

Nicaragua: Observations and Conclusions

By David Chandler

From January 5-13, 1985 I visited Nicaragua with a group from the Claremont Colleges. On my return flight from Mexico City to Los Angeles I sat by a Texan who had been living in Mexico for the last ten years. His first question was, "Where ya been?" I said, "Nicaragua," to which he responded, "What the hell for?" Perhaps that question is as good a starting point as any.

My interest in Central America had been, for the most part, focused on El Salvador because of my work with refugees through the Claremont United Methodist Church. Prior to my trip I had little involvement with Nicaragua, although I realized it was an important factor in the overall Central American situation.

El Salvador is in the midst of a revolution. Nicaragua, on the other hand, has already had its revolution. Under the leadership of the Sandinistas, the Nicaraguans overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in 1979. According to the Reagan administration the Sandinistas are communists, or at least "Marxist-Leninists", whatever that distinction is supposed to mean. In my reading I had seen some articles in Mother Jones magazine which gave glowing reports about the Sandinistas. I was interested, but Mother Jones is considerably left of center politically, so I was skeptical of its bias. I figured the truth lay somewhere between the extremes. I was in a position of not knowing whom to trust for reliable information. Perhaps some of you can identify with that feeling.

Last spring the wife of our pastor went with some church leaders on a tour of Nicaragua. She came back positively bubbling about how wonderful the place was. My immediate reaction was skepticism. How gullible was she? I was ready to hear her say it wasn't all that bad, but I really didn't expect such a glowing report from her. The things that made me take her seriously were some of her concrete observations. She said while they were in Nicaragua they had complete freedom of movement. There were no roadblocks, no curfews, and no ID checks like in El Salvador and elsewhere in Latin America. They could talk to anyone they wanted to. People they met spoke freely and expressed a broad range of political viewpoints without apparent fear of persecution. The most apparent foreign presence was not Russian, but Western European. Finally, most American missionaries in Nicaragua, even from conservative churches, testified to the absence of repression and spoke favorably about the political process occurring there.

In December I went to a welcome home party for a member of the refugee committee of our local Catholic church who had gone to El Salvador for a human rights conference. Despite all he knew about El Salvador ahead of time, actually going there had a profound impact on him. The same evening a professor from the Claremont Colleges announced an upcoming tour of Nicaragua. I wanted to see Central America for myself, so on impulse I signed on. I felt a little uncomfortable about the prospect of forming my opinions based on only eight days in a country. I felt better about the validity of my trip when I learned later that the Kissinger Commission, which supposedly laid the foundation for our policy in Central America, had been in Nicaragua only eight hours, half of that in the U.S. embassy.

Rather than recount the whole trip, I will summarize some of my impressions.

Nicaragua is definitely a poor third world country. Many of the people live in small wooden or adobe shacks with corrugated roofs. On the other hand the poor were not living in the extreme destitution I was used to seeing while I lived in India. The people coming out of those shacks were relatively well clothed and fed. I never saw signs of starvation such as exists in El Salvador and Guatemala. The average standard of living is low, but the basic needs are being met for everyone. Considering the growing number of homeless people in this country, I would venture to say the poorest people in Nicaragua are better off than the poorest people in Los Angeles!

When we were in Esteli and Matagalpa, where they were bringing in the coffee harvest, we saw lots of people with guns. Guns were carried by both the military and civilians, both men and women. We saw whole truckloads of coffee pickers going out to the fields, each with a gun on his back as a defense against attacks by the Contras, who had been trying to disrupt the coffee harvest. It wasn't a case of soldiers standing around policing the people. The soldiers and the people mingled freely. Everyone appeared to be at ease with everyone else. It was a strange sensation, with guns everywhere but without the sense of fear or tension in the air that one might expect. We met a student from Boston who was hitchhiking with his girl friend around the country. He told about waiting for a ride alongside a soldier and being picked up by a truck. The soldier actually handed him his gun while he climbed aboard.

One peasant man in Esteli invited two of us home with him. He lived in an adobe hut. It had a doorway, but no door. As soon as we entered the house his wife went into another room to prepare food. He had a lot he wanted to tell us, but neither of us was very good at Spanish. (By the way, we had three fluent Spanish speakers in our group who did all the translating.) To get around the language problem we turned on our tape recorders and let him talk. He talked about fighting in the revolution face to face with the National Guard. He showed us his military reserve ID card and seemed proud of his role in the revolution. But now he was really mad at the government and said so in rather strong language. His problem was he was a leather worker and couldn't get leather.

Economic frustration is widespread in Nicaragua and is the source of much of the political dissent. Somoza left the country bankrupt and with a huge foreign debt. The economy has been a constant uphill battle. There are shortages of many basic commodities. An added hardship comes from fighting a war against the Contras. The Contras, who are well financed and equipped, conduct terrorist style raids and have done so much economic damage that a year ago Nicaragua actually had a negative GNP

One of the big events of the trip was going to the disco in Esteli. I missed out. The students in our group, along with the guide and driver and some local people they had met, took the tour bus out to a disco at the edge of town. I decided not to go because there was going to be a lot of drinking and I wasn't anxious to ride back on mountain roads at 2 AM with a drunk driver.

One of the Spanish-speaking students in our group had a long conversation at the disco with a couple of peasant farmers who had fought in the revolution. They told about helicopters dropping 500 lb. bombs on the town of Esteli. (By the way, the recent Frontline TV series on Central America shows film footage of this very event.) They told how the bombs started out as tiny dots way up high, and slowly grew as they fell. They said it was hard to predict where they would land or which way to run. Every building in Esteli was destroyed. Everything we saw in Esteli had

been rebuilt since 1979. They said conditions were much better now than before the revolution. The very fact that they could come to the disco at all was evidence of how things had improved. It was still expensive for them, but they could pay it. Before, even if they had had the money they wouldn't have been allowed in because of class discrimination. Now for the first time they had respect. One of them said, "Take this message back to the U.S. We're not communists, we're not Marxists, we're not Leninists, we're not capitalists. We have taken a little bit from each of these and we're doing what's best for us. This is the first time we've had anything and Reagan is trying to take it all away from us. The whole thing is so stupid--the whole world is on our side."

The bus got back at 4 AM. There had been trouble. A couple of local men had made passes at the girls and when they got brushed off, they got mad and left. Later someone rushed in saying the bus had been looted. Everyone ran out looking for the thieves, assuming it was the same men. One man said, "Jump in my car" and several of the students did. To their surprise his first stop was his house where he got his gun. When they found one of the suspects the crowd surrounded him but no one pointed any guns. The suspect and the crowd stood calmly while someone went for the police.

The police searched the suspect, found a gun, and took it away. They separated everyone and questioned them. Since no one had actually seen the man do it, the police gave him his gun back and sent him home. I told this story to the Texan on the plane. He said if it had been in Mexico they would have kept him at least a couple of days and tried to get as much payoff as they could. In India the same would be true. There are villages in India where the police brag that they have never had an unsolved crime.

While they were in the police station one of the students noticed several signs posted on the wall in Spanish saying, "Your military rank is used only for purposes of organization and discipline," and "Your military rank has nothing to do with your value as a person." Everything we saw in Nicaragua confirmed the attitude conveyed in those signs.

While we were in Esteli we met several Swedes, a Finn, and a West German in a local restaurant. All of them were working on long term projects sponsored by their governments. The Swedes were working on a \$10 million electrical development project. We also heard of engineering projects sponsored by France, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, and Austria.

While most of our group was at the disco, several of us talked late into the night with the West German engineer who was staying at our hotel. He is a regional planner whose job was to evaluate natural resources, the economy, demography, human resources, etc. and to make recommendations for economic development. He was an excellent source of background information and confirmed many of the things we had heard elsewhere on the trip. Our conversation ranged widely. I will touch on just a few of the topics:

Poverty: He pointed out that despite the fact that Nicaragua is very poor, no one is starving. They ration basic foods, clothes, shoes, housing, etc. at artificially low prices. Anything beyond that the people buy on the open market.

Illiteracy: One of the Sandinistas' most successful projects has been combating illiteracy. They brought the literacy level up from under 50% to about 85% within one year. When I was in the home of the leather worker I witnessed his wife fluently read a page in Spanish. As she read she stood at attention with the page directly in front of her, as though she were reading in front of a class. For a peasant woman to be able to read before the revolution was unheard of. The West German planner said he had many occasions to witness the truth of the claims about increased literacy, despite press accounts that suggested it was just propaganda. His comment was that mass illiteracy is not that hard to overcome. The fact that it is not achieved elsewhere in Latin America is a result of political considerations. When people can read they are harder to keep down. It reminded me of our own past when the slaves in this country were not allowed to read.

Medicine: In medicine the Nicaraguans have made such great strides that they were cited by the World Health Organization as a model for the third world. After the triumph of the revolution health care was declared to be a basic right. They now have four times the number of health centers as under Somoza. Their emphasis is on preventative medicine and basic public health. They have virtually eliminated polio, with no cases in 3 years. Nicaragua is the only country in the world where everyone in the country was treated simultaneously for malaria. A mosquito has to bite an infected person to transmit the disease to a healthy person. If Nicaragua's program were carried out world wide, within three weeks malaria would be eliminated forever.

Police: In terms of crime and corruption our West German friend compared Nicaragua to Colombia where he had lived several years. In Colombia there was pervasive fear. Crime was bad and a corrupt police system made it worse. Nicaragua, on the other hand, he said was free of bribery and police corruption, confirming what others in our group were at that very moment discovering for themselves!

Agriculture: We asked about all the modern looking farms we had seen. He said these dated from the Somoza days. Somoza developed a good infrastructure for export crops, but not for food or domestic processing of raw materials. He said Nicaragua should be self sufficient in food within a year for the first time ever! The main problem in this could be the Contras. A large part of their efforts is put into destroying crops.

The Environment: The region around Esteli was covered with low scrub ground cover. We were surprised to learn that originally the entire area had been covered with hardwood forest, but North American lumbering companies had destroyed it over the last hundred years or so. This is an illustration of the exploitative nature of our relations with Nicaragua throughout our history.

The Nicaraguan Elections: We were in Nicaragua just after their first elections. We saw posters everywhere saying (in Spanish) "Voting is Easy", and explaining how to cast a ballot. These were the first free elections in well over a generation. Our West German friend gave us a detailed run-down of the elections and the positions of each of the seven parties that ran. He described all the precautions the electoral commission took to prevent fraud. His comment about Arturo Cruz, who the Reagan administration held up as the only viable democratic candidate, was that Cruz lived in Washington D.C. until shortly before the election and had no base of support in Nicaragua. When Cruz had a rally in Esteli only 60 people turned out to hear him and most of

those were from out of town. It interests me that some people can speak of democracy as though it resides in certain groups or individuals, rather than in the participatory process itself.

We did a lot more, but what I have said is representative of our experiences. We interviewed a retired Jewish businessman about Reagan's charge that the Sandinistas are anti-Semitic. He said the charge was completely untrue. We visited the Ecumenical Center in Managua, where we interviewed a Catholic priest, a Presbyterian missionary, and a Pentecostal minister. All were very supportive of the revolutionary process taking place in Nicaragua. We visited two newspapers (La Prensa and Nueva Diario), and two opposition political parties (Conservative Democrats, and the Liberal Independents). We interviewed Sister Mary Hartman at the UN Human Rights Commission. She spelled out in graphic detail the hypocrisy of the U.S. claim that Nicaragua violates human rights. (She gave a fascinating talk, which I have on tape.) We talked to the Committee of American Citizens Living in Nicaragua, a group led by a Presbyterian minister, that has picketed the U.S. Embassy for over a year. On January 10 we attended the inauguration of Daniel Ortega, who is seen by most of the world outside the U.S. as the first democratically elected president of Nicaragua. It was a major historic event for the Nicaraguan people. No 4th of July event I have ever been to could match the feeling of national pride and celebration in the air that day.

What can we conclude? Is Nicaragua communist? It has enough socialism to take the sting out of poverty, but capitalism is everywhere and it is encouraged. Nicaragua has a mixed economy. There are government farms, co-op farms, and privately owned farms, all coexisting. Most people object that communism is atheistic. We never saw even a hint of atheism in Nicaragua. Religion abounds, in all forms. Several of the top Sandinista officials are priests, much to the chagrin of the pope. The churches generally support the revolutionary process, although the catholic hierarchy is split. Out of seven parties in the election, two were explicitly communist (one being Maoist, the other Trotskyite). Each got about 1% of the vote.

Are the Sandinistas Marxist? They have certainly read Marx. Class struggle isn't a theory to them: they have lived it. They haven't abolished private ownership and show no inclination to do so. One saying we heard several times was that the government should allow capitalism, but it should never again be a government for the capitalists. The Sandinistas have some Marxist ideals, but they are certainly not doctrinaire Marxists.

Is Nicaragua a "totalitarian dungeon," as the Reagan administration characterizes it? We saw no evidence to support this claim. There is freedom of movement without harassment. Their economic policies seem to be directed toward the welfare of the people. One of their first actions after the revolution was to abolish capital punishment. Tomas Borge, the only surviving founder of the Sandinista movement, publicly forgave the National Guardsman who had tortured him in prison. The clearest argument against the charge of totalitarianism is that the general mood of the country is one of pride and hope, not fear. According to the UN Human Rights Commission there are isolated cases of human rights violations. But in Nicaragua, unlike El Salvador and Guatemala, violations are tried in court and offenders are punished.

Is Nicaragua under the domination of Russia? I don't think so. I am sure the Russians would like to see the Sandinistas succeed, but so would most of our European allies. Why shouldn't we support them as well?

Are the Nicaraguans going to export revolution? They are in no position economically or militarily to invade their neighbors. They know they could never get away with aggression with the U.S. hovering over them. On the other hand, they are proud of their revolution. They see it as the best thing that ever happened to Nicaragua. More to the point, other Latin Americans suffering under oppressive regimes admire the Nicaraguans and may want to emulate them. The real question is whether it is even possible to export a revolution unless conditions are ripe for revolution already. Why is the U.S. so set against revolution anyway? Isn't that what the 4th of July is all about?

Is Nicaragua an enemy of the U.S.? They don't want us telling them what to do because we have a history of dominating them. Yet they have continually tried since the revolution to establish good relations with us. I think their efforts are sincere. Their economy has always been oriented toward U.S. markets and they have every reason to want good relations with us. It's crazy to think they would prefer domination by Russia. What could Russia do for them that we couldn't do better? They just want to be free.

Is there freedom of speech? No one seemed afraid to speak his mind openly. We heard one opposition party leader berate the Sandinistas and justify U.S. support of the Contras while tape recorders were going and the tour guide was sitting in the room. That's equivalent to publicly advocating violent overthrow of government. His seemed to be an unpopular minority opinion, but he didn't seem too afraid of persecution.

Is there freedom of the press? There is censorship, but Nicaragua is at war. Even the U.S. has imposed censorship in wartime. The newspaper La Prensa actively solicits U.S. support for the Contras. They are censored, but they are allowed to exist. I guess I would have to say there is not complete freedom of the press at this time.

One last question: What is the status of our freedom in the United States? When I returned through U.S. customs, the customs agent asked where I had been. I said, "Nicaragua". He immediately went for my literature, found a booklet of Nicaraguan political cartoons, picked it up, and tossed it on a shelf. He and another agent then slowly went through it page by page. I asked the first agent if he found the cartoons interesting or if there were some official purpose in what they were doing. He said, "We can't let anything come through that would be damaging to the United States." I said, "What about freedom of speech?" He said, "You don't have the same rights coming into this country as you do when you are in the country. Coming into this country is a privilege." I found it hard to believe he would have the gall to say that to a U.S. citizen. He eventually gave me the booklet back, but I was stunned by the incident.

Some weeks after my return from Nicaragua I saw an article from the Feb. 28 issue of the New York Times that indicates that my official reception was not an isolated incident.

On January 16, three days after I had reentered the U.S., a journalist named Edward Haase of Kansas City, Mo. returned to Miami from Nicaragua. When the customs official learned that he had been in Nicaragua he told Mr. Haase that an FBI agent wanted to interview him. The FBI agent told him they had the right to search for subversive literature. They took his address book, his diary, a five-page list of organizations concerned about Nicaragua, typed manuscripts of two articles he had written, and other documents. They Xeroxed it all and returned the originals to Mr. Haase. Infuriated by his treatment, Mr. Haase took the issue to court and got an injunction forbidding the FBI from disseminating the information.

Aren't these kinds of actions precisely what we abhor in totalitarian societies? If we are going to become just like our worst enemies, why are we fighting them? All our ravings about the Communist menace become nothing more than blatant hypocrisy. It would be a lot easier to just invite them in. The only way to defend our ideals is to live by them, and have the faith that despite our apparent vulnerability, there is strength in living the truth. We are not immune to totalitarianism any more than any other human society. No foreign threat is so great that we should allow fear to deprive us of our freedom.