable arrived from Washington that the Director of the Meteorological Observatory was taken from his cell in the Fifth Police Station and brought before the President. It contained a report from the US weather ship *Emile* in the Atlantic, according to which on the previous day, December 14th, they had calculated that freezing winds from the Arctic would reach the Pacific coastline of Central America in the days around Christmas. After further consultations between the ship and the weather research bureau in Norfolk, Virginia, the precise co-ordinates had been worked out and disclosed to UPI, which put out the first news report from New York on the morning of December 15th.

"Sit down, won't you?"

The bone collar-stud had come off; he looked dishevelled and unshaven. He was also apparently barefoot.

“What’s this you were saying about snow...?”

“It is going to snow in Nicaragua,” he said, quietly but firmly.

“Yes, yes, we know that — read this.”

“That’s precisely what I worked out,” he replied after glancing through the report, “except that they did their calculations by extrapolation.”

“Right. And how did you do yours?”

The old man delved into the back pocket of his white trousers and pulled out the folded pink sheets.

“It’s all here,” he said, handing his forecast to the President, who was ensconced behind a desk huge as a catafalque, with lion’s paws for feet and the arms of the republic embossed on its side. The aide intercepted the papers and, saluting, passed them on to the President.

“Where did you study all this stuff?” he asked, leafing through the report.

“At the Norhausen Institute in Germany.”

“When was that?”

“Before the First World War.”

“And this is the first time you’ve managed to discover this snow thing?”

“But this is the first time it has happened, sir.”

“Ah, well, yes, I realize that.”

The President asked for a light, and was brought a big bronze lighter in the shape of an imperial eagle.

“Look here,” he said, raising the golden cigarette holder to his lips. “In my opinion we’d better keep quiet about this. Let them sort the matter out as they think fit; we’ll just wait and see.”

Every word the President uttered was typed out with two fingers by his private secretary. The President laid the cigarette holder down on an ashtray and folded his hands across his stomach. He was wearing a linen suit and Prussian boots.

“Excuse me, but...” the old man put in.

“As I see it,” the President continued, “we pretend we know nothing. You go back to your laboratory and let our friends in the North announce the news of what’s going to happen... you follow me?”

“Do you follow him?” the aide echoed, leaning over him. The old man shook his head.

“Look, this is a question of international relations, and they’re for me to deal with. So, let’s say that officially it was the United States who discovered that it’s going to snow: OK?” he said, struggling up out of the heavy red silk-lined chair. “You’re free to go.” With that, he made for a hidden door, which led out into the gardens. “And I want the day itself declared a national holiday,” he called out to his secretary. Then he vanished.

The President made a very moving speech at the traditional switching-on of lights on the huge Christmas tree outside the presidential residence. He wished everyone a white Christmas. Despite a torrid breeze from the lake, the female guests sat on their folding chairs wrapped in woolen shawls or fur coats with matching muffs, while the men perspired in heavy overcoats and scarves. “The day will soon arrive, according to our friends in the North, when snow will fall on us like a blessing from the heavens. Then there will truly be no reason left for us to envy the advanced nations of the old world and of North America.” The special American envoy smiled, the President pulled the lever,

## Our Vengeance Toward Our Enemies Will Be the Pardon\*

By Tomás Borge

*Commandante Tomás Borge is currently minister of the interior and a member of the nine-person National Directorate of the FSLN. He is the only surviving original member of the FSLN, which he founded in 1961 with Carlos Fonseca Amador and Silvio Mayorga. He spent many years in Somoza's prisons, reportedly suffering brutal torture.*

What are we doing in the prisons?

"We are not interested in destroying the sinners, but rather in eliminating the sin," I said.

And what are we doing with these assassins [ex-national guardsmen]? We are trying to convert them into something they have never been: true human beings. I believe that it is our moral obligation to raise them from their condition like beasts to the condition of human beings.

This then is the philosophy of our revolution, but clearly, they do not understand. When I was a prisoner I spoke with them. I told them that someday we would help them. They didn't believe me then, and they still doubt it.

A few days ago my wife's murderer was captured. When he saw me coming — that woman had been savagely tortured, she had been raped, her fingernails had been pulled out — he thought I was going to kill him, or at least hit him. He was totally terrified when we arrived, but we treated him like a human being. He did not understand then, nor can he understand now. I think he may never understand.

We once said, "Our vengeance toward our enemies will be the pardon, it is the best of all the vengeances."

\* Excerpts from No pedimos que elogien la revolución, sino que digan y divulgen la verdad, 1981. Translated by Peter Rosset.

## Role Play: Sandinista Dilemmas

*The performance of the Nicaraguan government in the years after the 1979 revolution has been controversial. For students to evaluate the arguments, pro and con, it's essential that the choices the new government made be examined in context. It's impossible to arrive at any reasoned conclusions about the Nicaraguan revolution unless students confront the limits and possibilities the revolutionaries, themselves, needed to confront. Through role play, this lesson puts students in the position of Sandinistas having just come to power in July of 1979. In discussion, students deal with the tough questions: land reform, worker rights, elections, foreign policy.*

*This lesson serves as a good introduction to post-1979 Nicaragua. For students to consider the issues thoughtfully and empathetically, it's important for them to have had some background on the Somoza dictatorship, economic and social conditions for the majority of Nicaraguans and on the history of U.S./Nicaraguan relations.*

### Goals/Objectives

1. Students will understand some of the goals of and limits on the Sandinistas when they came to power.
2. Students will learn key political choices the Sandinistas made in the first months of the revolution.

### Materials Needed

- Handout #8-A: **Nicaragua: 1979**
- Handout #8-B: **Sandinista Policy Dilemmas**
- Teacher Background: Sandinista Policy Decisions

### Time Required

- Flexible, it depends on the decision making process of the particular class. Generally, several class periods are required.

### Procedure

1. Seat students in a large circle. (It is also an option to have students complete this activity in smaller groups, or even individually. We suggest the large group format to simulate more closely the decision making difficulties the Sandinistas would also have faced.)
2. Distribute Handout #8-A: **Nicaragua: 1979**. Have students read the role sheet. Discuss this persona to make sure they understand the social conditions facing them and the roles they're being asked to assume. You might

“interview” a few students in order to help them step into their roles. Some questions include:

- Who helped you win the revolution?
- In general, how do you feel about the wealthy classes? The poor?
- What kind of society would you like to create?
- What problems do you have?

### Sandinista Policy Decisions

#### 1. The National Guard

Directly after the insurrection, some 7,000-8,000 former National Guardsmen and civilian supporters of the dictatorship were taken into custody. This was considered necessary to prevent them from taking up arms against the government, to see that justice was carried out, and also to protect them from the people they had harmed.

They were then tried by special tribunals. About 4,300 were sentenced to jail terms; the rest were pardoned or their cases dismissed. The former Guardsmen could not receive more than 30 years in prison, because the new government established that as the maximum jail term and outlawed the death penalty.

As of 1989, only a handful (38) of these prisoners remain in jail. Some served their full jail terms, but many were released through a series of pardons issued by the government. Many were pardoned as part of Nicaragua's promises in the Central American peace accords first signed in August 1987. The 38 who remain in jail are considered to have committed "crimes against humanity."

#### 2. and 3. Land reform

The Nicaraguan land reform has changed substantially over the last ten years, in response to economic realities and popular demands. The Nicaraguan government initially turned Somoza's land, which covered 20% of arable land in the country, into state farms. A small part of this land was given to groups of peasants to farm coop-

eratively. The government chose this path because these were large, modern agro-export farms upon which the economy depended. The government believed that it would not be economically sound to break up these modern farms into small parcels which peasants would farm by old-fashioned methods.

But by 1981, peasants began to demand land, organizing marches and protests. To satisfy this demand, the government passed a relatively mild agrarian reform law which expropriated land held in farms over 875 acres which were abandoned or idle; the landowners would receive some compensation for their lands. While this satisfied the demand temporarily, once again by 1986 the government could not meet the demand for land. At that point the agrarian reform law was expanded to affect smaller farms as well which were not being efficiently farmed.

The land reform policy also changed in two dramatic ways. One, in order to meet the demand for land, and because some state farms weren't very profitable, much of the state land was turned over to the peasants (state land was reduced from a high of 24% in 1984 to 11.3% in 1989). Two, peasants now had a real choice in how they received their land. They could receive it individually or as part of a cooperative. Cooperatives themselves ranged from groups of individual farmers who simply shared a tractor or applied for bank credit together, to groups of peasants who owned and farmed their land collectively.

The cost of any real land reform is clear:

the government will lose the allegiance of some of the wealthier farmers and other economic elites. But the benefits are just as clear; in Nicaragua's case, 5,000,000 acres of land have been distributed to 120,000 peasant families.

Promotion of domestic crops. Somoza had concentrated primarily on profitable exports, so that this agricultural country had to import basic foods, leading to higher costs for consumers—particularly hard on the poorest sectors. The new government promoted planting of basic food crops as well as exports, so that cheap food would be available to the population. In the last few years, believing that the pendulum has swung too far and in response to the economic crisis, the government is encouraging more export production.

#### 4. Workers

The issue of workers' rights is particularly difficult. On the one hand, the government's stated objective is to improve the lot of workers and peasants. On the other hand, if the government were to respond to all the increased demands for higher wages (and these demands escalated after July 1979 as part of a "revolution of rising expectations,") the economy would get out of control and no one would be better off.

The Nicaraguan government outlawed strikes as part of the State of Emergency imposed at the height of the contra war. More often, though, it relied on appeals to workers to pull together in the national effort and make more limited demands. The strike ban has since been lifted.

Unable to give good wages in a tight economic situation, the government relied on "social wages": better free health care and education, stores which provided low-cost goods to workers, free day care, low-cost or build-your-own housing on free lots, ac-

cess to plots of land so rural workers could grow their own food. Some of these programs were scaled back, however, as the economic situation worsened.

#### 5. Elections

For the Sandinistas, democracy meant more than simply voting once every few years, it meant more people participating in the political life of the country. And a politically active population needed to know how to read and write. One of the first acts of the new government was to launch a massive countrywide literacy crusade. All through mid-1980, young *brigadistas* fanned out across the country to teach people basic literacy skills and to learn about peasant life in the countryside. [See Lesson #11, **Teacher Background Reading -- Education for A Change: A Report on the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade.**]

Nicaragua held its first free elections in November 1984, five years after the insurrection. The Nicaraguan government argued that it needed time to organize its institutions and educate its people before the first elections were held.

While a group of parties dropped out of the 1984 elections, stating that a proper "climate" did not exist in Nicaragua for elections, a total of seven parties ran and all received seats in the national legislature. Despite the lack of democratic tradition in Nicaragua and the fact that voting is voluntary, over 90% of the people registered to vote and over 75% voted.

The legislature then began the task of ensuring freer and fairer elections, by ratifying a Constitution made with broad popular participation and passing an electoral law. That law was further reformed to respond to opposition demands prior to the 1990 elections. There are some 10 parties or coalitions running in the 1990



## Sandinista Policy Dilemmas

Following are some of the dilemmas which confront you as the new leaders of Nicaragua. Discuss each one among yourselves, keeping in mind your goals, whose interests you represent and the pressures of the immediate situation. In your discussions of each issue, be sure to clarify the difference between what you'd like to do and what you are going to do given the pressures or limits under which you operate. Explain the reasons for your decisions.

1. **Ex-National Guardsmen.** Former members of Somoza's army are running loose throughout the country. A good number of these people are known torturers and murderers. Your supporters, many of whom suffered at their hands, are angry to see them go unpunished. Many of the Guardsmen are attempting to flee the country, while others are trying to blend into the population. **How will you deal with these people?**
2. **Somoza's land.** The Somoza family and associates owned 23% of the farmland. Now that they have left the country, it is in your hands.
  - A. **What will you do with this land? Some possible choices:**
    - **Turn it into large farms run by the government**
    - **Hand it over to individual peasants**
    - **Create cooperatives — large farms owned by groups of peasants**
    - **Devise some other plan**
  - B. **What kind of farming will you encourage?**
    - **Do you want people to plant crops that can be exported like coffee or cotton?** (Advantage: These crops bring in the dollars to buy things abroad. Disadvantage: They require complicated machinery and fertilizers that are very expensive.)
    - **Do you want people to plant food crops like corn and beans?** (Advantage: They can be produced using inexpensive traditional methods and will provide food for people to eat. Disadvantage: They are sold within Nicaragua and don't earn dollars for the country to import the medicines, machinery and other things it needs which it can't yet produce.)
  - C. **How will you get people to do the kind of farming you want?**
3. **Land reform.** There are other landowners with large farms. A few helped the Sandinistas during your struggle; most sat back and watched. Some have abandoned their land, refused to plant or "decapitalized" their property, burning fields, destroying machinery, driving cattle across the border to Honduras, letting equipment run down, etc. This means that their land is not producing enough to help feed people or earn money for Nicaragua.
  - A. **Will you take over any land other than that which belonged to Somoza?**
  - B. **If so, how will you decide whose land to take?**



- What are some of the important differences between Food First and the State Department when interpreting recent Nicaraguan history?
  - How would you decide whom to believe?
  - The State Department argues that the U.S. government is committed to “develop democratic governments in Central America.” Does the history of U.S. involvement in Nicaragua before the Sandinista revolution tend to support or discredit the State Department’s assertion? Explain.
  - How does Food First measure progress in Nicaragua? Is this a different way of measuring progress than that used by the State Department?
  - Both the State Department and Food First agree that Nicaragua has built up its army. What interpretations do the readings offer for the build up? Which of these do you agree with and why?
  - Based on the readings, would you say Nicaragua poses a military threat to the United States?
  - Food First asserts “it is impossible to be both for the hungry and against change.” What does that mean? Do you agree?
  - How do you account for why different people, presumably working with access to the same information, could come to such totally opposite conclusions?
3. Ask students to choose one of the readings to critique. Give them a number of options for how they might complete this assignment. For example, they could be editorial writers composing point/counter-point responses. This

would allow them to be passionate and biting in their criticisms. As an alternative they might choose to write parodies of one of the readings. They could write speeches to be delivered at a rally, compose leaflets refuting the major points of either of the readings or draw on the dialogue poem model introduced in Lesson #6. The goal is simply to give students as free a hand as possible in evaluating and responding to the arguments raised in either of the readings.

4. After students have finished their critiques, give them the opportunity to share these with one another. Encourage student response.



# U.S. Policy on Nicaragua — For and Against

## For: U.S. Department of State: Nicaragua's Crimes

Today the Sandinistas are hard at work cementing their dictatorship. The Sandinista police are silencing voices of opposition throughout the country. So-called Sandinista Defense Committees operate in every neighborhood, watching the movements of citizens and enforcing politically correct behavior. These block committees can punish dissent by turning people in to the police or by taking away the ration cards people need to obtain the staples of daily life.

The Sandinistas draft Nicaraguan youth into the largest army in Central America. But it is not the Nicaraguan national army, it is the Sandinista party army. There is no such thing as conscientious objection. There is no such thing as free expression, either: **La Prensa** is closed. The Catholic Church radio station is closed. Were it not for radio and television from outside the country, Nicaraguans would get their only news from the Sandinista press, Sandinista radio, and Sandinista television. Farmers and businesses cannot set prices, move capital, or buy equipment without the state's permission...

Nicaragua, in short, is beginning to look less and less like a part of Latin America and more and more like the Soviet Union which Carlos Fonseca [a founding member of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation — ed. note] so admired three decades ago. And as in Eastern Europe, communist repression has given rise to a powerful reaction. Denied self-de-

termination, 20,000 Nicaraguans have taken up arms to fight for the freedom they thought they had won in 1979 when they got rid of the old dictatorship.

## Why Central America Matters to the United States

Why should their fight matter to the United States? Why should we care what happens in Central America?

Let us start with doing what is right. The thousands of Nicaraguans who resist the Sandinistas, whether in the civic opposition or in armed rebellion, are defending the sacred rights of the individual that we Americans have fought and died for ever since we won our own independence. They are fighting for our values, for democracy and independence. We have every moral right to help people free themselves from repressive rule.

But there is a second case to be made; it concerns our security. The Nicaraguan resistance is fighting for Nicaragua's freedom and independence, but their success will serve our security interest as well. We owe it to ourselves and to future generations of Americans, to help them succeed.

The challenge to American security in Nicaragua is not yet a direct one. Rather, it is indirect and building only gradually, but it is, nonetheless, a serious challenge with many dimensions.

But until the Sandinistas keep those promises, there will be no peace because the Nicaraguan people will keep on fighting. Their cause is just. And as long as they fight for that cause, the policy of the United States must be to support them. Freedom may not come in a few months; it may not come this year, but it will come. One day the Nicaraguan democratic resistance will be so strong that the Sandinistas will face a choice: to live up to their democratic promises or yield to a movement that will end their dictatorship and put more representative leaders in charge.

Today thousands of brave Nicaraguan men and women are fighting to reach that moment. Some are in the mountains with arms; others are caring for the wounded; many remain in the cities, working in every way they can to keep the flame of civic resistance alive. They have one thing in common — they are risking all they have for their country, for their children's future. As Americans we should be proud to have friends such as these. When peace and democracy come to Nicaragua, we will be proud that we made the right decisions at the right time to help friends in their hour of greatest need.

engaged in economic warfare against Nicaragua. Following several years of blocking international aid, in 1985 the Reagan administration declared an economic embargo against Nicaragua, excluding Nicaraguan airliners from U.S. airspace, banning the importation of Nicaraguan goods, and restricting U.S. trade and investment in Nicaragua. The U.S. economic warfare comes at a time when Nicaragua, like most Third World countries, is suffering from low world market prices for its major exports.

### **A Threat to the Region?**

President Reagan claims Nicaragua is building up its army for "waging war on its neighbors" and is seeking to "export revolution," especially to El Salvador.

The Nicaraguans are building up their army. This is understandable, given the extensive attacks by the contras and the legitimate fear of a full-scale U.S. invasion. The Nicaraguans would prefer to channel the money into development, but under the circumstances they would be foolish not to strengthen their armed forces.

A study by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute shows that Nicaragua's military hardware is defensive in nature, whereas the Honduran army is equipped mainly with offensive weapons.

Certainly most Nicaraguans would like to see a victory by popular forces in El Salvador. But as former CIA analyst David MacMichael reported in June 1984: "The whole picture that the Administration has presented of Salvadoran insurgent operations being planned, directed and supplied from Nicaragua is simply not true. The Administration and the CIA have systematically mis-represented Nicaraguan involvement... to justify efforts to overthrow the Nicaraguan government."

The Reagan administration claims its military and economic assault on Nicaragua is necessary to prevent foreign military bases from being established in Central America. Yet numerous foreign press correspondents have verified that there are no Cuban or Soviet bases in Nicaragua. There is no evidence to contradict Nicaragua's claim that the vast majority of the Cubans in the country are health workers and teachers. Nicaraguans feel that the victory over Somoza brought independence for the first time. Why would they now hand control of their country over to foreigners?

Nicaragua does not pose a military threat to the United States. As President Kennedy's National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy recently stated: "No one is going to make war on us from Central America. There is something genuinely zany in thinking about the area in those terms."

Throughout Central America and the Third World, the poor are demonstrating that they will not suffer in silence, watching their children die from hunger while the rich live in luxury and block the political and economic changes necessary to end hunger. Peasants and workers will continue to rise up against enforced poverty. For us, therefore, it is impossible to be both for the hungry and against change.

## Video: Face to Face

**Face to Face** follows a group of California and Oregon high school students to Nicaragua. In interviews and documentary footage we travel inside these students' heads and hearts to learn their reactions to Nicaraguan society. We've used the video with all high school grades as well as with middle school students.

**Face to Face** offers students a first-hand glimpse of Nicaraguan society today. Through the words of U.S. and Nicaraguan students as well as through pictures, we can contrast the two societies — and see some similarities in the two cultures. (For example, most students here are surprised to learn that baseball is popular in Nicaragua.) A number of interviews also help students learn more about the consequences of the contra war on the country.

### Goals/Objectives

1. Students will see Nicaragua through the eyes of U.S. high school students.
2. Students will compare and contrast the cultures of Nicaragua and the United States.
3. Students will recognize some of the consequences of the contra war on people's daily lives in Nicaragua.

### Materials Needed:

- Video: **Face to Face** (Available from: Gail Dolgin, PO Box 7905, Berkeley, CA 94707-0905, (415) 548-6521, \$35 purchase/\$20 rental. Allow 2 weeks for delivery.)
- Handout #10: **Face to Face: Traveling to Nicaragua**

### Time Required

- One class period and homework (the video is about thirty minutes long). Part of one class period to discuss the homework.

### Procedure

1. Ask students whether they would like to visit Nicaragua. What fears would they have? What similarities would they expect to find between the United States and Nicaragua? What differences? List these on the board. Ask students what their parents or guardians would think if told they had been invited to visit high school students in Nicaragua.
2. As students watch the video, ask them to notice and write down similarities and differences between the two countries. If they have any questions, these should be noted and discussed later.
3. Show the video. Don't hesitate to stop at points where you think your students might have questions, such as when the woman from the Sandinista Youth tells the tour members that if they came as soldiers they would be killed.
4. Here are some discussion questions to follow the video. (Some are repeated in the writing assignment):
  - Why do the young people interviewed in the first sequences in the video have such different amounts of knowledge and opposing views about what is going



## A Plastic Kid

The revolution in Nicaragua sparked numerous social changes. One of the most significant commitments of the new government was to wipe out illiteracy. In 1979 it was estimated that over 50% of Nicaraguans, especially people in the countryside, could not read or write. As the teacher background reading, **Education for Change: A Report on the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade**, points out, the government's solution was to close the schools and ask for a volunteer army of young people to trek into the countryside as teachers.

This lesson looks at the personal story of one of these "brigadistas". The young man interviewed in the reading, Rene Escoto, is from a privileged background, and Rene's choice to join a project of the revolution was greeted less than enthusiastically by his parents. His conscious choice to reject becoming absorbed in a culture largely imported from the United States gives students a more personal look at the issues raised in the short story, "Nicaragua is White" from Lesson 5. This reading also helps students see the religious roots of political commitment in Nicaragua.

**Note:** As background for this lesson we would recommend Sheryl Hirshon, **And Also Teach Them to Read**, Lawrence Hill, Westport, Conn., 1983. Hirshon is a teacher from the United States who participated in the literacy crusade. Her book is the only participant's account that we've seen, and is filled with wit and insight. We've used the entire book with selected groups of students.

### Goals/Objectives

1. Students will consider the roots of political commitment for some young people in Nicaragua, both before and after the 1979 revolution.
2. Students will learn about conflicts between generations in Nicaragua made sharper by the choices young people of conscience faced, and still face today.

### Materials Needed

- Teacher Background Reading: **Education for Change: A Report on the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade**
- Handout #11: **A Plastic Kid** (excerpted from **Now We Can Speak** by Joseph Collins and Frances Moore Lappé)

### Time Required

- One class period, and homework

### Procedure

1. Distribute the handout, **A Plastic Kid**, and read the selection aloud.
2. Some discussion questions include:
  - What made René choose to leave the privileged life his parents had carved out for him?
  - What was his understanding of Christianity that prevented him from being a "bystander", as Somoza's Guard killed young people?
  - How did meeting politically active students from other social classes affect René?

- René would have access to many more comforts in Los Angeles than in Nicaragua. Why did he decide to return?
  - How was René transformed by his participation in the literacy crusade?
  - Why doesn't René sense a conflict between religion and politics?
  - Would you have made the choices that René made?
- 3.** Review the two writing choices which follow the reading. As a way of working students into one of the roles, you might interview them as they imagine being either René or one of his parents. Give students adequate time to do a thorough and imaginative job on the writing. Encourage them to read their letters aloud.





### Education for Change: A Report on the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade \*

The women and men who took up arms against the Somoza regime had as their goal not just the overthrow of a government, but the liberation of a people — and after victory in battle, the next priority was literacy. At the time of Somoza's defeat, half of all Nicaraguans could neither read nor write. In rural areas the illiteracy rate was estimated at 75 to 80 percent, and, for women in many villiages, 100 percent.

Plans for a literacy crusade, under the direction of Fernando Cardenal, began five weeks after the new government took control. The Literacy Crusade's goal was to bring functional literacy— reading at the third grade level — to 50 percent of the population, or as many as could be reached. The crusade organizers conducted an extensive examination of literacy programs in other Third World nations — Cuba, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde — and invited the internationally renowned expert Paulo Freire to Managua to consult on methodology.

While method and content were being planned, a village-by-village nationwide census was carried out to determine levels of literacy in each of Nicaragua's sixteen provinces. Efforts were also made to ascertain the availability of volunteer teachers.

Influenced by Freire's methodology, the planners hoped to provide one literacy teacher for every four or five *campesinos* (poor country people). Teachers would be assigned to their own province when pos-

sible, but tens of thousands of teachers would have to be transported from the cities to the remote areas in the northern mountains and the Atlantic Coast forest regions where available teachers were scarce.

A serious problem was how to mobilize national resources for such a large-scale campaign without interfering with production. During the revolution, entire sections of Nicaragua's cities had been destroyed by the punitive bombings of the National Guard. Before Somoza fled, he pillaged the national treasury and left massive debts which the new government pledged to honor. Money to pay these debts had to be earned from exports, which meant production of goods had to be increased.

A clever solution was arrived at. Those who volunteered to work in the Literacy Crusade would be divided into two groups. One would consist of young people not yet actively engaged in productive work, who would leave the cities and live with the *campesinos* in the rural areas and mountains for a period of five months. They would give classes in the evenings and by day they would work in the fields, planting crops, harvesting, tending animals, and helping to increase the nation's productive capacity. These volunteers would comprise the Popular Literacy Army (EPA), better known as *brigadistas*. The second group would be factory workers, government workers, housewives, and professionals who would remain at their regular work in the cities and teach in the urban *barrios* during nonworking hours. These were the Popular Literacy Teachers, called "popular alphabetizers" (AP).

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\* Reprinted from The Interracial Books for Children Bulletin, vol. 12, no. 2 (1981) by the Council on Interracial Books for Children

The volunteers for the *brigadistas* were young people — high school and college students primarily, although some were as young as twelve. Several reasons account for the youthfulness of the *brigadistas*. For one thing, many had fought in the revolution and were committed to its goals. (A striking aspect of the Nicaraguan revolution had been the youth of the liberation fighters — teenagers, or younger).

In addition, the government made specific efforts to enlist young people in order to raise their consciousness about the realities of the poverty and oppression of the *campesinos* in the rural and mountain areas. (Most of the *brigadistas* were from urban areas, and while illiteracy was high there, it was far, far higher in the rural areas.)

The *brigadistas* were the political descendants of the “Choir of Angels” — children who had formed part of Augusto Cesar Sandino’s guerrilla army during the struggle to oust the occupying U.S. Marines in the 1930s. The Choir worked to “alphabetize” the *campesinos* in the mountainous provinces of Matagalpa, Jinotega, and Nueva Segovia, so that they could read Sandino’s literature. In the 1960s this same area became the base for the Sandinista forces — nationalists who derived their names and inspirations from Sandino.

### **Parental Permission Required**

Parental permission was a requisite for minors who wished to join the *brigadistas*. The crusade organizers found that they faced opposition from some middle-class parents who were not supportive of the revolution and who, in addition, had traditional parental worries about their children, particularly their daughters. (Working-class parents were not, in general, antagonistic.)

Parental hostility was met by widespread discussions about their concerns. Campaign representatives held weekly meetings in the schools with parents and

students. Posters, newspaper articles, and TV and radio programs addressed the issues. To allay some of the parents’ fears, it was decided to organize single-sex brigades, and young girls would be accompanied by their teachers and live in dormitories, farmhouses, public buildings, or schoolrooms. Boys and older girls would live in the homes of the *campesinos*. It is worth noting that children from middle-class homes — who joined the crusade for a variety of reasons — usually became committed to the goals of the new society Nicaragua is trying to build.

Initial preparations lasted six months. The Literacy Crusade first launched a pilot project in the same northern provinces where the Sandinistas had originally made their base. Undertaken by the eighty-member *Patria Libre* brigade, its objective was to test a training design and gain practical experiences that would later be transmitted to the other *brigadistas*. The group members also underwent physical training to prepare them for the arduous tasks ahead.

After completing the pilot project, each of the 80 members of the *Patria Libre* conducted workshops and trained 560 more teachers. These, in turn, trained 7,000 teachers. For the final phase, which ended in March 1980, schools and colleges were closed early, releasing thousands of volunteer students for additional training. By the conclusion of the last phase of training, a grand total of 95,000 “alphabetizers” were prepared for the campaign. Of these, 60,000 were the young *brigadistas* who would work and teach in the countryside. The other 35,000 were the “popular alphabetizers,” adults for the most part, who remained in the cities to work in the barrios.

### **Groups Support Crusade**

The Nicaraguan revolution had been successful in large part because of the involvement of the people’s organizations

that had formed in the years preceding 1978. Some of these were the National Union of Teachers, the Sandinista Trade Union Federation, the Organization of Nicaraguan Women, the block- and street-based Sandinista Defense Committee, and the Association of Rural Workers. The same groups now provided the Literacy Crusade with massive logistical support, transporting 60,000 *brigadistas* from the cities to the countryside, supplying them with food, medical care, textbooks, etc. They also provided protection; security was a major concern, because remnants of Somoza's National Guard, which had fled into the mountains on the Honduras border, threatened that the *brigadistas* would be killed.

On March 24, 1980, truck convoys by the thousands left the cities of Managua, Esteli, Leon, Granada, and Matagalpa and fanned out to all of Nicaragua's provinces. Because of the terrain, thousands of *brigadistas* had to march by foot. Some traveled by boat, some by helicopter. Each *brigadista* was eventually outfitted with jeans, a gray tunic, a mosquito net, a hammock, a lantern by which to teach at night, and a portable blackboard. On *brigadista* arrival day, a special service was held in every church of every denomination to greet the *brigadistas* and to launch the crusade.

From the end of March until mid-August, the *brigadistas* followed roughly this pattern: by day, work in the fields with the campesinos they lived with or chores around the house; by night, two hours of instruction with from five to seven campesinos huddled around a gas lamp. On Saturday, there were workshops with other *brigadistas* — usually thirty in number from the same village or a village nearby — to evaluate the week's work, discuss common problems, and plan the week ahead. For those *brigadistas* who could not meet together because of distance, all-day Saturday radio pro-

grams informed them of news of the campaign and offered advice and encouragement. In the cities, the popular alphabetizers worked at their regular jobs and, in addition, gave two hours of instruction at night; they also had Saturday workshops. Within this general pattern, there were wide variations.

The campaign took its toll: fifty-six *brigadistas* died during the crusade. Six were murdered by the National Guard, the rest were killed by accidents or illness. Today, the murdered youth are hailed by Nicaraguans as martyred heroes, and their faces are enshrined on posters and paintings hung everywhere.

The campaign itself was extremely successful. At its end, some 50,000 *campesinos* were no longer illiterate, and the rate of illiteracy was down from a national average of 52 percent to just under 13 percent. Confirming the statistics are the documented exams and the simple sentences that all *campesinos* had to write at the end of the five-month learning period. As important as the literacy they gained, however, was their new awareness of themselves and of their significance to the nation. Prior to the revolution, *campesinos* had been considered of little or no consequence; but this campaign, a major indication of positive governmental concern, contributed to a new sense of dignity and self-worth.

The influence of the crusade on the *brigadistas* and other alphabetizers was also dramatic. They gained a new understanding and respect for the rural poor — and often, as noted, a new commitment to the goals of the revolution. Participants also learned a variety of skills — life skills as well as teaching skills. All gained a more profound understanding of their nation — and learned that they could play a role in creating a new society.

### "A Plastic Kid"

*At dinner that evening we met a young man who gave us further insight into the professional and personal changes that so many upper-class Nicaraguans are going through. René Escoto is a young researcher at the Institute for Economic and Social Research (INIES), a new nongovernmental center doing medium- and long-range planning for Central America and the Caribbean. René is white. While color differences are not often spoken about in Nicaragua, we learned that they correlate with differences in class background. René's white skin and delicate European features — not to mention his polo shirt — made us wonder if he were not from a well-to-do professional family. So we asked.*

"Yes, the revolution has saved me from being what we call a 'plastic kid.'" he told us. "I could have easily been absorbed by U.S. culture — my head filled with American pop music (not that the music is so bad) or drugs or movies. In my head I would have been living in the United States, not Nicaragua facing the realities of my people — which is uncomfortable."

*Obviously, you personally identify with the revolution. How do your parents react to this?*

"Not well at all. We argue all the time at home. Sometimes they say that I must choose between them and the revolution. Since I love my parents, this has been very hard on me."

"From my early childhood, my parents have taught me to have upper-class, professional aspirations. In 1975 we moved from Matagalpa to Managua in part because they wanted me to go to the most prestigious private school in the country,

the Jesuit school. Nothing has influenced me more than the Jesuits and, ironically, in the opposite direction of my parents' way of thinking. The Jesuits helped me examine my personal practice of Christianity, as a son, as a member of the school and in relations with others. The Jesuits encouraged me to participate in teaching literacy in the poor barrios of Managua, where for the first time I came into contact with the realities of the working people of my country.

"Following this, we students formed a group to live on Zapatera, an island in Lake Nicaragua. There also I saw how the *campesinos* lived, squeezed by a few large landowners. Everyday we reflected on our experience in light of the Gospels. I became even more conscious of the system that impoverished so many in my country. We became aware that there was no way to help this island in the middle of the whole corrupt system without changing the system itself.

"Young people my age were being massacred in the working-class neighborhoods by Somoza's Guard. We began to realize that as Christians we could not be bystanders, we would have to fight against the biggest power, the real obstacle to a human life for most Nicaraguans. I worked hard to organize a movement of high school students, all from private religious schools. We were a little childish perhaps but it was our first try. Because we were from well-to-do families, we weren't persecuted by the Guardsmen. We weren't really afraid.

"But through this student organization we started to have contacts with public school students who were more revolutionary and more combative than we. Their

courage to live underground really impressed me. We helped these revolutionary students with supplies, safe places for underground meetings, and money.

"The conflicts with our parents sharpened: some of the kids in my school were sons of the highest National Guard officers. They sided with the Nicaraguan people and therefore opposed their parents, not as parents but because of their military position with the dictatorship. This really impressed me and provoked even more conflicts with my own parents.

"My parents were afraid that something would happen to me. My mother searched my room for pamphlets: when she found some, she became hysterical and threw them onto the patio to burn them. Then when the peak moment of the struggle against Somoza came and the Sandinistas called a national strike, my parents decided to take my brother and me out of Nicaragua and leave us with an uncle living in Los Angeles. At first I refused, but I was barely 15 years old. Finally I told them that I would go to the United States but it would be the last time I would give in to their will. I told them that when I returned after victory over Somoza (I knew it was close at hand), I would join in the work of the revolution despite any interference from them.

"So I went to the United States and spent June and early July 1979 with my uncle. I remember watching the television news constantly and seeing the big massacres. I saw young people murdered, good ordinary people assassinated in the barrios of Managua, the bombings by Somoza's air force, the National Guard's murder of the ABC newsman. All of this hurt me deeply. I kept asking myself: What am I, as a Christian, doing in the United States? My activity in the student organization had been phony because when the decisive moment came, I was not in Nicaragua but in another country looking after myself. From this pain was born a greater commitment to Nicaragua. I de-

ecided I would return to Nicaragua as soon as possible and throw myself into the work of the revolution."

*What did you do when you returned to Nicaragua?*

"First, we formed the Federation of High School Students, an organization for all the high schools, private and public, founded and directed by young people. And then I accepted an invitation to join the Sandinista Youth and began training volunteers for the literacy campaign. I was in charge of four squads, each with 30 student *brigadistas* (literacy teachers).

"Students from public and private schools were thrown together, but for once what distinguished us was not class but who worked harder, who merited more responsibility. This was a powerful experience with me: with my white skin and upper-class origin. I found that other students had expectations about me because of their own color and culture. But the literacy work brought us together.

"Politically I learned a lot by observing different attitudes of the *brigadistas* based on their backgrounds. For example, students from working-class families, from public schools, adapted to the living conditions quickly because they themselves had lived on the edge. But it was harder for them to learn how to teach. On the other hand, the *brigadistas* from well-off families and private schools were able to pick up the teaching techniques quickly — but it was harder for them to adapt to the new living conditions because they were used to more comfort."

*What did your parents think about your participation in the literacy campaign?*

"My parents put unrelenting pressure on me to quit. They sometimes visited me and couldn't understand why their son was living in such poor conditions. They were dead set against my being in the Sandinista Youth. They said the literacy campaign was communism, that we were brainwashing the campesinos, that my

god was the government, that the government, that the government was robbing parents of their sons and daughters. They didn't understand that we were trying to eliminate the enormous injustices with which we were living. They didn't understand that the first step, the one in which all the young people of Nicaragua were involved, was literacy.

"They couldn't see the overall thrust of the revolution — they just fixated on some errors committed by the government. So this conflict with my parents was the principal problem for me during the campaign. It was very tough for me. Especially on birthdays — mine, my father's, my mother's — when they insisted that I come to Managua. But that was out of the question for me, especially, since, as the person in charge of so many *brigadistas*, I had to set a good example and not go back to Managua for this or that. Imagine if all the *brigadistas* had traveled home to Managua for all these birthdays! It would have meant enormous expenditures.

"Through the literacy campaign my Christian faith deepened. I came to understand the Christian commitment much better, what the Latin American bishops in Puebla called 'the preferential option for the poor.' I began to really identify with the Gospel, with all the words that sometimes seem so abstract, so up in the clouds, so romantic when you just read them in the Bible. I came to understand these words concretely when I was living in poverty with the *campesinos*, when I was teaching them to read and write, and learning how they live and all the things they experience in the countryside. Then I could understand, if I opened my eyes a little, all that the Scriptures teach."

*What did you do after the campaign finished?*

"I went back home — to the same conflicts with my parents. They put tremendous pressure on me to quit the Sandinista Youth. Finally I decided to

obey them until I finished high school so that they couldn't say I had been brainwashed or that someone was taking their son away. I felt very bad about myself, but it was a necessary step with my parents. During this entire time I dedicated myself to my studies to avoid ideological confrontations with my parents. They had to see that even though for a whole year and a half I was not being "brainwashed" by the Sandinista Youth I still had the same commitment to the revolution.

"Once I graduated from high school, I decided to enter the university, rejoin the Sandinista Youth, and again work in the revolution. My parents objected, but now I had a job working here at the Institute, and I attended university classes so I was at home very little."

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**Complete one of the following writing assignments:**

1. Imagine that you are René. You have just decided to join the literacy campaign and want to tell your parents. You know they will disagree with your decision, at least at first, but you hope to convince them that it is the right thing to do. Write them a letter explaining in detail the reasons for your decision. Since they do not favor the revolution, you will need to explain why you support it; they will want to know what experiences influenced your political ideas. Tell them the kind of person you want to be and why.
2. Imagine that you are one of René's parents. You have just heard that René has decided to join the literacy campaign. You are completely opposed to this and wish to persuade him to abandon the project. Write him a letter explaining your views of the new government and of his participation with the literacy teachers. Describe your hopes for his future as well as your fears and misgivings about the present. Be persuasive.

**Note:** In completing either of these assignments, feel free to use information you've learned from other sources in our study of Nicaragua.

## The People Speak: Conversations with Nicaraguans

One of the best ways to evaluate the changes that have occurred in Nicaragua since the revolution is to talk directly to the people. Obviously, this is not possible for most of us. The following selections are representative of the book, **Nicaragua: The People Speak**, edited by Alvin Levie, and reasonably representative of Nicaraguan opinion, according to those who have been there.

This lesson attempts to show that people's attitudes about Nicaraguan society today are closely related to their social positions both before and after the revolution.

**Note:** The overthrow of Somoza is often referred to as the "Triumph" by Nicaraguans.

### Goals/Objectives

1. Students will understand some of the changes that the revolution has brought to Nicaragua.
2. Students will understand that people's attitudes about social change reflect, in part, different social positions people occupy.

### Materials Needed

- Handout #12: **The People Speak: Marina Mena de Cano, Liseth Mena, Eusebio Picado**

### Time Required

- One class period and homework

### Procedure

1. Have students read the interviews one by one, starting with Eusebio Picado. They are best read aloud and discussed, though the reading and questions can be done as individual written work.
  2. Questions:
- What are the most important changes since the Triumph for Eusebio Picado and his family?
  - Do you think the contras could win Eusebio Picado's support?

#### **Eusebio Picado Gonzalez:**

- Eusebio Picado works on a cooperative. What is a cooperative? How is it run?
- Why do you think the government encouraged Eusebio Picado and others to organize a co-operative?
- Why do the cows mean so much to Eusebio Picado?

#### **Marina Mena de Cano:**

- What does Marina Mena do for a living?
- How has her life been different from that of most Nicaraguans?
- How has Marina Mena's life changed since the revolution?
- Why are her attitudes towards the revolution different than those of Eusebio Picado?

- Has she a right to complain, or is she being selfish?

**Liseth Mena:**

- What about Liseth Mena's life makes her so optimistic? Why is she so much more hopeful than her mother?
- How does she feel about her work? Why?
- What is the attitude Liseth Mena has about the "patients" where she works?
- Why does she think "reeducating" the women patients will work?
- She says her mother "has not yet developed a collective outlook." What does she mean by that? In your opinion, is this a valuable kind of outlook?

3. Ask students to complete this assignment: Write a dialogue between Eusebio and Marina, or between Liseth and Marina. Show the differences in how they see the revolution, and the different concerns they have. Begin by encouraging the class to brainstorm topics the people might discuss. Possible issues could include whether Nicaragua was better off under Somoza, whether or not it's possible to live the "good life" in Nicaragua, etc. Or you might select a number of dialogue choices:

- How would Eusebio respond to Marina's complaints, and how would she answer him?
- Imagine Marina telling Liseth that her life is being wasted, and Liseth responding.





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## The People Speak: Conversations with Nicaraguans

LAS LOMAS, JINOTEGA

### Eusebio Picado Gonzalez

*Eusebio Picado Gonzalez, forty-five, is a powerfully built, dark campesino. He has a thick, black mustache. As we talked, in time-honored country fashion, Picado whittled on a piece of wood. He is general coordinator of the Lina Herrera Cooperative.*

We have a good cooperative here. We have good land, even though the size varies with the season. You see, part of our land borders on Lake Apanas. That parcel is 200 *manzanas* [measure of land] — in the dry season. When the water rises, then it's only 50 *manzanas*. That land on the lake, though — it's the best pasture, very productive.

Altogether, in the dry season we have 450 *manzanas*. On 80 *manzanas* we plant our crops. The rest is pasture.

We raise corn, tomatoes, carrots, beets, cabbage. This year we started potatoes. The government people came and made some tests on our land. They told us that this would be excellent land for potatoes. So we put in five *manzanas* for seed. Next season, if things go well, we'll plant a big crop of potatoes. There's a good market for potatoes in Nicaragua.

We get three crops a year of everything — even corn. There is plenty of rain around here, plenty of water during most of the year. During the dry season we use irrigation. We have a gravity system. It works very well.

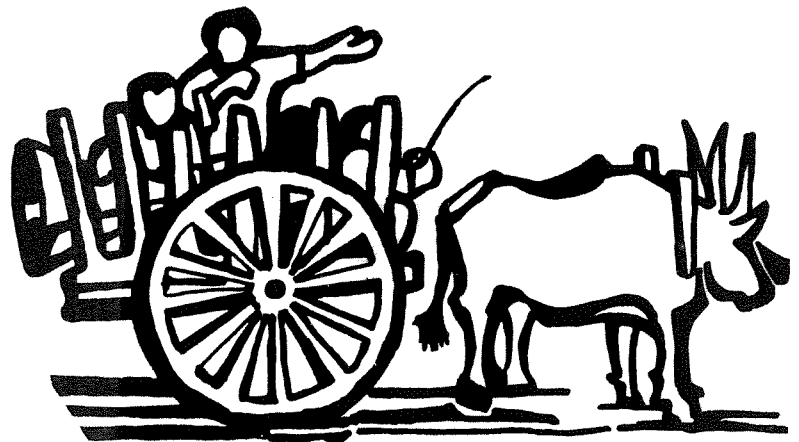
The Lina Herrera Cooperative was established on November 26, 1979, by

twenty-six members. That was only four months after the Triumph. Now we have seventy-eight people.

All of this land had been owned by officers in Somoza's army. After the Triumph it was simply lying here, unused. And we had nothing. We knew this land well. Before the revolution most of our members had worked on the farms that are now our cooperative.

After the Triumph people from the Agrarian Reform came to the village, and we all had a big meeting. They said, "Go ahead, take the land. Use it. Grow food for Nicaragua. But first, organize yourselves into a cooperative. We'll give you title to the land — free. We'll lend you money for seed, fertilizer, pesticide — whatever you need. We'll advance you money to live on until you sell your first crop."

Some of our people found this hard to believe. But others convinced them. We couldn't refuse an offer like this. What did we have to lose? We started this cooperative with one pair of oxen. That's just about all we owned among all of us.



It worked out for us. Now we don't owe anything above our obligation to the bank. After every crop we make an accounting and we divide the profits among the members. From the beginning we've made a good profit — every time. For our last three crops, each member earned 44,300 *cordobas*. In addition, each member takes as much of the vegetables as he wants. That's not too bad for *campesinos*, right?

Last October we bought this herd of 100 cows. They're Brown Swiss. They're good for both milk and beef. Thirty of our cows are milking now. Sixty-eight are heifers. We went to the National Bank for a loan for the cows, and they gave us the financing, just like that.

This herd was very important to us. You must understand, as a child I rarely saw milk — not me, not my father, not his father, going way back. Sometimes, once in a great while, there would be a bit of milk from a can, but never from a cow. We never saw fresh milk. For every *campesino* it was the same.

So now you know why this herd is important to us. Now our children drink milk. Every day. All they want. Every child drinks milk, fresh, warm from the cow. Our members buy the milk at cost — 3 *cordobas* a liter. The surplus we sell to the community. Soon, as the herds grow, every child in Jinotega will be drinking all the fresh milk he wants.

As I said, we started with one yoke of oxen. Now we have seven. We do all of our work with the oxen. We own no machinery — not a tractor, not a truck, not even an automobile. It's hard working that way. We'd like to have at least a truck — we'd like to be fully mechanized. Maybe some day. But now I'm not so sure. When I hear other farmers talk of their problems with machines, with parts — I don't know. The oxen — we have unlimited pasture for them, unlimited water. And they never break down.

So far we've been fortunate here. We haven't been troubled by the counterrevolutionaries. Not yet, although we know that they're in the mountains nearby.

But we're prepared for the worst. We have a permanent *vigilancia*. Everyone of us — all of our members — can handle a weapon. Forty-one of us are in the militia. We pray that we don't have to fight. We're farmers, not soldiers. Still, if we have to fight...

Our members are very active in social activities in the community. For instance, we've been working on a potable water system in the town. The Canadian people gave us \$40,000 for this system. And the English, they've promised us a pump. This will be a big help. We've been working on this water system for a long time, and we hope to have it completed in five more months.

Also, we're working on a new school building right here on the cooperative. The government provided the material. We on the cooperative are providing the labor. You see, some of our members live here on the cooperative; others live in the town. Everyone wants to live here, and so we're building homes for everyone, right here on our own land. When they're completed, when all of our people live here on the cooperative, the new school will be ready for our children.

Of my eight children, five are still at home. Two are in school. It will be good when our school is completed. We'll be able to use it for many things. Maybe in the evenings we can have adult education. Maybe we'll be able to have meetings. Maybe we'll show films.

It certainly is different from when I was a kid. I had two years of school. My wife, Esperanza, she had four years. We were both in the literacy campaign. Every one of our members was. When we began, only 5 percent of our people could really read and write. Now almost everyone can. Some difference, eh? Today the kids can

go as far as they want. Even the university. Who knows?

Look, before the Triumph I was a landowner. Don't be surprised. Yes, I owned one *manzana*. Every year I planted corn on my *manzana*. In addition, I was in partnership with other landowners. I grew corn on their land and I got half the profit — half the harvest. I had one *manzana* here, one-quarter *manzana* there, one-half *manzana* there — like that. I had no fertilizer, I had no pesticide, I had no irrigation. Most of the time I had no corn either. I did a lot of praying and we starved. Now it's a little different, eh?

### **Marina Isabel Mena de Cano**

*Marina Isabel Mena de Cano is forty-one years old. She is meticulous in her dress and her grooming. She tends to be nervous and animated.*

I was married at seventeen, here in Managua. At twenty-six I was a widow with two little children. My husband was an accountant, a good man, ten years older than me. But nine years after our marriage he got cancer, and he soon died. When my husband died, my life changed very much.

I was born in Juigalpa, in the department of Chontales. When I was little we moved to Managua — my father, my mother, my two sisters, and I.

We lived on a farm in Chontales. We had cows, chickens, horses. It was a very nice life as I remember. My mother was a schoolteacher. She taught primary school in Juigalpa. Later she did the same work here in Managua.

My father died soon after we came to Managua. But our lives didn't change. We seemed to have enough money, enough of everything. My sisters and I went to school, we helped our mother in the house, and then I got married.

Soon after my husband died I bought

this house. We had some money saved, and with insurance and other benefits I invested in this house — a place to keep my family together. For me, though, everything changed. Life became very difficult.

This house was a good investment. It provides a part of my income. I rent rooms. I have private little apartments around the garden. It's really quite nice, pretty, isn't it?

I rent mostly to foreigners. Last month I had an artisan, an Italian who taught in a school in Granada. After him, a Guatemalan. Once I had an Arab — a Libyan. He was a good cook. He made delicious Arab food. But mostly I have students, sometimes journalists from the United States, Germany, England. Most stay for two weeks or a month. But they must pay in dollars. *Cordobas*, they're worthless.

I have a profession, too. I design clothes — skirts, dresses, blouses — anything for women. I have a seamstress who comes three days a week, and she makes clothes from my designs. I sell to neighbors, friends, friends of friends — like that. My clothes are expensive. But today, everything is expensive — if you can get it.

Take meat. You can't get meat. The butcher store opens at nine o'clock. At four-thirty, five o'clock in the morning people start to line up in the streets to get meat. Lorena, who works for me — or sometimes I myself — stands in the line when it is still dark.

Milk. Before you could get all of the milk you wanted. Now try and get it. What are they selling? Powdered milk. It's terrible. I go to a farm three mornings every week to buy real milk. You have to be there at four-thirty in the morning when they milk the cows. It's expensive, but at least it's milk.

I know a farmer who has many chickens. Sometimes I buy eggs from him. I sell them to my neighbors. In that way I make a few *cordobas*. That's the way life is today.

I'm always planning. I'm buying, I'm selling, I'm waiting in line. I'm going here, going there. Anything to get what we need; anything to earn a few *cordobas*. It's very difficult. I hate this life.

Everything costs. People don't realize. I have light and water bills, taxes. I have to give something to Lorena. The gardener comes every two weeks. He must be paid. I have problems with the plumbing, the electricity. Tomorrow an electrician is coming to fix some lamps and repair the wiring. God knows what he will charge. My car is six years old, and it needs repairs, parts, tires. It's impossible.

And food. I have a big household. I have my mother — she's eighty years old — my daughter, Liseth, and Lorena. My nephew Armando lives with me. Armando is a student. He lives in Granada, but he goes to school in Managua. Liseth and Armando work, too, and they help out a little. But food, impossible.

Liseth is studying psychology, and she wants to go on — to continue her schooling in Mexico. But for that you need dollars. Who has dollars?

Me? I have no recreation, no social life. The only enjoyment I have is four or five mornings a week I go to my exercise class, and I jog, too. That's my recreation. You have to keep fit, right?

I have worries, many worries. My son, Paulo, he's twenty-two, and he was married last year. He works in a bank — he's a lovely boy. Now I'm afraid that they're going to take him into the army. If they try to take him, I don't know what I'll do.

I don't vote. Not me. To hell with them. None of them are any good.

### **Liseth Mena**

*Liseth Mena is Marina's daughter. Liseth is twenty-three years old, a student. She is vivacious and candid. Her blue*

*jeans, tennis shoes, T-shirt are in sharp contrast to her mother's formal dress.*

My life is full. I'm always busy, always in motion. I attend the university full-time and I work full-time. Don't ask me when I sleep.

I go to *La UCA*— the University of Central America. I think it's a good school. My major is psychology, and I'm in the fourth year of a five year program. One more year to go. I like clinical psychology, but I still don't know whether I'll specialize in children or adults. I'm interested in both. We'll see.

After I graduate from UCA I'd like to continue my studies. I hope to go to either the University of Mexico or to East Germany. I think I'd prefer to study in Germany. I hear that they're doing very interesting things in clinical psychology.

Of course, money is a consideration. It's possible that I can get a scholarship to study in East Germany. I'm trying. I'm working very hard to get a scholarship.

My job — it's wonderful. I work at the Reeducation Center *Campesinas del Cua*, right here in Managua. We have about thirty patients, all girls between twelve and fifteen years old. They had all been prostitutes, thieves, things like that. I work four nights a week, from seven in the evening to six in the morning.



The name of the center, *Campesinas del Cua*, is symbolic. Cua is the name of a Nicaraguan village. In this village, in Cua, all of the women had been violated by the *Somocista Guardias*. There had been a garrison in that town, and all of the women had been raped, many times.

Like the women of Cua, our patients, too, have been violated. They've been violated by a legacy of injustice, of exploitation.

We stress that at the center we do not *rehabilitate*. We hope to *reeducate*. Rehabilitation? For what? In Nicaragua there is no longer any institutional injustice, exploitation, repression. We aim to *reeducate*. We want to open their minds to the opportunity for the rich, productive life that is now possible in our country.

First, we have formal education. Everyone must master the basic skills: reading, writing, arithmetic. Then, we teach work skills. Some of our patients learn sewing. Some, those who are so inclined, we send to commercial and trade schools in Managua. Some have even been sent for advanced training to Cuba and other socialist countries.

My work — I'm called an *educadora*. I do group dynamics. I supervise

games. I lead the group discussions about their personal lives, about the news of the day, about national problems — anything, everything. The main thing is to help them to think about things beyond their previous limited experiences. Also, we must help them to learn to express themselves. I observe them — even while they sleep. That's when I get my sleep — sometimes three or four hours.

I love my work. It fills me with happiness to know that I'm doing something important, something for society. I feel that I'm building for myself, for my people, for the revolution. I feel myself growing, learning all the time. That's a good feeling.

In Nicaragua the future is beautiful, especially for the poor people, especially for the children. We're getting opportunities that we never had before.

My mother — she's a good person and we respect each other's views. She's a good woman, and she has many problems, financial and otherwise. But she comes from a different time. She is a strong individualist. She sees everything from a very personal point of view. She has not yet developed a collective outlook. So it is very difficult for her. Maybe she'll change. For her happiness, I hope so.



## **Masaya Market**

*by Pablo Beteta*

(A colorful, 18" x 24" poster of **Masaya Market** is available from NECCA for \$18.50 including postage. Use order form on last page of this curriculum. The proceeds from poster sales will be used to fund additional curriculum projects.)

## The Honduran Connection

*In recent years Honduras has been the scene of a number of large-scale military maneuvers by U.S. troops, including National Guard units from various states. As the map of Honduras and the list of U.S. military installations indicate, the United States has established what appears to be a permanent presence in the country.*

*The reading, **Gringos and Contras on Our Land**, is excerpted from a book by Elvia Alvarado, a peasant woman active in organizing the poor of rural Honduras. One of the conclusions she draws in the book is that the deeper the U.S. involvement in Honduras, the more repressive Honduran society has become. According to Alvarado, Salvadoran-like disappearances, once virtually unheard of, are becoming increasingly commonplace.*

*Alvarado's entire book could be used successfully with high school students; but Chapter 11, included here, is of direct use in a study of Nicaragua. As of late 1989, Honduras still provides sanctuary for the largest Nicaraguan contra groups. According to testimony in the Iran-Contra hearings, U.S. missions to resupply contras operating in Nicaragua originated mainly from air bases in Honduras.*

### Goals/Objectives

1. Students will become aware of some of the consequences the contra war in Nicaragua has had on neighboring Honduras.

### Materials Needed

- Handout #13: **Gringos and Contras on Our Land**.

### Time Required

- Varies with activity selected.

### Procedure

1. Distribute Handout #13: **Gringos and Contras on Our Land**. Review with students the map and charts which are found at end of the reading. Point out that the woman who narrates the student reading lives near Comayagua, just a few miles from the Palmerola military base.
  - let the contras onto its territory? Why does the government allow the U.S. military in?
  - Who suffers from the contra and U.S. presence in Honduras? In what ways?
  - Who benefits? In what ways?
  - Who in Honduras do you think has the most influence when it comes to deciding whether or not Honduran territory will be used by foreign military forces?
2. Read aloud Handout #13: **Gringos and Contras...**
3. Discuss. Some questions could include:
  - Why does the Honduran government
  - Why might it be difficult for us in this country to get an accurate sense of how

Hondurans feel about the U.S. and contra presence?

**Possible Activities:**

1. Imagine you are a poor Honduran. Write a letter to an American soldier telling him your reactions to having the U.S. military and contras in your country.
2. Write a poem from the perspective of Elvia Alvarado, the narrator of this reading. You might “steal” one of Elvia’s lines to open your poem. For example: “Everything in our country is for sale now. . .”
3. This would be a good time to engage students in a role play of the conflicts tearing at Honduran society. Divide students into six different groups:

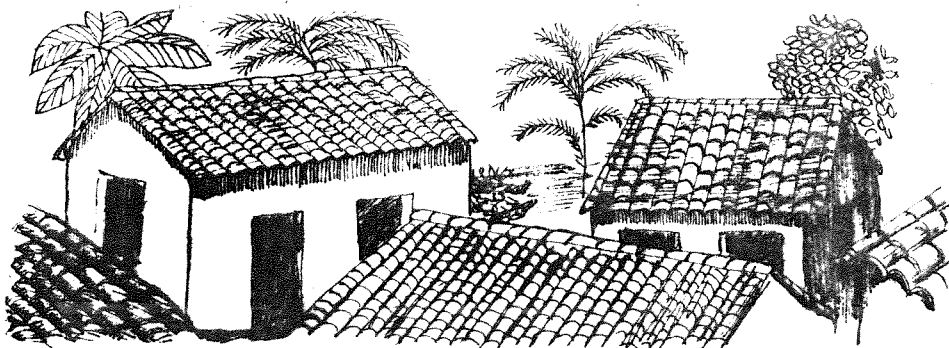
- The Honduran military
- Poor coffee growers on the Honduran border, displaced or threatened with displacement by the fighting

- Poor peasants such as Elvia
- Shopowners in the towns and cities
- Workers in the towns and cities
- Large landowners

Brainstorm with students about what life-conditions might be like for each of these groups and what their attitudes might be toward the contras and the U.S. military.

Divide students into these six groups and tell them that they will be responsible to make a presentation addressing the question: **Should the U.S. military be allowed to operate on Honduran soil?**

Give students awhile to talk among themselves and to decide on arguments. Then allow about half of each group to move around the room to meet and build alliances with other groups. Have students re-group and prepare presentations. During presentations encourage people to question and challenge one another.





## Gringos and Contras on Our Land

*The following was told to Medea Benjamin by Elvia Alvarado, a peasant leader in Honduras. Alvarado, concerned about the social problems she saw around her, first joined church-organized mother's clubs. She quit when she saw that the church, "wanted to give food out to malnourished mothers and children, but they didn't want us to question why we were malnourished to begin with. They wanted us to grow vegetables on the tiny plots around our houses, but they didn't want us to question why we didn't have enough land to feed ourselves." For Alvarado, land was the key issue; she joined a national campesino union and later, her current organization, the National Congress of Rural Workers.*

Ever since the Sandinistas came to power, the United States has been building bases all over our country. I live next to Palmerola, the biggest U.S. base. I don't know how far I live from Palmerola, because I really don't know how to measure it. By bus it takes 20 minutes. And if you walk through the fields, it's even closer. At night we can see the lights of the base from our house, and during the day we see the planes and helicopters flying overhead. They pass right over our houses.

I've never been to Palmerola, so I don't know what's really going on there. But I don't understand why these gringo bases are here to begin with.

First of all, they kicked a lot of *campesino* groups off their lands to make room for the bases. Take the Palmerola base — there were two *campesino* groups there before, and they moved them to another piece of land that isn't as good.

Secondly, the bases only strengthen the Honduran military, and that means more repression for us.

I used to feel hatred towards the gringo soldiers. Why should they be in our country, with all their guns and all their dollars, making life even more difficult for us? But now I know that these poor gringos are just ignorant; they really don't know why they're here or what this struggle is all about. I have friends who've talked to some of them, and they say that these guys don't know anything about Central America. They've just been sent here by their government. So it's really not their fault; it's the fault of the people who sent them here.

Sure, there are some people who are delighted to have the gringos here. They say, "Isn't it great we have these gringos here protecting our country?" Others are happy because the gringos spend their money here. In Comayagua, which is the town nearest the Palmerola base, the businessmen are happy to have their dollars. The people who own restaurants and bars are happy. And of course the prostitutes are happy.

There was a big scandal when the gringos first came, because the level of prostitution shot up something terrible. I won't say there weren't any prostitutes before, but not like this — with whole streets full of bordellos. The Honduran men got pissed because the prostitutes were only interested in dollars, they didn't want to sleep with Hondurans any more. And of course their prices went up, too.

There was also a scandal around the sexual abuse of children by the gringos. There were cases of children who were

raped. We'd never had anything like that before the gringos came here.

And people started talking about a sexual disease called the "flor de Vietnam," the flower of Vietnam. I guess it's named after that country Vietnam, where the United States fought another war. All I know is that it's a sexual disease that's hard to cure.

Another big problem for Honduras is the presence of the contras. The government can deny it all it wants, but everyone knows the contras are all over our country.

The contras make life hard for Hondurans living on the border. Coffee growers in the south lost their entire crop because of the fighting. These are poor farmers, not big plantation owners. I heard on the radio that they all marched to the capital to complain to the president and ask him to kick the contras out. Then they went to the U.S. embassy and asked them to pay for their losses, but the gringos said it wasn't their problem.

Where I live you don't see contras, because it's not close to the Nicaraguan border. I say you don't see them, but they might very well be there, because the Honduran military is so corrupt that it's selling its own uniforms to the contras. So you really don't know who's who any more, since there are contras going around as Hondurans. Can you imagine that? How can the military stoop so low as to sell its own uniforms? Doesn't it have any sense of dignity? Everything in our country is for sale now — from women's bodies to the army's uniforms!

Anyway, one time I was at a meeting in the south. It was right near the border between Honduras and Nicaragua where the contras have their bases. After the meeting I went around talking to the people there. I always want to learn everything I can. I'm always asking questions.

So I talked with people who lived near the border and they told me they were afraid because there was fighting going on

there all the time, right near their homes. They said that the contras live on the Honduran side of the border, and they sneak into Nicaragua when the Sandinistas aren't looking. They throw bombs and plant mines — and when the Sandinistas go after them, they run back into Honduras.

The people who live near the border are scared to death, because they get caught in the battles. Lots of *campesinos* have moved. They say there are now thousands of Hondurans who are homeless because of the contra war.

Everyone knows that if it weren't for the contras, there'd be no problems with the Sandinistas. Nobody thinks the Sandinistas are interested in taking over Honduras. They've already got one poor country to worry about. Why would they want another one?

But the *campesinos* down there are scared of the contras. They're scared about getting deeper into a war with Nicaragua, and they're scared to talk about their fears. They talk to me because I'm one of them. But they won't talk to outsiders, because there are lots of Honduran soldiers in the area. They say the soldiers told them not to talk to anyone, especially journalists.

Our government allows these contras to hide out here, but who are the ones to suffer? The Hondurans. Which Hondurans? The poor. The soldiers in the army, you see, are not the sons of the rich. Never. The sons of the rich are untouchable. They go to fancy schools or they hang around the street smoking marijuana. But the sons of the poor go into the army.

They recruit the *campesinos* by force. I know cases where the army has gone to the *campesino* settlements and taken away young boys right from the fields. They make the sons of the poor fight against their own brothers and sisters, against their own people or against their brothers and sisters in Nicaragua.

Just a few days ago we heard the

news that a Honduran military plane crashed near the Nicaraguan border. It was a plane that the United States sold to Honduras. I don't know what kind it was — I don't understand all that stuff about DCs and F2s. All I know is that it was a plane carrying 52 people — colonels, lieutenants, sergeants, soldiers, and a few civilians, including children. All 52 of them died; there wasn't a survivor in the lot.

No one knows exactly what happened — if the Nicaraguans shot it down, if there was something wrong with the plane, or what.

Fifty-two Hondurans died, and the whole country was in mourning. But no one asked why they died. They asked what happened to the plane, but they didn't ask why the plane was there to begin with.

The base they were flying to was a base in the Mosquitia. Before the gringos were around, Honduras never had an air base in the Mosquitia. Why should we? The Mosquitia's in the middle of nowhere — just a lot of mountains and trees. We're not such a rich country that we can afford to have bases in the middle of nowhere. No. It was the U.S. that built that airstrip. If we hadn't been dragged into this U.S. war, those 52 Hondurans wouldn't have been there to begin with.

But all the government says is, "Oh, what a terrible tragedy. Oh, the poor Colonel and the poor lieutenants and the poor little boy and their poor families. Oh, the Honduran people are in mourning." But they don't say anything about why they died, about why the Honduran military is flying around the Nicaraguan border.

Instead of all the condolences and the

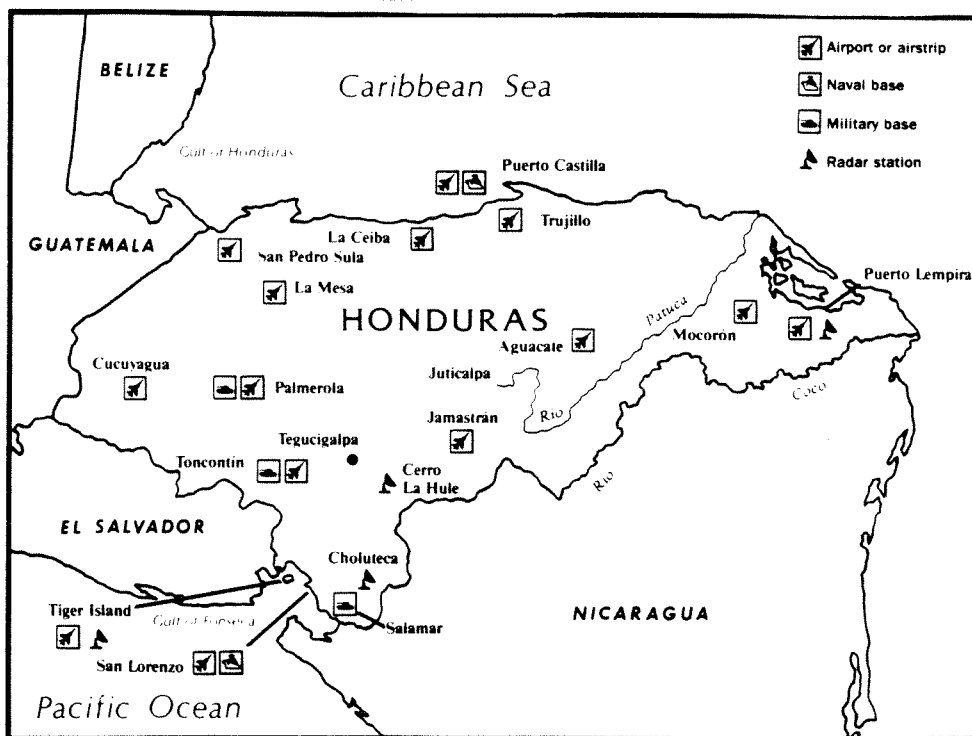
mourning, why doesn't the government say, "That's enough. We've had it with the U.S. bases and the U.S. military and this U.S. war. We won't be cannon fodder for the United States. Enough!"

*Campeños* don't want war. War only makes our lives more difficult than they already are. What we want is land and jobs, not war. War only means a lot of poor people will die. We've got enough problems without fighting the rich man's war.

I'd like to know how the United States thinks this whole thing is going to end. What's going to happen to the contras? How long are they going to stay in Honduras? Forever?

Because I don't think they'll ever win, unless they have U.S. troops fighting with them. So what's going to happen to them? They can't go back to Nicaragua, because they've killed too many people. They've caused too much suffering for the Nicaraguans to let them back in. So will they stay here in Honduras? That's what worries us.

From: Don't Be Afraid, Gringo: A Honduran Woman Speaks from the Heart, the story of Elvia Alvarado, translated and edited by Medea Benjamin, Food First Books.



# U.S.-Honduran Military Establishments in Honduras (1)

*Asterisks indicate sites of U.S. military construction between 1982 and 1986.*

- CUCYAGUA\*: Airstrip constructed to accommodate U.S. military C-130 transport planes.
- LA MESA: Airport of Honduran Air Force, used by U.S. military transport planes during the Big Pine II maneuvers.
- SAN PEDRO SULA\*: Airstrip with capacity to handle C-130 transports.
- LA CEIBA\*: Air base and advanced ammunition depot. Recently upgraded runway.
- PUERTO CASTILLA\*: Permanent military port and air base. Former site of Regional Military Training Center, where Salvadoran and other Central American armed forces received training from Green Berets. Training center was closed in 1985.
- TRUJILLO\*: Enlarged airport, used as a supply base for Puerto Castilla. Airstrip improved to handle C-130 military transport planes.
- PUERTO LEMPIRA\*: Secret satellite communication center. Airstrip upgraded to accommodate C-130 transports.
- MOCORON\*: Airfield improved to handle C-130 military transports.
- AGUACATE\*: Airstrip extended during Big Pine maneuvers, has capacity to handle C-130 transports.
- JUTICALPA\*: Honduran National Training Center. Staffed initially by U.S. Special Forces. Will train 2,000-3,000 new Honduran recruits per year in the use of weapons and counterinsurgency tactics.
- JAMASTRAN\*: Airport constructed during Big Pine maneuvers, has capacity to handle C-130 transports. Road and runway improvements during Big Pine 1987.
- SALAMAR: Base for advisors from U.S. Special Forces Mobile Unit.
- CERRO LA HULE\*: Radar station staffed by U.S. Tactical Air Command personnel.
- CHOLUTECA: Radar station staffed by U.S. personnel observing and coordinating "contra" attacks across Nicaraguan border.
- TONCONTIN: International Airport for Tegucigalpa. Site of U.S. MILGP (Military Group) base. MILGP is responsible for all U.S. military training activities in Honduras.
- SAN LORENZO\*: Naval base and airport, now capable of handling C-130 transports. Facility for remotely piloted intelligence-gathering vehicles.

Used to launch U.S. reconnaissance flights over El Salvador to detect guerilla activity.

- TIGER ISLAND\*: Radar station staffed by 150 U.S. Marines. Monitors activity in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Has airstrip with capacity to handle C-7 transports. Also used as base for CIA speedboats.
- PALMEROLA\*: Site of General Headquarters for Joint Task Forces Bravo, with 800-1,200 permanently stationed U.S. troops. Base for Mohawk and Beechcraft surveillance aircraft used over El Salvador and Nicaragua. Primary forward munition and jet fuel storage depot for U.S. forces in region.

## Additional Facts on U.S. Militarization of Honduras

- In 1980, the U.S. had 25 military personnel in Honduras. By 1984, from 800-1,200 maintained a regular presence, with the bulk on the Palmerola Base
- From 1983 to May 1987, almost 80,000 U.S. troops have been trained in Honduras on military maneuvers. (2)
- Between 1982 and 1986, the U.S. has built or upgraded in Honduras 11 airfields, 2 radar stations, roads, tank traps, fuel storage areas and air intelligence installations. (3)

## Notes

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2. Food First, phone interview, Captain Ferrara, Marine Corps Desk, U.S. Pentagon.

3. LeMoyné, James, "U.S. Said to Plan a Long Presence in Honduran Bases," *New York Times*, July 13, 1986.

## A North American in Nicaragua: The Life of Ben Linder

*Every war the United States government has waged, either with a formal declaration or informally, has encountered some resistance at home. But the U.S.-backed contra war in Nicaragua sparked a new form of opposition: United States citizens, by the thousands, trekking into “enemy” territory as volunteers — “internationalist workers.” Some of these travelers stayed for a week or two as coffee pickers, others made Nicaragua their new home. Attracted by what they understood to be a revolutionary process in the interest of the poor, many of these U.S. citizens knowingly risked their lives in the course of their work. One of them, Ben Linder, was killed.*

*Raised in Portland, Oregon and educated at the University of Washington in Seattle, Linder went to Nicaragua with a degree in engineering and talent as a clown. On April 28, 1987 Linder was ambushed by contras as he worked on a small hydroelectric project in a remote area of northern Nicaragua. Two Nicaraguans, Sergio Hernandez and Pablo Rosales, were killed with him.*

*What would motivate someone from what seemed a comfortable background, with a degree in engineering and numerous job prospects, to choose a life of privation and danger in Nicaragua? In this lesson, students step inside the life of Ben Linder. His choices become their choices: Why not opt for a life of comfort and security? Why live in a country which your own government considers a “totalitarian dungeon”? Once in Nicaragua, should you stay in the relative safety of the city or live in a more dangerous, but also more needy, region? Through a number of readings, discussions and writing assignments students consider these and other difficult — and not merely hypothetical — questions. (The Linder family has kindly allowed us to use material from letters and diaries so students can gain a more accurate and intimate portrait of Ben.)*

### Goals/Objectives

1. Students will explore the motivations of U.S. citizens who challenge the policies of their government.
2. Students will identify with the choices that one person made to commit his life to the poor of Nicaragua.

### Time Required

- Approximately three to four class periods.

### Materials:

- Handout #14-A: **Inside Ben Linder**
- Handout #14-B: **Ben Linder Chooses Nicaragua**
- Handout #14-C: **Dear Miriam...**
- Handout #14-D: **Ben Linder — A Brother's View** (By John Linder)

### Procedure

1. Ask if any students in the class have heard of Ben Linder, the 27 year old U.S. engineer who was killed by the contras in Nicaragua in April of 1987. Tell students they are going to climb inside the life of Ben Linder to understand what would motivate someone from a relatively privileged background to risk his life in the mountains of Nicaragua.

2. Distribute Handout #14-A: **Inside Ben Linder**. Read it aloud with students. Before assigning the writing, ask students to list their reactions to the letter from Paul as if they were Ben Linder. Give students a chance to share some of these comments with one another. Students can use their lists to begin writing their letters or interior monologues. Be sure to give them an adequate amount of time to do a thoughtful job.
3. When students have finished, ask for volunteers to read their letters or interior monologues aloud to the class. Have students listen for and list the ideas which appear frequently. When the read-around of student writings is completed, ask them to spend a moment looking over their lists for common ideas from the letters or interior monologues — the “collective text” of writings. Did any of the students accept Paul’s offer? If so, ask what experiences in Linder’s background would have made him open to the life Paul was offering. Talk about what aspects of Ben’s life would contribute to his rejecting Paul’s offer.

Ask students how *they* might have responded to Paul’s letter. How is his offer appealing? Why might it be unappealing?

4. Distribute or read aloud Handout #14-B: **Ben Linder Chooses Nicaragua**. Some questions for discussion:
  - What is your reaction to Ben Linder’s decision to move to Nicaragua?
  - If you had been in Ben’s position, how would you have felt about opposing the foreign policy of your own government?
  - Why would the contras have targeted

projects like the ones Ben worked on in the Cua-Bocay region?

- John Linder says the Cua-Bocay project indicated the Sandinistas’ commitment to democracy in Nicaragua. What does he mean by that? Do you think he’s right?
  - What kind of discussions do you imagine Ben Linder had with friends when he returned home for visits? [This might be an opportunity for you to do a little impromptu role playing with students.]
5. Handout #14-C: **Dear Miriam...** is an excerpt from a letter that Ben Linder was writing his sister just before he was killed by the contras. The letter was later found in his briefcase. Read the letter aloud with students. Make sure they are clear about their assignment. This is a good opportunity to use a “guided visualization” if you are comfortable with this technique. Turn off the lights. Ask students to imagine that they are Ben Linder [pause and allow students to reflect after each statement or question you pose]: “You are in the mountains of Nicaragua. It is early morning. You smell the coffee as you feel the sun’s warmth beginning to burn away the mist. Think back to your experiences at the University of Washington... Think about why you came to Nicaragua... What do you worry about here... What do you like about being here... What do you appreciate about the people here... What do you hope for...” Turn on the lights and instruct students to begin writing immediately, without any talking at all. The guided visualization may sound like hypnosis, but it’s not. When done well, it’s a wonderful way of preparing students to write. Allow students to take their papers home to finish.

6. As in step #3, encourage students to read their pieces to the class. Remind them that there are no right or wrong versions of the completion of Ben's letter. In discussion, draw out the aspects of life in Nicaragua that would keep a privileged North American from returning home. This is an opportunity to help students piece together their understandings about post-revolutionary Nicaraguan society from previous lessons. You may want to list with students the features of the Nicaraguan revolution they think contributed to the "feeling of peace" that Ben gained from what was happening around him.
7. Although surely obvious by this point in the lesson, it may be useful to review explicitly with students the non-material rewards Linder gained from his participation in the ongoing social transformation in Nicaragua. The daily media bombardment in the United States of BMWs, swimming pools and expensive clothes can easily squeeze out alternative visions of the "good life". It seems to us an important objective of this lesson is to suggest that a meaningful life can be secured without pursuing endless consumption.

Distribute Handout #14-D: **Ben Linder — A Brother's View**. The article doesn't concentrate on the details of Ben Linder's killing, but instead tries to put it in context and to draw lessons. Some discussion questions include:

- John Linder writes that, "Ben was himself transformed". How did Nicaragua change Ben?
- Why would Ben Linder choose to stay in Nicaragua if the United States military had invaded, as appeared very possible around 1984 and 1985?

- How would you answer the question, "Who killed Ben Linder?"
- Many conservative politicians in the United States, including former President Reagan, said that it was too bad that Ben Linder was killed but that it was his own fault. Based on what you know about Nicaragua and U.S. policy, explain why you agree or disagree.
- Based on what you've learned about the history of U.S./Nicaraguan relations, why would the U.S. government want to, in the words of John Linder, "crush Nicaraguans' hopes for a better life?"
- John Linder concludes his article by calling on U.S. citizens to "make a difference." What, if anything, can U.S. citizens do to make a difference? [For possible suggestions, see Appendix A on follow-up activities for students.]







### Inside Ben Linder

You are Ben Linder. The year is 1983 and you are just about to graduate from the University of Washington in Seattle. Like many graduates, you're not exactly sure what you want to do. But first a little background is needed.

You grew up in San Francisco during the years of the Vietnam War. Your family lived in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood — a stronghold of peace activity. Even before you were ten years old you were marching in anti-war demonstrations with your family. These marches, some with several hundred thousand people, taught you that people could come together to work for change. And that you could have fun doing it: You remember laughing at the jugglers and actors of the San Francisco Mime Troupe as they performed anti-war skits.

When you were eleven years old you moved with your family to Portland, Oregon. You lived up in the hills, near a huge park with trees that seemed to go on forever. These trees became your playground where you built forts with friends.

You were small and didn't much like competitive sports like baseball and football, but you enjoyed physical activity. And you were a dedicated inventor and tinkerer. With your friends you designed home-made burglar alarms and electronic eyes and even figured out how to tap into the phone lines in front of your house to make free long distance calls — until you got caught, that is.

You chose not to go to your neighborhood high school which you thought would not offer enough choices or challenges. Instead you took the bus into a poorer neighborhood to attend Adams High

School, a public alternative school which emphasized creativity over memorizing, and allowed you to take classes which were ungraded.

You loved Adams. Your teachers encouraged you to question everything and to think for yourself. In one game the class played, called "crap detector", teachers would bring in articles from the newspaper and quotes from politicians. You students would have to find the faulty logic and misinformation in the articles. You were the best crap-detector in class.

As long as you can remember, your family talked about politics and current events at the dinner table, and both your parents were active in civil rights and peace activities. At Adams you became even more interested and knowledgeable about what was going on in the world. You were particularly concerned about nuclear power.

After graduating from high school in 1977 you took part in a major protest at the nuclear power plant near Portland. You were so strongly convinced that nuclear power was a danger to the human race that you were willing to get arrested.

After looking at colleges throughout the country you finally settled on the University of Washington in Seattle. It was close to home, was a nice community and had a fine engineering department.

Here, you were able to combine your interests. You had begun to learn juggling at the end of high school in Portland. In Seattle, you began to take juggling more seriously and also took an interest in clowning. You learned to ride a unicycle and rode it everywhere you went — right into the classroom at times. At parties, you

would often arrive dressed head to toe in a clown costume. And you put your skills to use for political causes, performing, for example, at skits around the college to protest what you felt were unfair budget cuts.

Although you were a clown, you also were a serious and hard-working student. One of your favorite classes got you thinking about ways small technology projects could be run by people with little education in poor countries. This excited you because most engineering classes assumed that *big* meant *good*, and that you should be working for companies designing fancy

equipment or big dams. You were more interested in using engineering skills to experiment with non-polluting solar energy or to design artificial limbs. You were happiest when you could help people.

*And now:* You're graduating. You haven't had any job offers, though you know that there are lots of companies in the Seattle area that would hire someone with your skills. But you haven't quite yet decided what you want to do with your life. You've just received the following letter from a friend who took a number of classes with you at the university.

*Dear Ben,*

*Hey, buddy, we made it. Four years and now freedom. Out to the cold, cruel world, huh? Look, Ben, I was talking to my dad yesterday and he told me to call Bob, his brother, who is a big time engineer at Boeing. My dad said that Bob would know if there were openings there. Sure enough, I called Bob last night and he said he was positive he could help me get a job. But what's more is that he said he could help you get a job too, or at least he thought he could. Boeing has all these new military contracts so there's going to be work, work and more work for quite awhile. Bob says he's not sure but he thinks Boeing is paying about \$25,000 to \$30,000 for hotshot engineers like the two of us. And that's just to start. I can see it now: new car, apartment with a swimming pool, vacations in Hawaii, skiing in the winter. Sounds good to me.*

*So, Ben, here's what I was thinking. Why don't we go talk to Bob and see what kind of interviews he can set up for the both of us. It would be great to have you working there too. The idea of going into a big place like Boeing and not knowing anybody except my Uncle Bob is sort of scary. What do you think? I'm going to be down in San Francisco for a week or so. Why don't you write me a little note and let me know what you're thinking.*

*This is it. It's decision making time, old buddy.*

*Paul*

**Assignment:** Select and perform one of the following activities:

1. In your role as Ben Linder, write a letter back to Paul responding in detail to his proposal. If you think Paul's proposal is a good one, be sure to explain what parts of his plan are attractive to you. If you're uncertain, tell Paul what hesitations or questions you have. If you're not interested in his proposal, tell him why and explain what you're looking for in your work and life. Be clear, be specific.

2. Write an interior monologue from Ben's point of view. What's going through your mind as you read Paul's letter? In what ways is his proposal attractive; in what ways is it unattractive or even offensive? Think about the experiences Ben has had, the kind of person he is and what he is looking for in life. Remember, an interior monologue is your innermost thoughts, so you don't have to worry about hurting Paul's feelings, nor do you have to be concerned about how other people would respond to what you, as Ben, are thinking and feeling.

## **Ben Linder Chooses Nicaragua**

Ben Linder was 24 years old when he left for Nicaragua in August of 1983. The year before, he had studied Spanish in Costa Rica and then visited Nicaragua for three weeks to see if there would be work for him after graduation from the University of Washington. In a radio interview some time after, Ben remembered, "I ran into a man who worked for the [Nicaraguan] electrical utility who got me an appointment with the head of engineering. He said, 'Fine, Ben, we need you. We don't have enough engineers. When you graduate, come down and see us.'"

But why not get an engineering job in Washington state?

"In 1983, I graduated from the University of Washington with a degree in mechanical engineering. I looked around to see what my peers were doing. Unfortunately, in the state of Washington, which is very militarized, people were going to Boeing, or Hanford atomic works, or Bremerton shipyards. I said, no, that's not for me. I didn't spend five years at the University of Washington, eleven years before that in school, to go out and build equipment that, instead of working for the benefit of the human race, was working for its immediate destruction."

Nonetheless, Ben wasn't sure. "I had been involved in El Salvador support work and that got me thinking that I might be able to do some good work on energy production in Nicaragua. I had my doubts then. Reading the papers, I'd heard about the repression. From the groups on the left, you hear how wonderful it is. In 1982,

I rolled up my sleeves and said, 'I've got to find out about this country.'"

Ben first lived with a family in a working class neighborhood of Managua, the capital. The house was crowded, ten people sharing three bedrooms. Despite his promise of a job, he had problems securing a work permit. In the meantime, he put to use his clowning skills with the Nicaraguan Circus Amerigo. He wrote of performing in neighborhoods "where before [the revolution] the kids had no hope of health or education, and now even the clowns come visit them." After one performance, Ben wrote, "Last night I almost started to cry. We were in a very poor neighborhood. The kids were running around, staring out of their houses and just plain being kids. And here we were. A bit of cheer, something new and exciting. There is a slogan that goes: 'Los ninos nacen para ser felices' — children are born to be happy. And that is a governmental policy, and that is what they believe, and that is why we go to the neighborhoods. And that is what those... in Washington are trying to destroy."

Ben didn't find the revolution had solved all the country's problems, but neither did he discover the repression he had read about in the States. In September of 1983, five weeks after his arrival, Ben wrote friends, "Granted there are still problems now, but there is a feeling of hope, there is a feeling of building a new country. At times this exuberance leads to false hopes. Many more times it leads to a way of life that has never before been experienced for the majority of Nicaraguans."

Ben started to work at INE, the national energy institute, working on plans for a large geothermal generating plant. But he wasn't wild about city life or holding a desk job where his co-workers were drawn from Nicaragua's elite. In a letter to friends back home he wrote, "I must admit that I had higher hopes. These well-paid engineers [complain] about not having all the comforts of 'before' without any comprehension of what life was like for the majority of Nicaraguans. But at least here I can argue back."

After a year at the INE office in Managua, Ben began work on a new project to build a small hydro-electric plant in El Cua, about 160 miles to the northeast — population 2000. Plans for the generating plant were part of a national strategy to bring services to rural areas which had never had them before. Electricity in small towns like El Cua would allow medicines to be refrigerated, local timber to be milled, tools to be made and repaired and light furnished for evening classes. Ben described the town in a letter: "Going into El Cua is a lot like going into a small town in the western United States in 1830. The main street is dusty, two bars, one hotel, a military command post."

In an article, Ben's brother, John, wrote:

"For Ben the El Cua project was a dream come true, a chance to use his engineering skills to generate cheap, renewable energy, the same stuff he fought for in the United States.

"Working with a dedicated team of Nicaraguans and North Americans, Ben completed the plant in November 1985. Townspeople danced at midnight under the first streetlight in El Cua's history.

"Beginning with hydroelectric power, the Cua-Bocay Integrated Rural Development Project was born. Its goal wasn't to hang a light-bulb over poverty but to generate agricultural and industrial development.

"The Cua-Bocay project reflected the Sandinista revolution's democratic spirit. Workers advanced from clearing brush with *machetes* to operating the power plant. The work-crew initiated discussions with the local and regional governments on development priorities. Two women became power plant operators, probably a first for all of Central America."

El Cua lay in a valley that was a main route for contras infiltrating to Nicaragua from Honduras. In October of 1985, contras had kidnapped the teenage sister of one of the workers on Ben's project. Was he afraid? "Scared isn't the word," he wrote in November, "but neither am I whistling in the graveyard. There is an ever-present tension that I feel... It takes its toll on me."

Still, life in Nicaragua was giving Ben a different perspective on "home". On a December visit with friends in New York, he went to Rockefeller Center to look at the Christmas lights. In a radio interview, Ben reflected: "Coming from Nicaragua where we try to do so much with so little, to the intense commercialism of the United States, the intense, intense waste... It was shocking. I just looked and looked at the lights and thought, gee, this is so pretty, and yet somehow I felt removed from it. I felt removed from this country which I love so much."

### Dear Miriam

*Ben Linder began the following letter to his sister, Miriam, just twelve days before he was killed by the contras. He was in the town of Jinotega, recovering from an infection in his foot. The "Don Cosme" referred to in the letter was Ben Linder's roommate.*

April 16, 1987

Dear Miriam,

It was very nice talking with you last night. It is a rather strange last couple of days I've had. Lying flat on my back with an IV tube in my arm in a cool summer climate, for the NW of the US, listening to Neil Young, Dire Straits, Joan Armatrading, eating good food, talking English, being taken care of and staring at the topo maps of the Cua-Bocay area that are on the wall. Desubicado, or out-of-place.

But it does give me a good chance to step back and think about what my life down here is about.

I'd like to try to write about the war, violence and peace because that at least describes the background and my perspective of how I fit in.

Cua-Bocay area fits in a square about 20 x 25 km [kilometers] or 12 x 15 miles... It's an area, and a people, that historically have had a hard life...

When I ask people where they are from very few say they are from the area or if they are their parents aren't. Some were pushed off their land in the Pacific to plant cotton, others just plain moved to find work. Once there, some were able to buy a little piece of land, others stayed on the coffee farms. The area was run, for the most part, by a handful of feudal coffee barons. If they didn't own the land you worked, they owned you for the harvest time. The people that had their own plots of land needed some cash income to buy the staples, such as salt, that they couldn't produce, or for loans to buy seeds and other materials for planting. For this cash they sold themselves to the coffee barons. "Sold" is the only way to describe it. To simply say "worked for" doesn't describe the slave-like work and the subhuman living conditions.

This is the key to understanding the historical violence of underdevelopment. It is a much deeper, more painful, violence than that of mortars, guns and helicopters... The other day I saw the mother of five kids using her feet to wash the corn for the day's tortillas, the same feet which walk around the kitchen where the pig, the dog and the kids all sleep.

The littlest three kids all have the distended stomachs of parasites with malnutrition. But it is more than just health. Hours a day women carry firewood and water. Why are there so few oxen? Were people so much cheaper than animals, especially women? Why were relatively well-planned water systems put in for the coffee processing, but not for people? Was coffee and the money it made that much more important than the lives of so many children? Education wasn't "needed" for the *mozos* [workers], neither was health care, nor shoes (except for the men in the fields) nor a house which offered the basics for a dignified life. All that I wrote about are part of the violence of Cua-Bocay. Violence which year after year repeated itself. The effects are still deeply woven into many people's lives and habits.

Then there is the war... Here in Nicaragua it changes from region to region. In northern Nicaragua it varies from area to area. In Cua-Bocay it changes every mile, literally. In Managua the war is felt through the economic problems which get worse daily, through the draft and through workers such as myself who work closer to the actual fighting. But if you have a lot of money and close your eyes you can ignore it. In Matagalpa you are much closer to the fighting although still not in danger. The military trucks are much more present, more soldiers standing around, the news of skirmishes is more frequent and realistic and there are more people who work closer to the fighting. Jinotega is similar. Then there is the 90 km from Jinotega to El Cua.

On the road the situation is very different. The "war" in general terms doesn't change but the possibility of fighting nearby changes every 5 km, that is to say the danger becomes more or less depending on where you are. This changes monthly, and within the month, weekly, and within the week, daily, and at night there are places you just can't go...

I don't go off the road. People live off of the road. I once took a helicopter from Bocay to Jinotega. Below me were farms, many abandoned, some still producing coffee, beans and corn. Don Cosme has a nice pasture with a good stream next to the house. He boards horses for the day as farmers come into town. Sometimes I wake up and there are twenty saddles in the front room. Over the day, coffee people come by, pick them up and ride back home. I ask where they are from — La Flor, El Cumbo, Cano de la Cruz, La Lana, and so on. All of these casarios, or little groups of houses, are in the 20 x 25 km square of Cua-Bocay... They are ... where fighting has gone on for the last five years. So what does it mean that fighting has gone on for five years? Which really means: What is fighting? Once more our images are insufficient. In the zone there are areas off of the road where the contra have established inroads into the communities; they can move around with some freedom, buy goods and have an established series of informers. The communities I mentioned above are these. I don't go there. Then there are areas along the road where the contra occasionally cross. These are the "dangerous" areas. Then there are the towns of El Cua and San Jose de Bocay which are very secure. So as far as fighting is concerned it all depends on where you are.

Taking a typical example of an army-contra "confrontation", let's imagine the following: 500 contra (a large band) have come down from Honduras in small groups. Bit by bit they have formed into the complete unit. The army has found out about them. Either a group from the battalion in El Cua or San Jose de Bocay or a mobile army unit

goes in after them. There may be fighting — guns, mortars, and so on — for several days. Maybe some dead, maybe not. For a week or two after that small groups of contra will circulate, maybe running away, maybe an ambush of a car on the road, maybe a short attack on a cooperative, and generally avoiding the army. The army tries to track them down or at least minimize the damage they could do. The above may happen once a month during “bad times”, or every three-four months during “OK times”. Most of the time people plant corn or beans or pick coffee or do any one of the thousands of tasks of running a farm.

That is really the hard part to imagine, how really little fighting there is in this war.

On the other hand there are the attacks that I wrote about in my last letter.

So that is the war. I don't imagine it is much clearer but at least it gives you a point from which to ask questions.

Peace. If peace was just the end to the guns of war it would be simple. If there was no peace amongst the guns of war and the starvation of poverty life would be miserable.

But there is peace at certain times. My favorite is the morning coffee with Don Cosme. Sitting out in front of the house, looking across the pasture to the corn field and beyond, sipping coffee, not talking, just sitting there sipping coffee as the sun comes up and burns off the early morning mist. It is a very special time that I miss when I'm not there. My other favorite time is when I'm walking along a stream, looking at the stream for its own sheer beauty, looking at it for generating electricity, or just walking along a stream, scrambling over rocks, taking a quick bath in a little pool formed in the rock.

These are my personal peace-moments when I feel good, sometimes calm, sometimes excited, but with that deep down feeling of contentment.

But my feeling of peace also comes from what is happening around me. . .

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**Assignment:** Ben Linder never finished this letter. Imagine that you are Ben. Finish his letter to Miriam. What is it that is “happening around” you that gives you a sense of peace? Think about your work, the changes that you see people making, the changes that you see in the whole society, what you are learning from the people of Cua-Bocay and the rest of Nicaragua. Don't feel that it is necessary to be strictly faithful to what you know about Ben. Use your imagination. Draw on everything you've learned about Nicaraguan society up to this point. Think about experiences Ben might have had that kept him working in Cua-Bocay and gave him a sense of peace.

Remember, your sister Miriam has never been to Nicaragua or met the people you know and work with. You'll need to talk about your experiences in some detail. Again, be imaginative.





## **Ben Linder -- A Brother's View\***

*by John Linder*

[\*This article is excerpted from The Portland Alliance, May 1989.]

Ben only lived to see the beginning [of the rural electrification project in Cua-Bocay.] On the morning of April 28, 1987, while building a small dam needed to design a hydro plant for the town of San Jose de Bocay, he and his coworkers were ambushed by twelve contras. Ben and two coworkers, Pablo Rosales and Sergio Hernandez, were murdered.

Dozens of people picked up where Ben left off. In San Jose de Bocay two engineers returned to the stream where Ben was killed and designed the power plant. His coworkers just completed the access road to the plant and the building which will house the turbine and generator. Two linesmen from Ohio installed posts and wiring.

Workers in El Cua are building the turbine for the Bocay plant in a machine shop built with contributions to the Ben Linder Memorial Fund. Powered by electricity from the El Cua plant, the shop is now equipped with two lathes, a milling machine, and welding equipment. Workers in the shop built a foot bridge out of old truck chassis, repaired coffee processing equipment, fixed dozens of vehicles and farm machines, and rebuilt hundreds of chain-saws, clothing irons, and other items that would have otherwise been discarded.

In both El Cua and San Jose de Bocay, drinking water systems are underway. And seventh grade classes are being taught in El Cua for the first time ever.

These are the small steps that constitute progress in a country like Nicaragua. Ben was a big part of making it happen.

That is half the answer to the question so many journalists asked us after Ben's death: "Why would a young man from a comfortable Portland home want to go to Nicaragua?"

The other half of the answer is that in helping to transform Nicaragua, Ben was himself transformed. In the summer of 1983, when he left my house in New Orleans to begin his life in Nicaragua, Ben talked of spending one year, maybe two, gaining engineering skills, helping, experiencing.

That fall the U.S. invaded Grenada, and Nicaragua thought it would be next. As Ben walked home from work, people all over Managua were digging trenches. A carpenter and his friends were digging a ditch near Ben's neighborhood. Ben dug too.

"We never thought we'd see him again," the carpenter told me. "But he was there

the next night and the next. Until we were done.”

“As things stand I plan to stay if the U.S. invades,” Ben wrote his best friend.

The U.S. government didn’t invade. Instead, it intensified the contra war, and one by one Ben’s Nicaraguan friends went off to fight.

“On Tuesday I went to look for a friend of mine at work,” he wrote in the spring of 1984. “He wasn’t to be found. When I asked what happened they told me a rather sobering story. On Saturday the militia at INE (the public utility Ben worked for) was going through their practice. The militia is rather low-key: digging ditches, practicing marches, standing at attention, all on a very immature level. When one of the soldiers from the army came over and asked for volunteers ‘to go out for an indefinite time to a zone of active fighting and to leave Managua in two days’ there were ten volunteers.

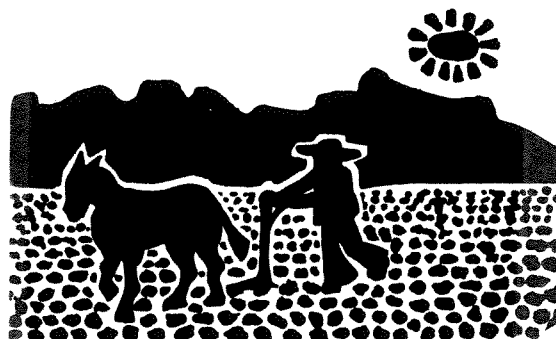
“What is it that makes people ready to die in defense of their country? I guess it is a very deep belief in what their country means, a feeling of struggle for something so very much greater than the individual.”

From the 1979 insurrection through today, many thousands of Nicaraguans have gained the confidence — in both themselves and humanity — to give all they have in the struggle for a better world. This consciousness, above all else, is what a revolution is. It’s what made possible the literacy crusade and the victory over the contras, as well as little things like the Cua-Bocay project.

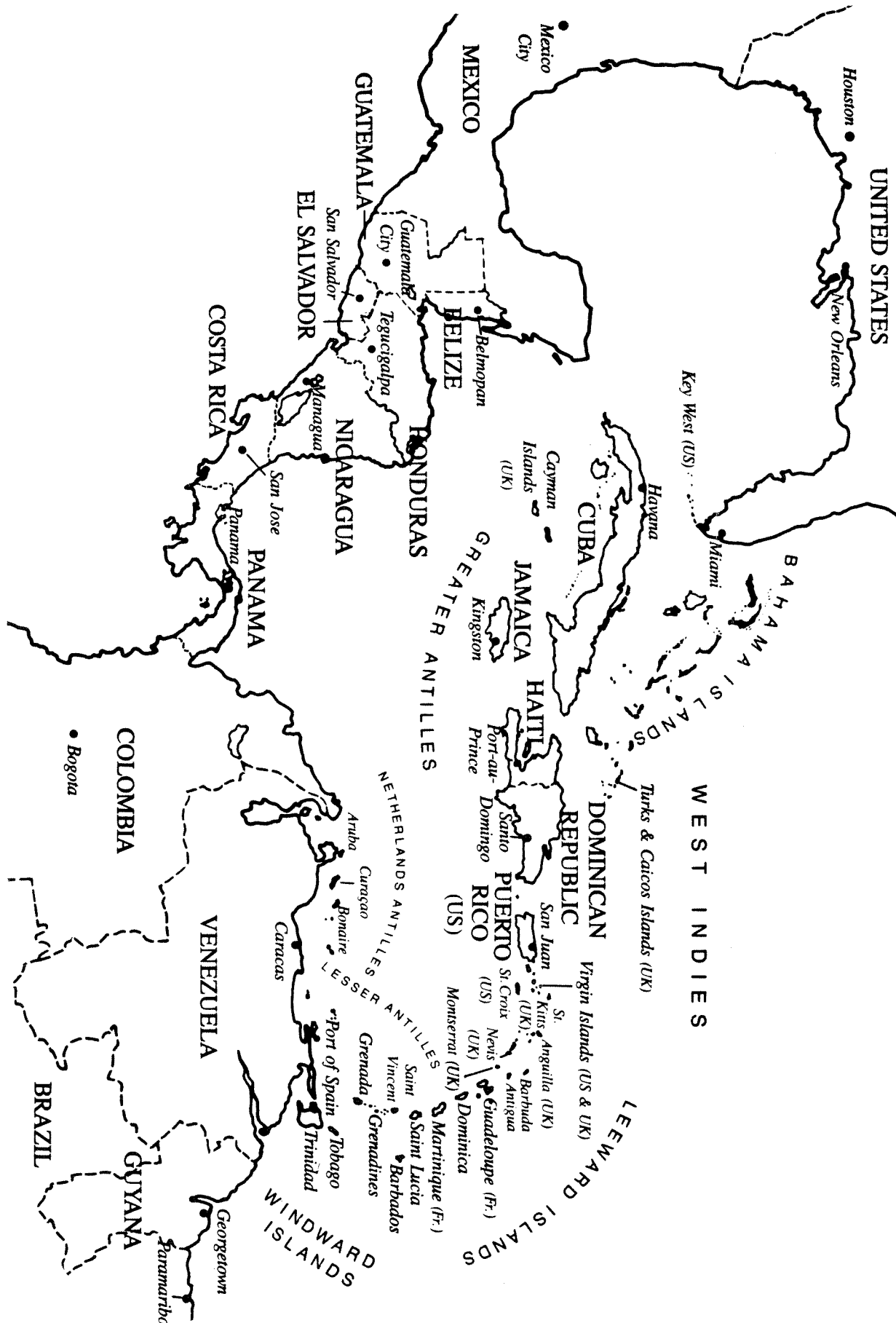
Defending the Nicaraguan revolution is as important today as ever. While Nicaragua defeated the contra war, it is still a long way from victory in the other war Ben wrote about, “the war against poverty, illiteracy, and disease.” The combined effects of a century of U.S. domination, the contra war, the U.S. economic embargo, and [the 1988] Hurricane Joan are staggering.

The U.S. government hopes to crush Nicaraguans’ hopes for a better life — and their democratic participation in creating it — under this burden of poverty. Congress didn’t offer a penny for hurricane relief but approved a \$45 million bipartisan plan to maintain the contra army for yet another year, forcing Nicaragua to divert scarce resources to defense and assuring that the death toll will keep growing.

I don’t know when I’ll be able to say, “Ben, we did it. Nicaragua can live in peace.” I do know that, like Ben, you and I have the opportunity and the capacity to make a difference.



## Central America and the Caribbean



Appendix C: Maps

