

Nicaragua: Superpowers' Broken Toy

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Nicaragua: Superpowers' Broken Toy

By Michael Dobbs

MANAGUA—If you want a human perspective on superpower decline—the trendy geostrategic theme of 1988—I can recommend a visit to Nicaragua. This earthquake-destroyed capital of an economically bankrupt, war-devastated country is a metaphor for the shattered pretensions of ideologues in Moscow as well as in Washington, in Havana as in Miami.

The earthquake took place 16 years ago, well before the 1979 Sandinista revolution that turned Nicaragua into a place of pilgrimage for leftists and an object of loathing for conservatives. But the center of Managua has never been rebuilt. Its ruins serve as billboards for slogans that sound more ironic than revolutionary: "We are invincible," "Everyone to the front," "The Yankees will always be defeated."

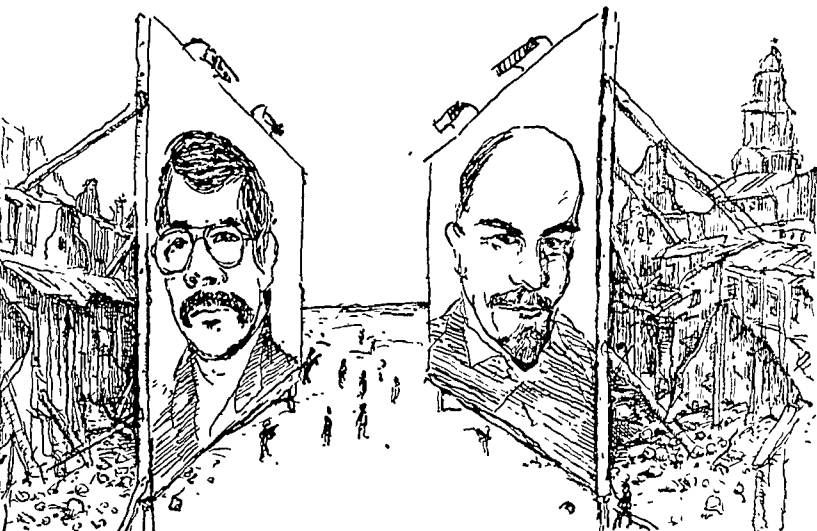
It is not just the Yankees who have been defeated by Nicaragua, as recent events have shown. The Sandinistas themselves have resorted to stern political measures in

order to stem popular dissatisfaction over plummeting living standards. Their Soviet patrons are saddled with another economic basketcase at a time when they need to turn their attention to domestic problems.

The limits to U.S. power are now widely recognized and debated. Less attention is paid to the Soviet version of "imperial over-

stretch," the term popularized by Yale historian Paul Kennedy to describe the decline of world powers. Nicaragua is a case study of the failure of the Soviet policy of promoting Marxist-Leninist regimes in the Third World—a failure that has been most dramatic in Afghanistan but is also apparent in

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all the "socialist-oriented states" that Moscow took under its wing during the '70s.

For a first-time visitor, downtown Managua presents a vision of ideological apocalypse. Its gutted buildings, somnolent street life and pervasive security presence are symbols of arrested economic development.

Down by the lake, rain pours into the roofless 18th-century cathedral left behind by Spanish colonialists. Soldiers stand guard outside the shell of the National Assembly building draped with the portraits of Sandinista heroes.

Dominating this weird dreamscape are two buildings erected by former dictator Anastasio Somoza that seem to symbolize the conflicting political forces fighting for Nicaragua's soul. The Sandinistas have taken over a modern high-rise that used to house the Central Bank. Opposite it stands the Intercontinental hotel. Shaped like a Mayan pyramid, it serves as headquarters for the army of journalists, foreign aid officials, spooks and idealists who have flocked to Nicaragua since the revolution.

I arrived in Managua with a planeload of enthusiastic *internacionalistas*—Sandinista jargon for foreign supporters of the revolution. We lined up to change an obligatory \$60 each into local currency (receiving an impressive six-inch stack of devalued cordobas in return) until the bank declared that it had run out of money).

The Sandinistas have been quick to appreciate the value of the *internacionalistas* as a living embodiment of domestic opposition to the Reagan administration's policies in Central America. The Americans who flew in with me were granted an audience with junta coordinator Daniel Ortega at what used to be Managua's premier country club (it now serves as a military training school). One after another they rose to ask questions like, "What can we do to make up for the destruction caused by our government?" The commandantes on the platform sagely stroked their moustaches.

"When it comes to the application of military force, we are self-deterred," said a senior U.S. official who has dealt with the region. "The Grenada exercise seemed successful at the time but in reality it showed that the only wars the American people are willing to tolerate are very quick ones. It is paradoxical that the more the American people learn about what is going on in this region, the less they want to get involved. It is difficult to persuade Americans that it is worth using military force in Latin America."

Washington no longer wields what Walter Lippmann once called "the power of life and death" over the governments of Central America. Back in 1855, a dashing adventurer from Nashville named William Walker was able to capture Nicaragua with the help of just 57 mercenaries. Since then, U.S. marines have landed in Nicaragua about a dozen times. But today, America's power has declined to the point that the U.S. is unable to get rid of an obviously corrupt, drug-running dictator in Panama.

Within Central America, new social classes have arisen to challenge the old aristocratic families that were practically integrated into the cultural and economic life of

the United States. Reared on a mixture of liberation theology and Marxism, the children of the new middle class see America as an imperial power.

One interpretation of the Sandinista revolution is that it represented a successful revolt against the pro-American oligarchy that ran Nicaragua under Somoza. Of the nine members of the ruling Sandinista junta, only one had any first-hand knowledge of the United States at the time of the revolution.

The Soviet journalist sat in the bar of the Intercontinental hotel sipping his favorite beer, a Miller Lite. Like many Soviets in Managua, he was critical about the mess the Sandinistas have made of the economy. Shaking his head in amazement, he commented: "There are many things happening here that even we can't understand."

The Nicaraguan economy makes the Soviet economy seem like a model of well-functioning efficiency. When prices rise in Nicaragua, they double or quadruple. Western economists now estimate that the annual inflation rate is somewhere in five digits. A recent series of 50,000-cordoba notes was issued by overprinting a batch of 50 cordobas that had become worthless before they could be put into circulation.

Hundreds of Soviet tractors lie idle in a lot on the outskirts of Managua, trapped in a kind of bureaucratic no-man's-land where they must be inventoried every time the cordoba is devalued. The average life of East German trucks, when exposed to Nicaragua's tropical climate without proper servicing, is said to be less than a year. A significant portion of the food aid provided by the Soviet bloc ends up in Managua's teeming Oriental Market, where it is sold for black-market prices. The chaotic pricing system has created some absurd anomalies: Until recently, a gallon of Soviet-supplied gasoline was sold for the equivalent of three U.S. cents.

"The field of economics is very complex and very boring," declared Ortega in a speech marking the ninth anniversary of the revolution. It was a strange remark for the leader of a country whose economy is in a state of free-fall—but it encapsulated the problem of Third World revolutionaries. Running a prosperous, self-sustaining economy requires qualities that successful guerrilla leaders do not often possess.

The Soviet Union and Cuba supplied the Sandinistas with a reliable model for winning and consolidating political power. Sandinista power rests on a large army and government bureaucracy, a network of party cells or block committees and an efficient security apparatus: roughly 400,000 people out of a total population of only three million.

The catch is that this state-supported *no-menklatura* is exorbitantly expensive. Soviet and Sandinista officials concede that, without Soviet aid, the economy would collapse altogether. Western economists estimate that military and economic assistance from the Soviet bloc accounts for around one-third of Nicaragua's gross annual income of \$3 billion. The Soviets supply Nicaragua with 95 per cent of its oil and practically all its military equipment—from MI24 helicopters and armored personnel carriers down to field kitchens and uniforms.

The Soviet Union would appear to get a considerably worse rate of return on its investment in Central America than the United States. According to the State Department, Soviet-bloc aid to Nicaragua is roughly equivalent to U.S. aid to all other Central American countries combined. Moscow's commitment to Nicaragua must be put in the context of sustaining a worldwide presence that stretches from Cuba to Vietnam.

The deputy economic cooperation minister, Pedro Antonio Blandon, compares Nicaragua's present economic situation to "life in an oxygen tent." "Supposing someone cuts your oxygen supply," he says, evidently referring to the U.S. economic blockade of Nicaragua. "Either you get out of the tent or you die. And we don't intend to die."

The Sandinistas blame Nicaragua's economic crisis almost entirely on the war with the U.S.-supported contras, which eats up over 50 percent of the state budget. This explanation does not, however, convince Soviet officials in Managua. "The main reason the economy is in a shambles is the way the government has been running things," said a Soviet political analyst. "They seem unable to decide whether they want a market economy or a planned economy."

Asked what type of economy the Sandinistas should move toward, he replied: "Well, it's not up to us to tell them what to do. But if you want my personal opinion, I think they would be better off with a market economy."

Almost a decade of war and revolution seem to have produced a superpower stalemate in Nicaragua. The United States has been defeated politically—in the sense that the contras cannot hope for a military victory over the Sandinistas—but remains the dominant cultural power. The Soviet Union has secured a political footing in Central America but has been defeated economically and culturally.

The rhetoric of the Sandinista revolution may be Marxist-Leninist, but the popular culture is American. Baseball is the national sport, Miami the regional shopping center. When state television tried screening Soviet movies, nobody watched—and Amer-

ican reruns were swiftly reinstated. A recent sampling of Sandinista television included "Tom and Jerry," "Mr. Ed," and "Hardcastle and McCormick."

The paradoxes of Managua under the Sandinistas were reflected in a street scene that I observed just around the corner from Ortega's office. Crowds of Managuans waiting to see "Rasputin," a raunchy West German movie, were lining up beneath the 30-foot statue of a Sandinista fighter clutching a machine gun. "Solo los obreros y campesinos iran hasta al fin" ("Only the workers and peasants will go to the end"), proclaimed the saying on the monument. These particular *obrerros* and *campesinos* were dressed in Chichita jeans and American baseball caps and were totally absorbed in the pictures of well-endowed blonds on the outside of the movie house.

"Nicaraguans are basically pro-American," said a U.S. diplomat who has served in Managua. "They may hate America for what we have done to them, but they have an affection for American things. Their relationship with the Soviets is new-found and artificial."

A West European ambassador in Managua described the relationship in familial terms: "Nicaragua is like a child that has managed to tear itself away from its parents, but can never grow up and overcome such an intense relationship. There may not be any marines here—but America exists in the minds of every Nicaraguan, which is the strongest way it can exist."

For ordinary Nicaraguans, socialism seems more a matter of convenience than conviction. The owner of a stall in the market used a popular saying to explain why Nicaragua had turned to the Soviet Union for help: "When you have a row with your mother, you move in with your grandmother."

In some ways, Moscow seems more aware of its imperial predicament than Washington. Western diplomats in Managua say it is unclear whether the United States is striving for the overthrow of the Sandinista regime or simply the containment of communism in Central America. Most seem to regard the first goal as unrealistic—and fear that its aggressive pursuit could fan

the flames of latent anti-Americanism throughout the region.

The Kremlin under Mikhail Gorbachev, by contrast, seems to recognize that it is over-extended, even if it is not quite sure how to resolve its dilemma. With hindsight, the Sandinista victory in 1979 (followed by the invasion of Afghanistan later the same year) marked the highwater mark of the Brezhnev policy of promoting Marxist-Leninist states in the Third World.

These days, Soviet officials are reluctant to grant the honorific tag "socialist-oriented state" to Nicaragua. The Soviet ambassador in Managua has been trying to persuade his western colleagues that what is happening in Nicaragua has little to do with socialism. Asked to characterize the nature of the Sandinista revolution, a Soviet journalist shifts uneasily in his chair before replying: "A movement for national liberation."

Gorbachev would clearly like to place Soviet relations with Third World countries like Nicaragua on a more cost-effective, non-ideological basis. However, as with *perestroika* at home, this is easier said than done. For the time being, the Soviets seem condemned to bailing out an economically inefficient system for fear of losing their initial investment.

Soviet aid to Nicaragua reached a peak in 1986, the year after Gorbachev came to power. The Sandinistas have successfully resisted Soviet attempts to cut aid levels by arguing that such a move could drive them back into the arms of the "imperialists."

The Reagan administration's obsession with the Sandinistas may have had the perverse effect of whetting the interest of Soviet leaders in a part of the world well beyond their traditional geopolitical horizons. As a former U.S. ambassador in Central America remarked, "Nicaragua is like a little gift which the Soviets don't know what to do with. They've spent most of the time unwrapping it, figuring out what's inside. They seem to think that, if it upsets Ronald Reagan so much, there must be something in there."

And there, perhaps, is the ultimate irony. We often assume that our political rivals are endowed with perfect vision. But in the ideological and economic wasteland that is modern-day Nicaragua, both the superpowers have been staggering about blind.