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## The Myth of Unity: The Contra War, 1980–1990

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The Myth of Unity: The Contra War, 1980–1990

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty  
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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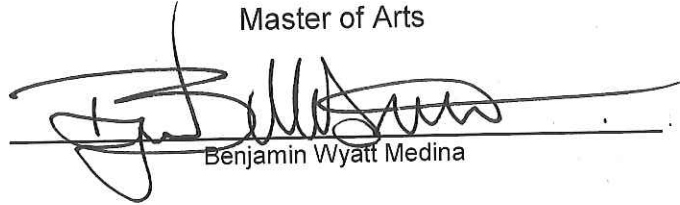
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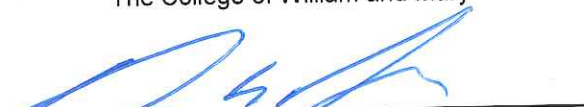
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## ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the anti-Sandinista forces popularly known as the "contras" who operated in Nicaragua from 1980 to 1990, in particular the Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense (FDN), the Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática (ARDE), and the two main Atlantic Coast contra groups: MISURA (Miskito Sumu and Rama Indians of the Atlantic Coast) and MISURASATA (Miskito, Sumu, Rama, Sandinista Aslatakanta [Working Together]). This thesis looks at the different ways these contra groups viewed their conflict and explained it to national and international audiences, as well as to those within the anti-Sandinista movement. Because there was such heterogeneity within the contra movement, a comparative look at the different groups that composed it is essential. While there were similar strains of thought among the most prominent contra groups, goals were articulated differently from one group to another, and these varied narratives serve as a basis to explain how they became obstacles to unity among the contra groups, and how these differences were finally reconciled into the larger, more-unified anti-Sandinista effort.

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This Thesis is dedicated to Barbara Joan Pilcher Robison  
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## INTRODUCTION

The 1980s was a decade of political and economic tumult throughout Latin America. Nicaragua was no exception as a decades-long revolutionary struggle gave way to a protracted guerrilla war that lasted from 1980 and 1990. Roughly 30,000 people on both sides of the conflict, including civilians caught in the middle, died in the fighting between the government of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN, or Sandinistas) and the anti-Sandinista resistance, popularly referred to as the *contras*.<sup>1</sup> While the Sandinistas operated under a unified ideology while heading the Nicaraguan state, and could thus be more readily understood to an international audience, a comprehensive understanding of the *contras* proved elusive.

Confusion surrounding the *contra* forces can be attributed to both an internal incoherence stemming from the oftentimes conflicting motivations between the various groups that composed the *contras* as well as external efforts to discredit them. The tenuous nature of a diverse *contra* coalition made crafting a unified political and social message virtually impossible for most of the *contras*' existence. The singular "contra" label sought to unite peasant *comandos* under the leadership of small landowners and former *Guardia Nacional* (National Guard) from the Somoza dictatorship in the northern highlands, indigenous people on the Atlantic Coast, and disillusioned Sandinistas in the

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<sup>1</sup> While an exact death toll is not available, 30,000 represents a conservative estimate, with some figures reaching upwards of 40,000. See Holly Sklar, *Washington's War on Nicaragua* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1988), 393; Ellie Klerlein, "Environmental Effects of Nicaraguan Armed Conflicts," accessed July 19, 2016, <http://www1.american.edu/ted/ice/nicaragua.htm>.

South. While this clearly shows that dissatisfaction with the Sandinistas came from many circles, the sought-after alliance also allowed the Sandinistas to discredit any forces that attacked the state by connecting them to the ex-Guardia that held leadership positions within certain contra groups. Only in the last few years of the Contra War did any semblance of a broad and unified contra coalition begin to develop. Years of each individual contra group defining its own struggle in relative isolation led to a factionalism that was not overcome until 1987, when the remaining contra groups united under the auspices of the *Resistencia Nicaragüense*, Nicaraguan Resistance or RN. My research focuses on the factors that kept the contras apart prior to 1987, along with the forces that ultimately brought many of them together. Detailed attention to documents and first-hand accounts outlining how the various contra groups articulated their goals, I argue, is where a more nuanced understanding of the Contra War can begin.

### **Sources and Methodology**

My research makes use of primary sources that, as far as I can tell, have been heretofore unused in research, including contra missives, communiqués, official proclamations, and brainstorming sessions as well as interviews conducted with the principal players. I look at the different ways the main contra groups viewed their conflict and explained it to national and international audiences, as well as to those within the anti-Sandinista movement. The making of the contras is a story of an effort to build community and overcome differences in opposition to a central government with more troops, resources, and international acceptance. Because there was such heterogeneity within the contra movement, a comparative look at the different groups that composed it is essential.

What the contras in all their various forms attempted to do was construct a narrative to counter that of the Sandinistas. That the contras were a diverse conglomeration of interests and groups is undeniable, and while there were similar strains of thought among the most prominent groups, no single narrative tells the whole story. Goals were articulated differently from one group to another and even these purported goals tended to differ depending on who the intended audience was. The Miskito people who fought against the Sandinistas on the Atlantic Coast tell a far different story than the former Guardsmen along the Honduran-Nicaraguan border, or the ex-Sandinistas in the *Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática* (ARDE) in the south. By looking at these groups through a comparative lens, my research diverges from studies that would simplify the anti-Sandinista struggle by ascribing the narrative of any one contra group to the entirety of the movement.<sup>2</sup> In this study, I will look at the varied narratives being told both to explain how they became obstacles to unity among the contra groups, and how these differences were finally reconciled into the larger anti-Sandinista effort to build a globally-recognized alternative to the regime in Managua. As it turned out, these efforts came too late for the contras, as U.S. funding waned in these years, and a favorable

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<sup>2</sup> The following authors are a few of many who tend to simplify the contra effort, mainly by attributing the actions and attitudes of the *Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense* to the entirety of the contra movement: Edgar Chamorro, "Confessions of a 'Contra'," in *Nicaragua and the United States*, ed. Andrew C. Kimmens (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1987); Leslie Cockburn, *Out of Control: The Story of the Reagan Administration's War in Nicaragua, the Illegal Arms Pipeline, and the Contra Drug Connection* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987); Christopher Dickey, *With the Contras: A Reporter in the Wilds of Nicaragua* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985); Sam Dillon, *Comandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1991); and David Stoll, "The Nicaraguan Contras: Were They Indios?" *Latin American Politics & Society* 47, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 145–157.

election in Nicaragua challenged the continuation of an armed military organization opposed to the Sandinistas.

The singular “contra” label belies the variety of ideology and motive within the movement, a complexity revealed through a comparative analysis. The term “contra” does not take into account the diversity within the anti-Sandinista forces that operated in Nicaragua between 1979 and 1990. The term homogenizes a variety of groups, interests, and even ethnicities into a single entity that does not accurately reflect the reality of the “counterrevolution.” The three principal groups I will examine are the *Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense* (FDN), the *Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática* (ARDE), and the two main Atlantic Coast contra groups: MISURA (Miskito Sumu and Rama Indians of the Atlantic Coast) and MISURASATA (*Miskito, Sumu, Rama, Sandinista Aslatakanta* [Working Together]). The FDN operated in the mountainous northern region of the country and was composed of the region’s peasant and middle classes with a small cadre of Somoza’s former National Guardsmen comprising the principal leadership. The ARDE functioned mainly in the southern part of the country along the border with Costa Rica and was composed largely of ex-Sandinistas, the most famous being Edén Pastora. MISURA and MISURASATA were principally made up of Miskito Indians along with Sumu, Rama, and creoles who populated the Atlantic Coast. The acronym “RN” will be used when referring to the Nicaraguan Resistance: the civilian political leadership that, in theory, spoke for all anti-Sandinista forces and mainly operated in the United States as a liaison between contra military forces and the U.S. government from 1987 until the end of the war. I will use the term contra for any blanket statements made about anti-

Sandinista forces, and I will also use the term *comando* when referring to individual contra fighters in absence of any official rank.

### **Bibliographic Review**

Skepticism abounds about both contra and Sandinista motives and actions during the war. Yet in the decades since the initial glut of literature that came out during the war and in its immediate aftermath, there has been a paucity of research on the Nicaraguan Civil War.<sup>3</sup> This does not do the topic any justice as untested assumptions are not questioned and slowly become accepted as fact. It is worth looking at the Contra War in more detail to come to a better understanding of the motives of those involved and to prevent this era in Nicaraguan history from becoming a neglected footnote in a larger Cold War narrative.

Despite the relative lack of attention the Contra War has been paid recently, a few American scholars have taken another look at Nicaraguan history and the Contra War in the past decade or so, and have added new perspective. Timothy Brown is a historian and former State Department diplomat with experience in Nicaragua who has written and edited a number of books looking at the Nicaraguan Civil War and its causes from an ethnic perspective.<sup>4</sup> This perspective, while interesting, can be problematic. In his argument, he claims that there have been ethnic tensions between the people of the

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<sup>3</sup> Historian Lynn Horton also laments the “relative dearth” of literature looking at the Contra War from a perspective that departs from the traditional focus on the major powers involved. Horton, review of *The Real Contra War: Highlander Peasant Resistance in Nicaragua*, by Timothy C. Brown, *Hispanic American Historical Review* 84, no. 1 (February 2004): 163–165, esp. 163.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy C. Brown, *The Real Contra War: Highlander Peasant Resistance in Nicaragua* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001); and Brown, ed. and trans., *When the AK-47s Fall Silent: Revolutionaries, Guerrillas, and the Dangers of Peace* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000).

northern highlands (those who made up the majority of the fighting ranks of the FDN in the north of the country) and the Pacific lowlands (the mestizos of the major cities, and the principal supporters of the Sandinistas) since pre-Colombian times. He mainly uses interviews conducted with former FDN comandos to build the case for an identity of opposition that is somewhere between a native Indian identity and a sort of libertarian peasant ideology. He sees the rejection of the imposition of an “alien ideological/cultural model”—itself a product of the Sandinista’s own “Pacific coast urban ethnocentrism”—as the root issue of the Contra War.<sup>5</sup> According to Brown, the war for those who fought the Sandinistas was just “one more in a thousand-year-old string of attempts at subjugation by outsiders.”<sup>6</sup>

Some historians have either criticized Brown for his methodology or have produced work that undercuts Brown’s assertions about contra ethnicity. Brown describes various towns and sites in the Matagalpa department that were strongly pro-contra, and draws parallels between the anti-Sandinista sentiment there and the rebellious indigenous past of the same region that historian Jeffrey Gould covers in his research. In his work on Nicaraguan ethnicity, Gould argues that many of the cultural links the people of the Nicaraguan highlands had with their indigenous forebears were steadily eroded over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries through the process of *mestizaje*, or mixing: “Ladino discourse exhibited a remarkable, totalizing capacity as it parried, then assimilated, every indigenous effort at autonomous expression.”<sup>7</sup> Gould does not deny the indigenous heritage of the departments of Matagalpa, Chontales, and Jinotega, all located within the

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<sup>5</sup> Brown, *The Real Contra War*, 87, 194.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Die In This Way: Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of Mestizaje, 1880–1965* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 58.

sphere of contra—specifically FDN—influence. However, he differs from Brown in his perception that there was still a palpable indigenous identity after over a century of the Nicaraguan state actively attempting to eliminate this very identity in the western half of the country. Taking into account Gould’s work, Brown’s ethnic contention becomes questionable.

Lynn Horton is another author who takes issue with Brown’s methodology, yet focuses her research in much the same way. Like Brown, her research on Nicaragua also has a “bottom-up” quality that eschews “policy decisions at the top levels of government both in Nicaragua and the United States,” in favor of “the voice of peasants from the rural communities where the war was fought,” which she feels “has been largely absent” from the literature on the Nicaraguan revolution and the subsequent civil war.<sup>8</sup> Instead of reductively equating U.S. policy and contra motivations, she attempts to understand the differences between the two. This is a legitimate concern as there is still history being written about the Contra War from a U.S. policy perspective that ignores the perspectives of those fighting the war.<sup>9</sup> Both Brown and Horton find a population that views itself as separate from the majority population of the Pacific lowlands, but instead of focusing on ethnic tensions as the root cause of contra/Sandinista animosity as Brown does, Horton looks at highland peasant culture and its institutions for clues to the genesis of the contra struggle. For instance, part of the problem the Sandinistas created for themselves in the

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<sup>8</sup> Lynn Horton, *Peasants in Arms: War and Peace in the Mountains of Nicaragua, 1979–1994* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1998), 311. She also echoes this same sentiment in Horton, review of *The Real Contra War*, 163.

<sup>9</sup> See Duane R. Clarridge and Digby Diehl, *A Spy For All Seasons: My Life in the CIA* (New York: Scribner, 1997); Greg Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006); and Michael Holm, “Brothers In Arms: Congress, the Reagan Administration and Contra Aid, 1981–1986” (master’s thesis, McGill University, 2007).

northern highlands, Horton argues, stemmed from a fundamental misunderstanding of the patterns of rural hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the northern contras—by both operating in close proximity to and being composed of people from this region—were able to take advantage of specific economic and cultural systems like the *finquero* sector and patron-client ties in ways that the Sandinistas did not. Much in the same vein, Robert Langlois adds that the Sandinistas “disrupted the deep-rooted patterns of peasant community and kinship” by fostering distrust between neighbors and among communities, and that “kinship was a natural channel for joining the contras.”<sup>11</sup> Both of these perspectives go beyond simply blaming the Sandinistas for misguided policies and instead look at the people who were most affected by these policies, asking why they took up arms. In this case, these authors demonstrate, it was not because U.S. policy told them to.

All of the aforementioned studies have looked almost exclusively at the northern highlands, and for good reason: this is where the majority of the contras came from and where they most-successfully operated. But the Atlantic Coast complicates the story of the contras due to the stark differences between its demographics and that of the rest of the country. The work of Charles Hale and his study of Miskito ethnicity is indispensable in looking at the Atlantic Coast contras.<sup>12</sup> He does not deal with the Contra War specifically, but his ideas concerning Miskito ethnic identity such as the importance of “Anglo affinity” are important to my research in that they go some way toward

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<sup>10</sup> Lynn R. Horton, “Constructing Conservative Identity: Peasant Mobilization Against Revolution In Nicaragua,” *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 9 No. 2 (June 2004): 167–280.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Langlois, “Becoming a Contra: The Dilemma of Peasants during the Revolution in Nicaragua,” *International Journal*, vol. 52, no. 4 (Autumn 1997): 701–02.

<sup>12</sup> Charles R. Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894–1987* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).



explaining the anti-Sandinista sentiments that led the Miskitos and other Atlantic Coast indigenous peoples to be such an integral part of the contra movement.<sup>13</sup> Hale's work highlights the key differences between the Atlantic Coast peoples and the rest of the country which maintained the "Mestizo standard of cultural homogeneity" that Gould discussed in his work.<sup>14</sup> This struggle between conformity and diverse group expression is one that plays itself out throughout the conflict and explains the successes and failures of both the Sandinistas and the contras in fully assimilating the Atlantic Coast indigenous peoples into their cause.

Sandinista sympathizers have also tried in some ways to understand the Sandinista failure to garner more support on the Atlantic Coast. The contributions of the likes of Carlos Vilas, an Argentina-born political economist who worked for the Sandinista Ministry of Planning on the Atlantic Coast, help explain the Atlantic Coast contras from the Sandinista perspective.<sup>15</sup> He, like Horton and Langlois, is somewhat critical of the inability of the FSLN to understand the culture of the Atlantic Coast, but he is equally disdainful of two of the biggest influences on life in the Atlantic Coast: the Moravian church, and the U.S. government. While his analysis is from the perspective of a former Sandinista official, his discussion of Miskito history and collective memory is valuable in understanding their Miskito motivations during the Contra War.

The final significant group to constitute the contra forces was the ARDE, which Donald Castillo Rivas details in his book *Gringos, contras y sandinistas*. Although he

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 28, 58.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 36; John Beverley, *Subalterneity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 95.

<sup>15</sup> Carlos M. Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity in Nicaragua: Capitalist Modernization and Revolutionary Change on the Atlantic Coast*, trans. Susan Norwood (Boulder, CO: L. Rienner Publishers, 1989).

was involved with the ARDE and subsequently the RN, he does not hold back criticism of either the ARDE or the contra movement as a whole. He hangs the ARDE's failures mainly on Edén Pastora's poor leadership and laments the inability of the contras to explain their struggle to audiences outside the movement. He also attempts to place the contra struggle within the larger context of Nicaraguan political history and the political "deficiencies" a half-century of Somoza rule produced.<sup>16</sup>

As mentioned before, there are a number of works focusing on the conflict mainly from a U.S. foreign policy perspective or from the Sandinista perspective.<sup>17</sup> These works tend to be characterized by their appearance either during the conflict or in its immediate aftermath, and can have a palpably emotional or biased tone. However, some are quite useful in introducing the reader to important historical actors and setting the stage for the events of the war. Journalist Glenn Garvin and authors Roger Miranda and William Ratliff offer up a pair of informative overviews of the conflict, but they both fail to go into the contra movements in depth, either focusing on the U.S. perspective (Garvin) or the Sandinista view (Miranda and Ratliff).<sup>18</sup> This is somewhat understandable as these

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<sup>16</sup> Donald Castillo Rivas, *Gringos, contras y sandinistas: Testimonio de la Guerra civil en Nicaragua* (Bogotá: TM Editores, 1993), 235.

<sup>17</sup> This sort of literature includes but is not limited to: Edgar Chamorro, *Packaging the Contras: A Case of CIA Disinformation* (New York: Institute for Media Analysis, 1987); Clarridge, *A Spy For All Seasons*; Cockburn, *Out of Control*; Dickey, *With the Contras*; Dillon, *Comandos*; Grandin, *Empire's Workshop*; Karl Grossman, *Nicaragua: America's New Vietnam?* (Sag Harbor, NY: Permanent Press, 1984); Holm, "Brothers In Arms"; Andrew C. Kimmens, ed., *Nicaragua and the United States* (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1987); Henry A. Kissinger, *Report on the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America* (1984; repr., Darby, PA: DIANE Publishing 1998); Robert S. Leiken and Barry Rubin, eds., *The Central American Crisis Reader* (New York: Summit Books, 1987); and Thomas W. Walker, ed., *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987).

<sup>18</sup> Glenn Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo: The CIA and the Contras* (Washington: Brassey's [US], Inc., 1992); and Roger Miranda and William Ratliff, *The*

books are sweeping in nature and try to put the entire conflict in a comprehensible narrative. In addition, they both came out in the first years after the conflict and lack some of the perspective of more recent research. But they do have value. A pair of interesting works that look at the war from a first-hand perspective are Duane “Dewey” Clarridge’s *A Spy For All Seasons* and Edgar Chamorro’s *Packaging the Contras*. Clarridge is an ex-CIA officer who helped acquire funding for the contras, and writes of the contras in a positive—if almost paternalistic and grandiose—tone as he describes the conflict years after retiring. He offers important insights into the machinations of funding the contra effort and how various agencies in Washington perceived them. Chamorro, on the other hand, writes as the embittered former head of public relations for the RN. He too has unique insights to offer, but these two sources have noted, if understandable, biases.

### **Thesis and Research Questions**

This paper will look at how the motivations and interests of the FDN, MISURA/MISURASATA, and the ARDE kept the contras from forming a unified front against the Sandinistas for much of their existence, and the factors that ultimately created conditions more conducive to unity. The FDN drew its strength from the masses of disaffected people in Nicaragua’s northern highlands who saw their own values reflected in the FDN’s objectives, even though former Guardsmen from other areas of the country occupied most of its highest leadership roles. In their messaging, the FDN laid out a mission based on the restoration of personal liberties that fit snugly into the northern highland’s tradition of relative independence and “difference” from the traditional seat of

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*Civil War in Nicaragua: Inside the Sandinistas* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993).

political power in the Pacific lowlands.<sup>19</sup> These goals would also find their expression in the contra movement more broadly, but they first formed from a narrower, regional mindset that happened to also meet the desire of Washington to bankroll a “democratic” military force that would help roll back communism in Latin America.

On the Atlantic Coast, MISURA and MISURASATA also found motivation in regional traditions of independence and opposition to the interference of the state in daily life. The main difference was that the indigenous makeup of its comandos gave the Atlantic Coast contra groups ethnic and cultural dimensions the FDN and the ARDE did not share and often did not understand. The Contra War on the Atlantic Coast was much more regionally focused, and incorporated themes of religious, cultural, and historical differences, which put it in opposition to both Managua and the overall goals of the contra movement.

Finally, the former Sandinistas who made up much of the ARDE’s ranks saw their war as a continuation of the Sandinista Revolution. They were sympathetic to the initial goals of the revolution, but were disillusioned by the changes they began to see in the regime, whether it was the increasingly oppressive state security apparatus or their progressively marginalized roles outside Managua’s influential circles. Unlike the other groups, it is nearly impossible to separate the ARDE from its charismatic leader, Edén Pastora, and his mercurial ideology. Personal politics, infighting, and an unwillingness to compromise hobbled both the ARDE’s efforts and any real chance of contra unity across disaffected sectors of Nicaraguan society.

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<sup>19</sup> Horton, “Constructing Conservative Identity,” 167–280; 168.

Each group brought unique preoccupations to their struggle which was further complicated by U.S. involvement. With millions of dollars of funds and materiel on the line and with U.S. government involvement at all levels of contra activity, extricating U.S. interests from the contra effort verges on impossible. However, comparing how the Reagan administration thought of the contras and how the contras viewed themselves can be a valuable exercise in uncovering independent strains of contra thought. It is here where individual fighters' testimonies are essential in uncovering the divergent goals and motivations that were true obstacles to contra unity.

Teasing out these differences in a comparative framework helps explain the successes and failures of unifying into a viable military and political alternative to the Sandinistas. The myth of contra unity begins to break down when the differing messages and motivations within what is supposed to be a unified front are laid out, exposing the deep divisions and differences in priorities that lurked below the surface. While the contra groups shared the goal of seeing the Sandinistas removed from power, at times even invoking the same sort of images, exploring their differences helps us understand why unification was such a difficult process. We can also better understand what it took to overcome these differences and bring about a more unified resistance. Studying how these various groups attempted to assert their individuality as they jockeyed for power and sought to have their voices heard amid a confusing and enervating war serves to explain both the mire in which the contras found themselves for nearly a decade, and the steps that ultimately led toward greater unification.

To see how each of these groups envisioned their place within the broader contra movement, I look at contra press releases; self-published magazines, newsletters, and

manuals; personal correspondence; interviews and autobiographies of comandos; notes from contra planning sessions; correspondence with foreign officials; and news releases about the contras. These sources allow distinctive contra narratives to shine through. This is not to say that these narratives are not tainted by outside forces or that these messages do not have their own biases, but it goes further in documenting the differences within the contra movement and correcting the view of an undifferentiated and unthinking mass of anti-Sandinistas waging a brutal war against a revolutionary regime. To this end, this study looks at the process of community building across the diverse sectors of Nicaraguan society that took a stand against the Sandinistas, and the myriad ways in which they attempted to position themselves as an all-encompassing, Nicaraguan alternative to Sandinismo.

## F DN

The *Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense* (FDN) was by far the largest and most militarily-successful contra group to operate in Nicaragua, with roughly 15,000 troops at the height of the war. This success proved a double-edged sword, as their battlefield victories were due in no small part to a discipline instilled by a leadership and fighting force that contained a small but visible contingent of Anastasio Somoza's maligned National Guardsmen, and to U.S. military and financial support. As Lynn Horton explains, at the same time that the FDN was fighting Sandinistas in Nicaragua's northern highlands, "they were also engaged in an intense discursive struggle over the causes and significance of the war" in the court of national and international public opinion.<sup>20</sup> The FDN continue to color how the entire Contra War is viewed, which masks the diversity of interests and goals among contra fighters. Nonetheless, their motivations do serve as a baseline for understanding the contras more broadly.

Given their military primacy and roots in the earliest anti-Sandinista groups, the FDN became the prism through which many observers outside of Nicaragua understood the contras. But the local motivations of individual fighters and leaders also reveal a more nuanced and heterogeneous force whose interests did not always align with those of other contra groups. The idea of a struggle for a "democratic Nicaragua" is a recurring theme both in FDN and U.S. government documents, but it was likely not these lofty, abstract

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<sup>20</sup> Horton, review of *The Real Contra War*, 165.

ideas that swelled the FDN's ranks to the tens of thousands.<sup>21</sup> Instead, individual and deeply personal goals seem to have been driving forces behind the FDN, rooted in the desire to reinstate personal liberties that many individual comandos felt were lost when the Sandinistas took power.

The FDN officially began in 1982, but several smaller insurgent groups that formed the basis of what would become the FDN had been operating in the northern highlands of Nicaragua since the moment the Sandinistas took power in 1979.<sup>22</sup> A recruiter for one of these early groups, *Legión 15 de Septiembre*, recalled, "We had no ideology of our own. The basic idea was that we were living in a time of war, and that we needed to use the means of war to force the present government to its knees. Afterwards we would be able to elect a liberal/conservative government."<sup>23</sup> With such nebulous early goals, it is no wonder that contra groups did not initially attract fighters in large numbers. In fact, this lack of a clearly articulated ideology plagued the FDN throughout the Contra War. Consequently, FDN ranks only truly began to grow when spurred by the introduction of Sandinista social programs to rural areas, especially with comprehensive agrarian reform in 1980.

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<sup>21</sup> Estimates vary on the exact number of contras across all anti-Sandinista groups, but the United Nations disarmed roughly 21,000 contras in 1990. See Miranda, *Civil War in Nicaragua*, 235.

<sup>22</sup> For more on early contra groups see Brown, *The Real Contra War*; Dillon, *Comandos*; Department of State, "Nicaraguan Biographies," accessed September 21, 2015, [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Nicaraguan\\_Biographies](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Nicaraguan_Biographies); Dieter Eich and Carlos Rincón, *The Contras: Interviews with Anti-Sandinistas* (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1984); Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*; and Stoll, "The Nicaraguan Contras," 145–157.

<sup>23</sup> Within this context, "liberal" and "conservative" are likely to be taken as the historic Conservative and Liberal parties that traded power in Nicaragua from independence until the beginning of the Somoza dictatorship, Eich, *The Contras*, 135.



Indeed, the lack—and in some cases the outright rejection—of an explicit ideology is clearly evident in many comandos’ personal accounts. In his introduction to a collection of interviews of former contras, former Sandinista diplomat Alejandro Bendaña explained, “A key sector of the campesino community entered into conflict with Sandinismo out of immediate and particular reasons or motivations, more so than ideological factors.”<sup>24</sup> One such interviewee admitted to never having voted and was ambivalent about who sat in the presidential palace. Yet another stated, “For most of us, we went to the Contra because of the repression, not because of ideology.”<sup>25</sup> “Repression” as it was understood by comandos tended to be highly personal and took on the form of religious persecution, land confiscation, or forced conscription into the Sandinista Liberation Army.<sup>26</sup>

In an expansive press release announcing its formation in 1982, the FDN laid out a list of demands that included the reinstatement of democratic government (calling specifically for elections), freedom of religion and expression, press freedom, the right to private property, and the right to organize freely—broadly understood in terms of labor and political organization.<sup>27</sup> While these general calls for political freedom and social justice were palatable to U.S. government entities involved in contra affairs, all of these tenets found their initial expression in the personal experiences of individual comandos,

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<sup>24</sup> Alejandro Bendaña, *Una tragedia campesina: testimonios de la resistencia*, (Managua: Editora de Arte, 1991), 130, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Langlois, “Becoming a Contra,” 703.

<sup>26</sup> “Retratos de la Contra (Portraits of the Contra),” 1986, Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 18, folder 2, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University (hereafter cited as “Retratos de la Contra,” Hoover Institution Archives).

<sup>27</sup> “Comunicado: Al Pueblo de Nicaragua y a los Países Democráticos del Mundo [1982],” Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 21, folder 4, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

some of whom had initially fought in contra groups that predated the FDN. In particular, the perceived assault on religious freedom and the Sandinista appropriation of private properties proved to be two of the most potent factors motivating FDN comandos to join the anti-Sandinista cause.

Post-revolutionary Nicaragua was still a Catholic-majority country with a nascent but growing evangelical protestant minority. In this religious milieu, respect for religious freedom was one of the most-cited liberties motivating the FDN. It was difficult for the Sandinistas to keep reports of religious intolerance out of opposition newspapers and U.S. government publications. Sandinista supporters invading Protestant churches, state attempts to discredit opposition clergy, or state-sponsored *turbas divinas* (“divine mobs”) interrupting Pope John Paul II while he was conducting mass in Managua in 1983 gave anti-Sandinistas more than enough ammunition to label the FSNL as antagonistic to religious institutions.<sup>28</sup> The audience for such literature may have, as the former Sandinista representative to the United Nations charged, been actively created by contra leadership and the Reagan Administration in an attempt to manipulate “religious sentiment” to its advantage against the Sandinistas.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the Reagan Administration reported on Sandinista anti-religious activity both officially and in off-the-record communication. An example of the latter comes in remarks like those found in a letter to Senator Richard Lugar in which Deputy Secretary of State John C. Whitehead legitimized support of the FDN by stating that “the actual fighters of the Resistance are

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<sup>28</sup> Calvin L. Smith, *Revolution, Revival, and Religious Conflict in Sandinista Nicaragua* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 36; Department of State, *Inside the Sandinista Regime: A Special Investigator’s Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1986), 11, 19; Bendaña, *Una tragedia campesina*, 160; and Alan Riding, “Pope says taking sides in Nicaragua is peril to Church,” *New York Times*, March 5, 1983.

<sup>29</sup> Bendaña, *Una tragedia campesina*, 255.

overwhelmingly rural youths loyal to their families and localities driven to rebellion by Sandinista attacks on religion and independent farming.”<sup>30</sup> Here, religious persecution and the threat to small-scale capitalism are expressed as concerns of equal import. These themes were playing out globally as the Cold War was entering its final decade, and Nicaragua was no exception.

But independent of religious oppression being used abroad as a way to make the contras more sympathetic, the FDN itself was particularly adamant about the religious nature of its movement. This was a feeling that both arose out of the FDN’s ranks and was actively constructed by the FDN and its leadership both for internal morale and for propaganda purposes. For example, at a planning seminar in Miami aiming to bring the contra movement under one group, representatives of the *Unidad Nicaragüense Opositora*, or UNO, brainstormed about how to build credibility, and about the factors that motivated campesinos to fight. Freedom of religion was mentioned alongside “integrity and unity of the family,” and the right to private property.<sup>31</sup> There was a perceived assault on the markers of Nicaraguan identity, the Christian faith being one of

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<sup>30</sup> The use of “Resistance” in this context predates the RN by a year but hints at efforts to bring the contras together as a U.S. government priority. “Resistance Leadership [13 February 1986],” Department of State FOIA Electronic Reading Room, accessed February 20, 2010, <http://foia.state.gov/documents/LATrafficking/0000B1C3.pdf>, 1–2. Other U.S. government publications that seek to uncover religious intolerance within the Sandinista regime can be located in the Nicaraguan subject collection, box 10, folder 3, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>31</sup> “Síntesis: Sobre algunos conceptos, mensajes y sugerencias (derivados del seminario de comunicación de la UNO/Miami – Octubre – 1986),” Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 18, folder 2, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University. These were also part of the “Principles” of the FDN laid out in a 1983 document. See FDN, “Principles (February 1983),” in *Central American Crisis Reader*, ed. Leiken and Rubin, 261–263. “Ideas básicas para el trabajo de las relaciones internacionales de la U.N.O.,” Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 13, folder 2, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

several institutions perceived as increasingly endangered by the Sandinistas. In one document outlining its strategic public relations stance against the FSLN, UNO placed persecution of organized religion as one of the four “big themes,” along with human rights violations, union repression, and indigenous issues.<sup>32</sup> Again, this document was also tied to strategies combating negative press reports about contra forces.

But these were not complaints the contra leadership simply generated in planning meetings. The religious feeling of many of the comandos is readily on display outside of official documents. One comando related, “I heard a Sandinista say he didn’t believe in God, but we carried out a job and defeated them with the help of God because we walked with the Bible they gave us in the Resistance.”<sup>33</sup> So prevalent was scripture in the FDN that the Lord’s Prayer was included in the Centro de Instrucción Militar (CIM, the FDN’s military basic training center) instruction manual for prospective FDN comandantes.<sup>34</sup> Even in an institutional, military publication, religion was something that, while not immediately relevant to officer training, colored the day-to-day business of the FDN.

According to numerous FDN documents, comandos were supposed to represent “the democratic and Christian guerrilla” who believes in “God, family and work” and who fights “heroically in defense of the Christian faith, the values and morals and the most sacred principles of Democracy.”<sup>35</sup> The FDN promoted this image in publications

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<sup>32</sup>“Ideas básicas para el trabajo de las relaciones internacionales de la U.N.O [no date],” Hoover Institution Archives.

<sup>33</sup> Bendaña, *Una tragedia campesina*, 86.

<sup>34</sup> *Manual de campaña para cuadros* (Centro de Instrucción Militar—Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense, [1983?]).

<sup>35</sup> “Christian guerrilla” in “Retratos de la Contra,” Hoover Institution Archives; “heroically” in “Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense (Handwritten FDN document),” 11 April 1988, Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 21, folder 2, Hoover Institution

both for internal and external consumption. A common refrain in FDN documents was *con Dios y patriotismo derrotaremos al comunismo*, with God and patriotism we will defeat communism.<sup>36</sup> The connection between what it meant to be Nicaraguan was closely linked with religious belief. This image was prominent in the glossy *Comandos* newsletter published by the FDN public relations office. The publication served an important dual purpose: to boost morale among the troops and to improve the image of the contras abroad. Even FDN public relations chief Edgar Chamorro noted that it was often the intent of the magazine to exploit the image of the “Christian soldier.”<sup>37</sup> The fourth issue featured on its cover “Christian guerrillas,” with a photo of one comando wearing a rosary while others knelt in the background, reading what appear to be Bibles.<sup>38</sup> The December 1983 issue used highly charged religious language in an attempt to motivate comandos: “when one participates in the Crusade to rescue the homeland, for religious freedom, for the rights of man, and for peace and democracy, then, more than

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Archives, Stanford University. For evidence of connections between FDN religiosity and family, see Bendaña, *Una tragedia campesina*, 131.

<sup>36</sup> “Boletín No. 1,” [1983], Resistencia Nicaragüense Ejército records, 1979–1993, box 12, folder 7, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University. Also found on documents from organizations tangentially associated with the FDN. “Juventud Democrática Nicaragüense: Programa de Primer Ciclo...,” [September 1985], Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 23, folder 1, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University. This is also cited as being an Evangelical slogan. See Roberto Zub, “The Evolution of Protestant Participation in Nicaraguan Politics and the Rise of Evangelical Parties,” in *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Latin America*, ed. Paul Freston, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 104.

<sup>37</sup> Chamorro, *Packaging the Contras*, 24.

<sup>38</sup> “Comandos: Boletín Informativo de Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense,” 15 July 1983, Resistencia Nicaragüense Ejército records, 1979–1993., box 52, folder 15, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University. See fn 19.

ever, is one close to God.”<sup>39</sup> Chamorro himself was a former Jesuit and had a large role in constructing these early publications before leaving the FDN leadership in 1984, so the adept use of religious language is unsurprising.

For the FDN, these values were diametrically opposed to the Sandinista regime and its ideology. In its Code of Conduct, the FDN claimed, “Every member of the FDN is very clear that we fight in a Civil War that has been imposed on us Nicaraguans by a Marxist-Leninist system that enslaves the individual, denies God and imposes war, tyranny, state monopoly, [and] the elimination of social classes.”<sup>40</sup> The FDN comandos thus fought “to return to our country its moral, spiritual, western, and Christian values,” which for some equated to the Contra War being a “sacred war.”<sup>41</sup>

Despite the presence of Catholic imagery and the leadership of Chamorro, the magazine usually took a non-denominational tact when discussing Christianity. After all, the challenge of building community across a religiously plural national populace would have only been made more difficult by the introduction or acknowledgement of sectarian differences by an official contra publication. If the goals of the magazine were to boost comando morale and lure possible recruits, a broad use of religion seems to have been an effective way to do so given the frequency and intentionality with which it was used. If the young men and women who fought for the FDN came from strong religious

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<sup>39</sup> “Comandos 9: Boletín Informativo de Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense,” 15 December 1983, Nicaraguan subject collection, box 7, folder 3, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>40</sup> “Prólogo [to FDN Code of Conduct],” [1984?], Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 21, folder 4, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>41</sup> “Resolución Patriótica,” 16 April 1988, Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 21, folder 2, Hoover Institution Archives. José Benito Bravo Centeno, interview, *The Nicaragua Reader: Documents of a Revolution under Fire*, ed. Peter Rosset and John Vandermeer (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 237.

backgrounds, it stood to reason that the FDN could benefit from reflecting their beliefs institutionally, and tapping into the feelings of pride, fear, and paranoia that came along with them.

The attempt to promote both the idea of the Christian soldier and religious diversity within the FDN is on display in a document called *Portraits of the Contras* written by exiled businessman Jaime Morales Carazo (under the pseudonym “Tolentino Cifar”). One FDN comandante, “Fernando,” was prominently featured because of his past as an evangelical Protestant pastor.<sup>42</sup> The purpose of the document was to highlight certain combatants who were to represent the best the FDN had to offer, and the fact that Comandante Fernando “aspired to serve God and his people” first as a pastor and then as a comando allowed the FDN to advance an image it was ever-eager to capitalize on.<sup>43</sup> By highlighting the presence of religious minorities in positions of authority within the context of a Catholic-majority country, FDN leadership hoped to lure U.S. evangelical backing by showing off the FDN’s respect for diversity while also attracting Nicaraguan recruits by showcasing the FDN’s religious tolerance in opposition to the perceived intolerance of the FSLN.<sup>44</sup>

The other major strain of anti-Sandinista thought within the FDN involved the appropriation of private properties for use in FSLN agricultural collectivization

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<sup>42</sup> Carazo published a number of works for the FDN under this pseudonym as well as under his real name. Jaime Morales Carazo, *La contra* (Austin, TX: Planeta, 1989), 7.

<sup>43</sup> “Retratos de la Contra,” Hoover Institution Archives.

<sup>44</sup> For more on U.S. evangelical support for the contras, see David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?: The Politics of the Evangelical Church* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); and Smith, *Revolution, Revival, and Religious Conflict*, 213–248.

projects.<sup>45</sup> For Managua, the “primitive and individualist” way in which northern highlands campesinos and landowners tilled their land was an “obstacle” to the goal of collective organization.<sup>46</sup> But just as the FSLN misjudged its disruptive forays into indigenous populations on the Atlantic Coast, so too did they misjudge the “deeply ingrained conservatism” of both the landed and landless populations in the northern highlands.<sup>47</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine wealthy landowners flocking to the FDN’s cause. One comando from a self-described “well-to-do” family of ranch owners wanted nothing more than to “pay the Sandinistas back” for the appropriation of his family’s lands.<sup>48</sup> But this does not explain the attraction of the FDN for the far larger population of tenant farmers in the region. Horton posits that the northern highlands already displayed high esteem for “private property, a strong work ethic, patriarchy, honor, and self-sufficiency,” and the FDN used these pre-existing feelings to frame Sandinista land reform “not as an act of social justice, but rather as the theft of private property, the product of a man’s hard labor.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, state agricultural programs required that even “dispossessed and land-poor peasants reconstruct their concept of community,” which goes some way to explain

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<sup>45</sup> For an in-depth study of Sandinista agricultural policies, see María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 109–147.

<sup>46</sup> Bendaña, *Una tragedia campesina*, 42.

<sup>47</sup> Stephen Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1991), 129. See also Horton, “Constructing Conservative Identity,” 167–180; and Saldaña-Portillo, *Revolutionary Imagination*, 143.

<sup>48</sup> Eich, *The Contras*, 189.

<sup>49</sup> Horton, “Constructing Conservative Identity,” 172. See also Langlois, “Becoming a Contra,” 695–713.



why these programs had the unintended consequence of undermining peasant support in the countryside.<sup>50</sup>

Horton writes extensively about the importance of kinship networks to northern highland society, and the FDN made use of these networks from landowners on down, to foster support for its cause. In writing about the FDN's advancement into new territories in 1986, the Department of State also wrote about the importance of contra supply networks "making use of family ties" in order to "retain local backing."<sup>51</sup> To put it another way, although Somoza's Nicaragua had been oppressive and corrupt, at least hard work was tempered with the "freedom to pursue independent lives," within the political strictures of the dictatorship.<sup>52</sup> In her work on development in Latin America, sociologist María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo laments that appeals by "elites and counterrevolutionaries spoke to the itinerant proletarians' and the minifundistas' [small landowners'] interest in autonomy, which superseded their interests as workers, especially since the FSLN was unable to dramatically improve their status as a proletariat."<sup>53</sup> Rather than being a bastion of revolutionary sentiment like the country's urban populations, the campesinos of the northern highlands had a strong conservative or even libertarian streak that funneled troops into the FDN and against the government in Managua.

The most obvious and painful manifestation of the new regime for many in the northern highlands was the loss of private property. Taken within the context of the Cold

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<sup>50</sup> Saldaña-Portillo, *Revolutionary Imagination*, 131, 111.

<sup>51</sup> "National Intelligence Daily [20 November 1986]," CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room, accessed February 23, 2010, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Dillon, *Comandos*, 48.

<sup>53</sup> Saldaña-Portillo, *Revolutionary Imagination*, 121.

War, the FDN tried to place themselves as defenders of homegrown, small-scale capitalism in the face of an imported model of wealth redistribution. The FDN often framed their fight in the context of past foreign invasions. For example, the second issue of *Comandos* exhorted Nicaraguans to emulate their forefathers who had expelled American filibuster William Walker and his invading force in 1856.<sup>54</sup> Going even further into history, RN head Adolfo Calero put the contra's struggle in pre-Columbian as well as more modern terms: "The Chorotega and Nahua Indians founded Nicaragua, in revolt against the tyranny of the Olmecs, as the land of their freedom... During the last century our forefathers threw out William Walker... We overthrew a rightist dictatorship and are now fighting a leftist totalitarian regime."<sup>55</sup> Both the Olmecs and Walker are posited as antecedents for the new foreign ideological invasion linked in contra discourse to the Sandinistas.

After the FDN became a more regularized fighting force by the middle of the decade, its leadership began to make a concerted effort to correct this perceived ideological deficiency by incorporating its own ideological instruction into its military training regime. The FDN published the "Blue and White Book" (corresponding to the colors of the Nicaraguan flag) in 1983 so that comandos could "educate themselves about what they were fighting for," in particular "a democratic and pluralistic government in

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<sup>54</sup> "Comandos: Boletín Informativo de Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense," 15 May 1983, Resistencia Nicaragüense Ejército records, 1979–1993., box 52, folder 15, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>55</sup> "Artículo de Adolfo Calero: We Shall Return," 10 August 1988, Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 7, folder 35, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

Nicaragua.”<sup>56</sup> Additionally, “democratic leaders” were embedded in military units so as to explain what it meant to be in a “democratic force” at the fighting level.<sup>57</sup> Political training also became an element of CIA training for contra commanders as it “enhanced their awareness of the political nature of the insurgency,” although this did not happen until after the RN formed and the military conflict was de-escalating.<sup>58</sup>

There was also pressure for the FDN to tie the Contra War to the civil war raging next door in El Salvador. Since the Carter administration, the United States had already been thinking of the leftist Salvadoran guerrillas and the FSLN as symptoms of the same problem, a line of thinking which solidified under the Reagan White House.<sup>59</sup> However, very little indicates that the FDN saw their war in those terms. An official communique from UNO dated May 29, 1986 made an oblique reference to the “common defense of the security of the Central American Isthmus,” but top FDN leaders were less concerned about the flow of arms from Nicaragua to El Salvador than with fighting their own war in

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<sup>56</sup> Chamorro, *Packaging the Contras*, 104; “The Blue and White Book [September 1983],” CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room, accessed October 12, 2016 [https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000526683.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000526683.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Department of State, “Background information on the attached ‘Blue and White Book’ [25 October 1984],” Declassified Documents Reference System, 1. Grossman, *Nicaragua: America’s New Vietnam?*, 178.

<sup>58</sup> “Talking Points on Nicaraguan Insurgency for DD/ALA’s Briefing of SSCI [3 June 1987],” CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room, accessed February 23, 2010, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>, 2.

<sup>59</sup> Department of State, “Secretary of State Cyrus Vance provides President Jimmy Carter with his daily report. Issues include: the situations in El Salvador and Nicaragua... [29 January 1980],” Declassified Documents Reference System. Department of State, “Cable regarding an assessment of Nicaraguan cooperation in terrorist activities along the Costa Rican border [19 August 1980],” Declassified Documents Reference System. For more on the U.S. government view on the El Salvador-Nicaragua nexus, see: Clarridge, *A Spy For All Seasons*, 198; Cockburn, *Out of Control*; Dickey, *With the Contras*; Leiken, *The Central American Crisis Reader*; Miranda, *The Civil War in Nicaragua*; Kimmens, *Nicaragua and the United States*; and Ronald Reagan, “National Security Decision Directive on Cuba and Central America [4 January 1982],” NSDD 17, accessed February 20, 2010, <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-017.htm>.

their own country.<sup>60</sup> As Edgar Chamorro stated after he left the FDN directorate, “I did not care about El Salvador. I cared about Nicaragua.”<sup>61</sup> The relative silence of the FDN on the issue of El Salvador suggests that comandos at all ranks of the FDN felt much the same way.<sup>62</sup> Initially, some FDN leaders thought—perhaps naively—that while the United States would hold the purse strings, they would have a greater say in the direction of their war; as Chamorro would later complain, “I joined [the FDN] on the understanding that the United States Government would supply us the means necessary to defeat the Sandinistas and replace them as a government, but I believed that we would be our own masters.”<sup>63</sup>

Former Nicaraguan Permanent Representative to the United Nations Alejandro Bendaña charged that the U.S. government failed to incorporate the true interests of the rural FDN comandos into its dealings with the FDN and the contras writ large, characterizing U.S. contra support as “a plan that never took into account the interests of the campesinos, instead only taking into account the anti-Soviet policy of the American Administration.”<sup>64</sup> State Department cables do show an evolving understanding on the part of Washington of the actual men and women who composed the FDN’s ranks as the war dragged on, yet while the U.S. government had a notional understanding of these

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<sup>60</sup> Communique, 29 May 1986, Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 16, folder 1, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>61</sup> Chamorro, *Packaging the Contras*, 38.

<sup>62</sup> See also Jorge Ramírez Zelaya in Eich, *The Contras*, 41.

<sup>63</sup> Chamorro, *Packaging the Contras*, 271. For a more detailed take on this interaction, see Dillon, *Comandos*, 104–105.

<sup>64</sup> Bendaña, *Una tragedia campesina*, 13.

motivations, Washington still saw the conflict through the prism of the Cold War.<sup>65</sup> And indeed, high-minded struggles over the FDN's discourse and how best to express its essential "democratic" and nationalist nature took place mainly among the top leadership of the FDN and their Washington interlocutors.<sup>66</sup> But conversely, as former chief of the Sandinista Defense Ministry Secretariat Roger Miranda posited, the FSLN also failed to realize "that the Contra War had become a peasant insurrection... a fact most Sandinista leaders themselves had great difficulty understanding for years."<sup>67</sup> The comandos doing the actual fighting came up with their own ideas and motivations, joining the FDN despite any "inconsideration" on the part of Washington or Managua.<sup>68</sup> For most of the FDN's comandos, the recovery of personal "liberty and rights" took precedent over any other consideration.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> "Resistance Leadership [13 February 1986]," Department of State FOIA Electronic Reading Room, accessed February 20, 2010, <http://foia.state.gov/documents/LATrafficking/0000B1C3.pdf>, 1–2.

<sup>66</sup> Being perceived as mere actors in a "proxy war" was of particular concern in one working document from 1986 which was actually titled "The Challenge of Our Democracy: The Search for Legitimacy." See *El Desafío de Nuestra Diplomacia: La Búsqueda de la Legitimidad*, October 1986, Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 14, folder 1, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University; and *El Desafío de Nuestra Democracia: La Búsqueda de la Legitimidad, Documento de Trabajo*, 12 August 1986, Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 22, folder 2, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>67</sup> Miranda, *The Civil War in Nicaragua*, 92.

<sup>68</sup> Bendaña, *Una tragedia campesina*, 35.

<sup>69</sup> "Retratos de la Contra," Hoover Institution Archives.

## Atlantic Coast

The indigenous peoples that joined the contra movement on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast shared many similarities with the contras in the northern highlands—primarily a sense of cultural difference from the rest of the country and a feeling of alienation toward early Sandinista policies. Indeed some of the earliest anti-Sandinista groups sprang up on the Atlantic Coast, and some of the Sandinista's most visible abuses took place there. If there was one region that had the potential to sully the generally favorable view of the FSLN abroad, it was the Atlantic Coast.

Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast was a diverse region consisting of the Miskito, Sumu, and Rama Indians, as well as Afro-descended creoles and Spanish-speaking mestizos.<sup>70</sup> The Miskito people were the dominant indigenous group, and much of the Atlantic Coast contra leadership drew from this population, although all groups had some representation within the contra movement. The Miskito contras will be my primary focus due to their greater numbers and the fact that Miskito leaders tended to dominate anti-Sandinista thought on the Atlantic Coast, although they often espoused a pan-indigenous worldview that both linked the Atlantic Coast contras to international indigenous struggles for autonomy, and incorporated the other Atlantic Coast constituent groups into the Contra War.

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<sup>70</sup> Miskito is alternately spelled "Miskitu"; Sumu is also spelled "Sumo," and this group is contemporarily referred to as "Mayanga."

Prior to the FSLN's rise to power, the Somoza-era narrative of the Atlantic Coast tended to follow that the people there "generally lived in a condition of neglect."<sup>71</sup> However, the FSLN soon began to bring nation-building programs to the region which chafed with local traditions in some communities. As early as 1980, U.S. government national security analysts were already looking to the Atlantic Coast as a potential hotbed of discontent within Sandinista Nicaragua.<sup>72</sup> Complaints about limits on the harvesting and sale of natural resources, as well as culturally insensitive literacy campaigns eventually snowballed into outright conflict.<sup>73</sup> At worst, the early Sandinista understanding of the Atlantic Coast assumed a "blank page of primitivism" that needed to be corrected through social programs already being rolled out in the rest of the country—a symptom of a "paternalistic and narrowly modernistic attitude toward the peasantry."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Martin Diskin, "The Manipulation of Indigenous Struggles" in *Reagan versus the Sandinistas*, 82. See also Tomás Borge, Carlos Fonseca, Daniel Ortega, Humberto Ortega, and Jaime Wheelock, *Sandinistas Speak* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1982); Ana Carrigan, "Caught in the Crossfire," *New Internationalist* 186 (August 1988): 22; Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Blood on the Border: A Memoir of the Contra War* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005); Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*; Brooklyn Rivera, Interview by Michael Rediske, Managua, April 1, 1981, in *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity: The Conflict between Sandinistas and Miskito Indians on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast*, ed. Klaudine Ohland and Robin Schneider (Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 1983), 120; Patrick Thornberry, *Indigenous Peoples and Human Rights* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

<sup>72</sup> CIA, "Atlantic coast separatism outlined [19 December 1980]," Declassified Documents Reference System.

<sup>73</sup> "Processes of shaping and defining collective identity are intrinsically linked to the articulation of initial and ongoing grievances—emphasizing certain complaints, excluding others, and defining trajectories of collective action." Horton, "Constructing Conservative Identity," 168. See also CIA, "Steadman Fagoth lists grievances against Sandinist government [25 January 1982]," Declassified Documents Reference System, 2–3; Steadman Fagoth, *La Moskitia: Autonomía regional: Lamento indígena, o caso de una raza que se resiste a fallecer* (1985), 133; Bernard Nietschmann, *The Unknown War: The Miskito Nation, Nicaragua, and the United States* (New York: Freedom House, 1989), 8.

<sup>74</sup> Diskin, "The Manipulation of Indigenous Struggles," 84; and Saldaña-Portillo, *Revolutionary Imagination*, 146.

As in the northern highlands, the intrusive nature of these programs—administered by Spanish-speaking mestizos from the more populated areas closer to the Pacific—caused some on the Atlantic Coast to look back on the neglect of the Somoza years with a nostalgia that was little-understood by Nicaraguans from major cities. In the words of one Miskito comando, “For many years before the Sandinistas came to power, we were subjected to neglect by the dictatorship of the Somoza family, but that was a blessing compared to the brutal malevolence of the Sandinistas.”<sup>75</sup> Even Miskito leader Brooklyn Rivera, who had been an early champion of the Sandinista revolution and remained a moderating force within the Atlantic Coast contra movement, characterized Sandinista action on the Atlantic Coast not as a “revolution of social justice, [but] rather a process of hatred, destabilization and social repression.”<sup>76</sup>

Despite the heated rhetoric against the FSLN, it was the very Sandinista revolution that created the space for discussion about autonomy on the Atlantic Coast. In an early article from the Sandinista publication *Barricada*, indigenous leaders from MISURASATA (*Miskito, Sumu, Rama, Sandinista Aslatakanta* [Working Together]) saw the revolution as a positive means to “recover and promote our culture” and “meet our economic needs.”<sup>77</sup> Much in the same way the revolution made it possible to talk about democracy after decades of dictatorship, so too did it spur a renewed interest in indigenous autonomy. Rivera recognized the debt the Atlantic Coast Indian activists owed to Sandinismo: “Of course the revolution made this whole movement possible. The

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<sup>75</sup> Reynaldo Reyes and J. K. Wilson, *Ráfaga: The Life Story of a Nicaraguan Miskito Comandante*, ed. Tod Sloan (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 4.

<sup>76</sup> Brooklyn Rivera, *Problems of the Indians with the Sandinista Revolution*, letter from September 1981, in *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, 207.

<sup>77</sup> MISURASATA, “Together We Will Build a Just Society!” from *Barricada*, November 27, 1979, in *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, 40.



fervor of the revolutionary triumph injected into the soul, heart and atmosphere that everybody could express themselves and participate. Before there was no incentive ... we were just asleep."<sup>78</sup> Even Steadman Fagoth, the Miskito leader who broke with MISURASATA 1983 to form the MISURA (Miskito, Sumu, Rama) contra group, started out as a member of the Sandinista Council of State. While Miskito leaders shared the ultimate goal of autonomy within Nicaragua, they disagreed fundamentally about the ways in which to achieve that goal. Ultimately, the Atlantic Coast population split between those who advocated for negotiation with the FSLN and those who chose armed conflict.<sup>79</sup>

National security concerns and economic development initially informed the Sandinistas' presence on the Atlantic Coast.<sup>80</sup> However it did not take long before the FSLN's relationship with the Atlantic Coast population turned adversarial, with the government coming to be viewed by significant portions of the population as an occupying force.<sup>81</sup> As Miskito and other Indian leaders demanded more autonomy, the government in Managua viewed the Atlantic Coast with greater suspicion, especially as nascent contra groups began to operate in the northern highlands along the same border with Honduras that stretched to the Atlantic. Instances of isolated violence, usually

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<sup>78</sup>Philippe I. Bourgois, "Nicaragua's Ethnic Minorities in the Revolution," *Monthly Review* 36, no. 8 (January 1985): 22–44. See also Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 132.

<sup>79</sup>MISURASATA and MISURA eventually converged again concurrently with the RN in 1987 as YATAMA (Yapti Tasba Masraka Nanih Aslatakanka, Sons of Mother Earth). The YATAMA Directorate was composed of six Atlantic Coast leaders representing Miskito, Sumu, and Rama Indians as well as creoles. Both Brooklyn Rivera and Steadman Fagoth served on the directorate.

<sup>80</sup>Miranda, *Civil War in Nicaragua*, 237.

<sup>81</sup>Fagoth, *La Moskitia*, 133. The sense that the FSLN was an occupying force was not just an Atlantic Coast phenomenon, but also existed in regions closer to Managua and the other Pacific lowland cities. Miranda, *Civil War in Nicaragua*, 243.

involving excessive force on the part of Sandinista security forces, coupled with increasingly militant calls for autonomy, served to drive many Atlantic Coast Indians to the contra cause.<sup>82</sup> One anthropologist wrote that there eventually came a point where “to identify as Miskitu became virtually synonymous with being counterrevolutionary.”<sup>83</sup> The most tragic result of this view was the FSLN’s forced relocation of thousands of Indian communities on the Atlantic Coast beginning in December 1981 in an attempt to disrupt MISURA and MISURASATA’s bases of support.<sup>84</sup> Cultural differences largely fed this perception which was not entirely unjustified given that the cultural and historical differences of the Atlantic Coast, along with Sandinista abuses, led directly to the formation of a significant contra force in the region.

While the rest of Nicaragua was predominantly Catholic, social and political life on the Atlantic Coast has been dominated by the Moravian Church since the first missionaries arrived in the mid-1800s. Anthropologist Charles Hale credits the Moravians’ success among the Miskitos as providing them another means to carry on with their historical defiance of “government rule” stretching back to the Spanish conquest. “Converting Miskitu people to Protestantism, educating them in Moravian schools, and promoting their own language reinforced their identity and enhanced their

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<sup>82</sup> The U.S. government was also eager to point out instances of FSLN violence against indigenous groups as this was thought to make Atlantic Coast contra groups more sympathetic than the FDN or ARDE. See Diskin, “The Manipulation of Indigenous Struggles,” 81, 86; and Department of State, *Broken Promises: Sandinista Repression of Human Rights in Nicaragua* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1984), 20.

<sup>83</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 36.

<sup>84</sup> For more on forced removals, see Dickey, *With the Contras*, 134; Michael Dodson, “Religion and Revolution,” in *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua*, ed. Thomas W. Walker (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 174; Miranda, *Civil War in Nicaragua*, 193; and Brooklyn Rivera, “Problems of the Indians with the Sandinista Revolution,” in *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, 210.

sense of being different from ‘Spaniards.’” The Moravian Church proved adept at adapting to the cultural needs of the local population: “Miskitu people converted to the Moravian religion through a process of reciprocity, the argument goes, whereby missionaries respected, even deferred to, a preexisting Miskitu identity.”<sup>85</sup>

The Moravian Church also played a significant role in the economic development of the region. The church “enthusiastically greeted the arrival of new investments and companies, in which it saw the solution to the serious problems of unemployment... and low income for the natives.”<sup>86</sup> With the arrival of these new companies came new social services that added to those already being provided by the church. Since most of these companies were North American, this only added to what Hale defines as the Miskitos’ “Anglo affinity” that had begun to form since their first contact with Europeans of non-Spanish origin.<sup>87</sup>

By the time Sandinista programs arrived, Atlantic Coast Indians already had a preferred system of non-profit subsistence and communal land distribution which, instead of being a part of any Marxist model, stemmed from, as they saw it, “Biblical teachings both of the Old and New Testaments.”<sup>88</sup> From the Sandinistas’ point of view, part of the reason the Miskitos resisted integration into the nation was that the Moravian Church had an interest in keeping the Atlantic Coast from integrating. The church “reinforced the aspirations of Costeños for autonomy, adding a spiritual argument to other, more secular ones.” This is to say that the “government policy of extending public health and social

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<sup>85</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 49–50.

<sup>86</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 36.

<sup>87</sup> Bourgois, “Nicaragua's Ethnic Minorities in the Revolution.” For more on Miskito “Anglo affinity,” see Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*.

<sup>88</sup> MISURASATA, “General Directions MISURASATA, 1982,” in *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, 52.

security programs threatened the church's near monopoly in this sphere."<sup>89</sup> One Miskito Moravian pastor said that Sandinista programs might have actually been well-received "if the government had sent Americans, Canadians, Europeans" who were sympathetic to the revolution instead of the Nicaraguans and Cubans they did send.<sup>90</sup>

The Moravian Church in Nicaragua was "fervently anticommunist," and given that the church was the "strongest ideological influence on the Miskitu and Creole peoples," it is not a stretch to presume that anticommunism was simply another marker of Atlantic Coast difference from the rest of the country.<sup>91</sup> One anthropologist wrote that "Sandinista distrust of evangelicals was fed by events on the Atlantic Coast."<sup>92</sup> As evangelical missions in other parts of Nicaragua received financial aid from overseas, especially from the United States, it was not a drastic leap of logic on the part of the FSLN to see all forms of evangelical Christianity as potentially threatening to the state. Since Protestantism was equated with counterrevolution on the Atlantic Coast, it was then easier for the Sandinistas to make the same case in the rest of the country as well.

In its own way, what the Moravian Church did on the Atlantic Coast is precisely what the FDN attempted to do among the northern highlands population. The FDN was most successful among the populations that defined themselves by local loyalties stemming from a shared way of life different from that of "urban revolutionaries and their

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<sup>89</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity in Nicaragua*, 116.

<sup>90</sup> Grossman, *Nicaragua: America's New Vietnam?*, 96.

<sup>91</sup> Bourgois, "Nicaragua's Ethnic Minorities in the Revolution."

<sup>92</sup> Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?*, 230. See also John Brentlinger, *The Best of What We Are: Reflections on the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 59.

‘foreign’ ideology and programs.’<sup>93</sup> The FDN positioned itself as a supporter of such communities in the same way that the Moravian Church did on the Atlantic Coast.

However, a key difference that kept Miskito anti-Sandinista sentiment wholly separate from that of either the FDN or ARDE was that the Miskitos did not necessarily want inclusion in, much less control of, the Nicaraguan state. Unlike the FDN which fought for “God and Country” and framed their struggle in a national context, the Atlantic Coast contras kept their focus on regional concerns. Maintaining traditional culture and land rights were the driving factors behind indigenous contra groups, goals that could never be fully supported by either the ARDE or FDN leadership, despite lip service paid to the poor treatment of the Atlantic Coast indigenous people by contra leaders in other areas of the country.<sup>94</sup>

Freedom of religion played a key role across contra groups. But instead of religion being a means by which to bring more people into the contra community, Moravianism was a way in which the Miskitos kept themselves separate from other contra forces. What the Miskitos saw as the Sandinista “call to assimilation and conformity” was intolerable, be it from Managua or from the FDN.<sup>95</sup> When not receiving aid directly from the CIA, Indian anti-Sandinista forces would often obtain weapons and training through either the FDN or ARDE. Yet even when the FDN, which ostensibly shared the same goals as MISURA, sent troops to train Indian comandos in Honduras, problems arose. One Miskito comandante recalled, “The boys made trouble only because

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<sup>93</sup> Horton, “Constructing Conservative Identity,” 171.

<sup>94</sup> See Edén Pastora, “The Watchful Eye (April 1982),” in *Central American Crisis Reader*, ed. Leiken and Rubin, 256.

<sup>95</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 92.

we did not like the Spaniards [mestizos] being over us.”<sup>96</sup> “We are not the soles of the FDN’s feet,” another Indian comando remarked.<sup>97</sup>

Thus, though the FDN responded to and played up the religious devotion it saw on display within its ranks, and religion was an important part of furthering the FDN’s overall goals of regime change in Managua, this did not necessarily link them to Atlantic Coast contras or counterbalance larger cultural gulfs. The Atlantic Coast was set apart from the beginning by its religious and other differences. Their counterrevolution was informed by their culture and by mestizo insensitivity to the inherent difference between the Atlantic Coast and the rest of the country.<sup>98</sup>

Among indigenous people on the Atlantic Coast, a sense of a shared history with the United States also dovetailed nicely with the American mission of regime change in Nicaragua. For the Miskitos, Americans were blameless for any injustices that may have occurred during the Somoza years. If anything, so the belief went, Somoza had manipulated American companies, for example, into paying Miskito workers substandard wages.<sup>99</sup> And even in the face of past injustices, Miskitos were receptive to American aid when the contra war was ramping up. Part of the reason that Miskitos, in particular

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<sup>96</sup> Reyes, *Ráfaga*, 97. For more on how FDN aid was linked to the Atlantic Coast, see Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 173–174, 241.

<sup>97</sup> William Gasperini, “Miskitos Divided in Allegiances to Sandinistas and to Homeland,” *In These Times*, September 3–9, 1986, p. 9, quoted in Diskin, “The Manipulation of Indigenous Struggles,” 89.

<sup>98</sup> For example, see the expulsion of Bishop Vega in “National Intelligence Daily Monday 7 July 1986,” CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room, accessed February 23, 2010, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>. One of the more dramatic incidences was the exodus from the Miskito village of Francia Sirpe. For a number of different views, see Department of State, *Broken Promises*, 20; Reyes, *Ráfaga*, chapter 8; Miranda, *Civil War in Nicaragua*, 92–93; and Reed Brody, *Contra Terror in Nicaragua: Report of a Fact-Finding Mission, September 1984–January 1985* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1985), 107–111.

<sup>99</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 73.

MISURA, were so receptive while other groups like the ARDE were wary of American involvement is due to nostalgia for a time when stores were full of American products, and American-owned businesses provided plentiful employment. As Stephen Kinzer writes, “they do not deny that those were days of injustice and racial prejudice, days of low wages earned in the hot sun or deep in poisonous mine shafts, but still their memories are sweet.”<sup>100</sup>

Charles Hale found in his study of a Miskito population in Sandy Bay, Nicaragua that “when the Reagan administration began to fund MISURASATA, Sandy Bay Miksitu interpreted the aid as yet another affirmation of this historic partnership with the Americans.”<sup>101</sup> The Sandinistas also saw this same phenomenon occurring. Sandinista minister of the Nicaraguan Institute for the Atlantic Coast, William Ramírez, claimed at a United Nations seminar in Managua in December 1981, “We are currently harassed by North American imperialism which utilizes the indigenous problem as an ideological weapon to destabilize the revolutionary process.”<sup>102</sup> So, unlike the Nicaraguan national history that portrayed Americans as looters or hostile invaders that was so prevalent in the rest of the country, Miskitos saw a beneficial relationship with the United States in their history which, when used in tandem with their distaste for the Sandinista presence on the Atlantic Coast, made for a population that was highly receptive to U.S. help in fighting the Sandinistas.

Atlantic Coast contra leaders weaved the theme of a historical culture of resistance into their contemporary struggle. MISURASATA, the Sandinista-sanctioned

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<sup>100</sup> Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers*, 258.

<sup>101</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 162.

<sup>102</sup> William Ramírez, from *IWGIA Newsletter* No. 30, April 1982 10–28, in *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, 222.

Atlantic Coast Indian group that was initially led by Brooklyn Rivera and Steadman Fagoth before the group broke with the FSLN in 1981, declared “that the period of oppression lasting nearly two centuries proves that the indigenous peoples possess an inherent revolutionary vocation and a capacity to resist conquest and domination.”<sup>103</sup> MISURASATA did not see the revolution in and of itself as a negative event in Nicaraguan history, and they initially sought to occupy a space within the new Nicaraguan social order. Miskito contra leader Steadman Fagoth wrote that Miskitos in colonial times used their “warrior spirit and their knowledge and ample command of the area” to serve as a “bastion of resistance,” and that they “continually rejected the invading colonial forces of the era in defense of their territory, their liberty, and their political autonomy.”<sup>104</sup> Using such modern language and concepts while invoking these centuries-old struggles served to fold rebellion and resistance into the social fabric of the Atlantic Coast.

Unlike Steadman Fagoth who eventually threw himself full-force into armed, anti-Sandinista resistance, Indian leader Brooklyn Rivera took a diplomatic and arguably more pragmatic approach to Sandinista-Atlantic Coast relations. He often worked with the Sandinista government to achieve some sort of peace on the Atlantic Coast, which earned him a place for a time as the ideological enemy of Fagoth and those who saw his actions as capitulatory. However, this could have just been an extension of Rivera’s contention that the Contra War was just another case of “Spaniards’ fighting among

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<sup>103</sup> MISURASATA, “General Directions MISURASATA, 1982,” in *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, 51.

<sup>104</sup> Fagoth, *La Moskitia*, 94.



themselves for power,” and that the Atlantic Coast had no real stake in such a fight.<sup>105</sup>

“Spaniard” in this context is meant to denote the mestizo population of the western part of Nicaragua, a population seen as so foreign to the Indians of the Atlantic Coast that they might as well have represented interests oceans away.

These two ideas, that the Indians of the Atlantic Coast shared a rebellious heritage that was forged over hundreds of years of shared history, and that the mestizo majority of the country—this is to say, the vast majority of the Sandinistas—was seen as foreign made the Atlantic Coast suspect in the eyes of the FSLN. It was especially this lack of a sense of belonging to the dominant culture that made the non-mestizo Atlantic Coast populations subject to Sandinista mistrust. Just as evangelical Protestants were more likely to be suspected of contra sympathies because they found themselves outside the dominant culture and with historical ties to powers outside the country, so too did Atlantic Coast Indians find themselves, justly or not, under the same suspicions. The Atlantic Coast provided a coherent historical narrative in which its legitimacy was rooted in a shared culture, geography, and history—a feat the RN could only have wished it could weave.<sup>106</sup> Instead of devising a history that would appeal to many different ideologies and backgrounds like the RN had to do, the Atlantic Coast Indians could draw from their more singular culture.

From the Sandinista perspective, “ethnic chauvinism” kept the Atlantic Coast outside the Sandinista national project from the beginning of the revolution, but the same charge could have been leveled by the FDN and later RN as well as the decade wore

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<sup>105</sup> Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers*, 262.

<sup>106</sup> Nietschmann, *The Unknown War*, 52.

on.<sup>107</sup> While reviled by many Atlantic Coast leaders for going outside the purview of acceptable anti-Sandinismo by his willingness to negotiate with Managua as early as 1984, Brooklyn Rivera was still able to maintain legitimacy with many because he was seen as working for the interests of the Atlantic Coast directly and not becoming embroiled in the war that many Indians saw as having nothing to do with their interests of Atlantic Coast autonomy. He said as much in a speech in which he explained, “Our struggle for our Indian rights is our own Indian struggle and not part of the East-West political conflict or some other non-Indian conflict.”<sup>108</sup> Given Rivera’s independent streak and willingness to work with Sandinistas toward the specific goal of Atlantic Coast autonomy, the FDN and CIA preferred to work with Steadman Fagoth’s MISURA.

An excellent study of indigenous history in the service of the contra agenda is Steadman Fagoth’s awkwardly-titled 1985 book *La Moskitia: Autonomía regional: Lamento indígena, ocaso de una raza que se resiste a fallecer (Moskitia: Regional Autonomy: Indigenous Lament, Decline of a Race that Refuses to Die)*. It is part historical monograph of the Miskito people, part political screed, with a prologue written by pro-contra journalist Nicolas Lopez-Maltez which described Fagoth as a “modern Miskut,” the mythical progenitor of Miskito people.<sup>109</sup> But this sort of self-serving, historical allegory was not a simple case of contemporary hagiography. The Nicaraguan state had a history of depriving the Miskitos of their leadership, and Miskito contra comandante Reynaldo Reyes describes his people as being without a leader for “a hundred years.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity in Nicaragua*, 126.

<sup>108</sup> Brooklyn Rivera, “Statement on Indian Rights (April 1982),” in *Central American Crisis Reader*, ed. Leiken and Rubin, 256.

<sup>109</sup> Lopez-Maltez, prologue to *La Moskitia*, 5.

<sup>110</sup> Reyes, *Ráfaga*, 35.

This sort of claim could help explain why Fagoth's detractors could make the case that he, as scholar Philippe Bourgois posits, "succeeded in distorting these nationalist aspirations in order to provoke confrontation with the new Nicaraguan government."<sup>111</sup> By making himself an authority on Miskito history, Fagoth could then position himself to manipulate it to serve his own ends which, as his close association with the FDN and the United States would prove, lined up solidly against the Sandinista regime.

*La Moskitia* is most interesting in terms of how Fagoth framed Indian independence. In his Platform for Regional Autonomy, Fagoth sets about justifying the Atlantic Coast contra movement by relying heavily on history. He first details certain "inalienable rights" that the people of the Atlantic Coast should enjoy, including land, culture, and liberty. The language here reflects heavily the precedents concerning individual rights set forth in the U.S. Declaration of Independence that held such import to this pro-American community. Native language was to be preserved along with native laws. Fagoth claimed that Indians were "dying slowly" because of state institutions that were created without the participation of Indians and were thus in conflict with traditional laws. The Indian political structure he described relied heavily on the historic communal assemblies which formed the backbone of "Indigenous Democracy."<sup>112</sup> So if the Indians were to reclaim what Fagoth viewed as their natural democratic heritage, then they

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<sup>111</sup> The Sandinista government was equally adept at projecting its own preoccupations onto Atlantic Coast history as "rumors abounded that the young Miskitu men were arming to return, and that the United States was going to recognize 'secret' nineteenth-century treaty provisions between the Miskitu King and the British Crown guaranteeing nationhood for the Miskitu people." Bourgois, "Nicaragua's ethnic minorities in the revolution."

<sup>112</sup> Fagoth, *La Moskitia*, 154–156, 159.

needed to join the ranks of the contras who also sought to bring new elections to the rest of Nicaragua.

This is not to say that Fagoth was entirely opposed to certain state interventions. In fact, he suggested that the central government could participate in the planning, financing, and technical assistance in support of development of the Atlantic Coast. However, Indian involvement was an absolute necessity, he argued, to create the proper context for the new region. This “context” was precisely what Fagoth was trying to create with his book and the invocation of Miskito history to give his words the force of tradition. MISURASATA had already declared years earlier that “indigenous populations are able to act from a political consciousness that stems from an ethnic consciousness.”<sup>113</sup> A key component of this consciousness was knowledge of a shared history, something Steadman Fagoth used adeptly to justify and give context to his war. That Fagoth was able to publish a document that would seem completely alien to FDN fighters in Honduras or Edén Pastora’s ex-Sandinistas in the South, yet still talk about the “struggle to liberate the Nicaraguan people” shows the extent to which Atlantic Coast interests muddled the grand contra narrative.<sup>114</sup>

There were exchanges between anti-Sandinista forces and Atlantic Coast populations as early as 1980, including training, but there was a great ambivalence on the part of many residents of the Atlantic Coast toward the FDN and later the RN.<sup>115</sup> The culture and history that drew so many indigenous fighters to MISURASATA and

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<sup>113</sup> MISURASATA, “General Directions MISURASATA, 1982,” in *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, 60.

<sup>114</sup> CIA, “Steadman Fagoth lists grievances against Sandinist government [25 January 1982],” Declassified Documents Reference System.

<sup>115</sup> Brown, *The Real Contra War*, 75–76.

MISURA also kept them at a distance from comandos and leaders from other contra groups. Even indigenous military leaders became disillusioned with the RN leadership and their CIA backers due to inconsideration of the specific goals and desires of Atlantic Coast contras:

Men from the CIA would come to talk to us about the dangers of Sandinista expansionism and the threat to the interests of the United States. They never spoke to us about the rights of Nicaraguan Indians or of any Central American Indians. There was apparently no plan for the future government of the Atlantic Coast if we should win. We did not matter to them. We were just meat to them, nothing more.”<sup>116</sup>

One cultural geographer posited that the nationalist aspirations of the Atlantic Coast leaders actually “threatened the establishment of a united front against the Sandinistas.”<sup>117</sup> The FSLN eventually understood this as well, given that the demands of the Atlantic contras were “not for power in Managua or most of the country, but simply to be left alone on the coast, and thus a concession or seeming concession was less of a challenge to FSLN power.”<sup>118</sup> The very cultural and historical factors that brought the Atlantic Coast peoples into the contra war were ultimately what caused them to disengage as well.

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<sup>116</sup> Reyes, *Ráfaga*, 147. See also Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 269. For more on contra attitudes, both positive and negative, toward the Atlantic Coast, see Eich, *The Contras*, 36, 55.

<sup>117</sup> Nietschmann, *The Unknown War*, 39.

<sup>118</sup> Miranda, *Civil War in Nicaragua*, 255.

## ARDE

The *Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática* (ARDE) enjoyed international attention that far outweighed its effectiveness as a military organization. Never a major military threat to the FSLN, the ARDE relied on its charismatic leader, Edén Pastora, to secure U.S. funding and push its message out into the world. And that message was distinct from that of the other contra organizations. Operating in the swampy southern region of Nicaragua, the ARDE was not motivated by land rights, as their ranks were largely comprised of ex-Sandinistas from urban centers operating outside of their geographic comfort zone. Neither did the ARDE's discourse emphasize personal liberties, ethnic affiliations, or even an outright rejection of Sandinista policies. In fact, Pastora had been the Sandinista government's Vice Minister of Interior and then Vice Minister of Defense until resigning in 1981. The ARDE's main political aim was to recover what they viewed as a betrayed revolutionary moment. Understanding the ARDE's motivations and how they were in many ways inextricable from Pastora's own personal history and grievances helps explain the difficulty the contra groups had in becoming part of an effective alliance.

In April 1982, Pastora publicly announced his opposition to the FSLN, and by the same time the following year he had actively taken up arms against the Sandinista regime. Yet in one of his early press conferences, he made it clear that ARDE had no intention of joining forces with the FDN due to their Guardia leadership. The CIA,

realizing that Pastora's image as a "social democrat" could help to ameliorate the negative image of the former Guardia beginning to populate the Nicaraguan-Honduran border, met with Pastora in February 1982 in the hopes of bringing him into the blossoming contra movement.<sup>119</sup> In addition to leading a fighting force, CIA officers hoped Pastora would also tour Europe to win over FSLN supporters there and sway popular opinion to the contra cause.<sup>120</sup> The ARDE was to be a counterbalance to the difficult reminder of the Somoza era that the FDN represented for many. They made the same calls for democracy, freedom of worship, and freedom of the press as the FDN, and even took a stance against the presence of Cuban advisors in Nicaragua.<sup>121</sup> However, the ARDE was to follow its own (and Pastora's) distinct aspirations.

At the same time that Brooklyn Rivera professed the Atlantic Coast contra movement to be independent of "the East-West political conflict," Pastora declared that "our *sandinismo* cannot permit that we be caught up in the East-West conflict, since that is contrary to the national interests."<sup>122</sup> Despite the FSNL's appropriation of Augusto Sandino's name and image, the ARDE's invocation of early-20<sup>th</sup> century Nicaraguan revolutionary leader was not incompatible with anti-Sandinista aspirations. Sandino was, and continues to be, a popular inspiration for Nicaraguans of all political stripes,

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<sup>119</sup> Miranda, *Civil War in Nicaragua*, 23.

<sup>120</sup> Clarridge, *A Spy For All Seasons*, 215. The same idea was also revisited years later after Pastora had been removed as ARDE's commander as a condition for his return to good standing within the contras. Untitled Memo dated 26 March 1986, Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 18, folder 4, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>121</sup> Pastora, "The Watchful Eye," 255; and Edén Pastora, "Proclamation (April 1983)," in *The Central American Crisis Reader*, ed. Leiken and Rubin, 263–264.

<sup>122</sup> Rivera, "Statement on Indian Rights," in *The Central American Crisis Reader*, ed. Leiken and Rubin, 256; and Pastora, "The Watchful Eye," 255.

including contra comandos during the 1980s.<sup>123</sup> Pastora in particular felt a strong affinity for Sandino.<sup>124</sup> For Pastora, as he explained to Fidel Castro in one of his many visits to Cuba, Sandino represented “nationalism, sovereignty, and shame.”<sup>125</sup> The first two points are evident given Sandino’s guerrilla campaign against U.S. Marines who occupied Nicaragua from 1912 to 1933. One ARDE member explained, “Nicaraguans follow the example of Sandino, because he fought for national independence.”<sup>126</sup> The ARDE itself claimed inspiration from “the nationalist ideals of Augusto C. Sandino and Pedro Joaquín Chamorro.”<sup>127</sup> Chamorro was the murdered anti-Somoza journalist and newspaper owner whose assassination was part of a series of events that helped propel the Sandinistas to power, and thus, the symbolic meaning of both these men would not have been lost on Nicaraguans and was a way to present revolutionary credentials in shorthand form.

The last element of Pastora’s comment, however, is more complex. This “shame” was initially framed as the continued violation of Nicaragua’s sovereignty. In an early essay, he called on “all Nicaraguans to put themselves on a war footing as long as there is a foreign soldier on the native soil.”<sup>128</sup> But the shame evolved into something different for Pastora. As Comandante Cero, Pastora’s notoriety was a boon for the early Sandinista regime. He was the Sandinista’s own personal Che Guevara: a photogenic, romantic guerrilla who stormed the National Palace in Managua on August 25, 1978 with a cadre

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<sup>123</sup> One infamous FDN comandante claimed to have “identified with the man” instead of any sort of “Sandinismo” ideology. Dickey, *With the Contras*, 94.

<sup>124</sup> Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo*, 86, 102, 140; Dickey, *With the Contras*, 94–95.

<sup>125</sup> Quoted in Miranda, *Civil War in Nicaragua*, 111.

<sup>126</sup> Eich, *The Contras*, 156.

<sup>127</sup> “Postulados para el Rescate Democrático de la Revolución Nicaragüense ([September?] 1983),” Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 24, folder 2, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>128</sup> Pastora, “The Watchful Eye,” 255.



of urban guerrillas and was famously photographed afterwards wearing a revolutionary's beret with grenades dangling from his bandoliers. However, as the realities of running a revolutionary government set in, he was shunted aside and eventually became disillusioned with the direction of the FSLN. He resigned from his government positions in July 1981 and formally broke all ties with Managua on April 15, 1982. Pastora's shame no longer came from a collective, Nicaraguan memory of foreign intervention in its domestic affairs, but rather his role as a formative part of a revolution that he was no longer a part of.

Thus, the ARDE was founded on September 24, 1982 as a means for disaffected Sandinistas and others who wanted nothing to do with ex-Guardia to voice their grievances with the FSLN.<sup>129</sup> Alfonso Robelo was one such disillusioned revolutionary who shared many of Pastora's views. Robelo was at first a "leading anti-Somoza political figure" of the late-1970s.<sup>130</sup> Initially a member of the post-Somoza five-member governing junta, Robelo too became disillusioned with the FSLN, and eventually joined the ARDE. He explained on U.S. television in 1984 that "We're fighting for the democratic rescue of the Nicaraguan revolution. We are revolutionaries. We do not accept the name Contras. We are not counterrevolutionaries. We are part of the revolution that has been betrayed."<sup>131</sup> Robelo and the ARDE in general did not view

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<sup>129</sup> For Pastora's dislike of the FDN Guardia makeup see Edward Cody, "Exiles Opposing Managua Seek Wider Support," *Washington Post*, December 8, 1982; and William H. Blanchard, *Neocolonialism American Style, 1960–2000* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996), 81–82.

<sup>130</sup> "Nicaragua: Somoza's Reform Proposals [15 March 1979]," CIA Records Search Tool, National Archives II.

<sup>131</sup> "Transcript of *Crossroads* (CBS) [29 August 1984]," CIA Records Search Tool, National Archives II. This echoes the same sentiment as Edgar Chamorro who defined

themselves as being *contra*—“against” in Spanish—the principles of the Nicaraguan revolution. Indeed, some in Washington saw Pastora as having an “authoritarian streak” not completely out of line with a former Sandinista of his stature.<sup>132</sup> In a 1987 speech at Ashland University, Robelo even lamented the “absence of books by socialist writers who follow a line other than that of Moscow” in Nicaragua, not exactly a talking point from the Reagan White House.<sup>133</sup> However, there was a space within the *contras* for a more traditionally leftist voice, and Robelo would later join the RN-precursor Unified Nicaraguan Opposition (*Unidad Nicaragüense Opositora*—UNO) triumvirate before joining the directorate of the RN in 1987.

The idea that the Sandinistas had betrayed the revolution was not unique to the ARDE; it was also reflected in the discourse of the broader *contra* movement. Edgar Chamorro made a similar argument during his time as public relations chief for the FDN by framing the *Contra War* as “an effort to rescue the revolution.”<sup>134</sup> One document attributed to the RN, although predating the official formation of that group by two years, stated, “the Nicaraguan people reject, obviously, the imposition of a regime that in essence contradicts the values and aspirations that the revolutionary process originated.”<sup>135</sup> Robelo made the same point when he argued that the Sandinistas violated their commitment to the revolution by substituting a “totalitarian project” for a

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the *contras* as “an effort to rescue the revolution,” Grossman, *Nicaragua: America’s New Vietnam?*, 178.

<sup>132</sup> Clarridge, *A Spy For All Seasons*, 223.

<sup>133</sup> “Alfonso Robelo Callejas The Struggle in Nicaragua Ashbrook Center October 5, 1987,” YouTube video, 26:39, posted by TheAshbrookCenter, July 30, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAr4cyx7nUQ>.

<sup>134</sup> Grossman, *Nicaragua: America’s New Vietnam?*, 178.

<sup>135</sup> “Documento de la Resistencia Nicaragüense Sobre el Diálogo Nacional [1 March 1985],” Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 24, folder 2, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

“democratic” one.<sup>136</sup> Thus, the value of the original intent of the revolution tended not to be contested by the contras; most could agree the Somoza dictatorship was bad for Nicaragua and that there was a need to move away from dictatorship. The revolution opened up the country to the possibility of a democratic process, the contras would argue, and was a clear break with a past that was politically pathological. By accepting the revolution, then, the contras sought to place the course of Nicaraguan history on their side. The revolution happened and there was nothing that could put the revolutionary ideals back in the bottle. Ignoring the revolution completely, or worse yet, wanting to turn back the hands on the clock was the sort of regressive attitude the ARDE and FDN both wanted to distance themselves from. What the contra groups could do was try to wrest away the legitimacy the revolution gave the Sandinistas, and reclaim symbols that the contras could then appropriate as their own. The ARDE found more success taking this tact than other contra forces because of their members’ previous experiences within the Sandinista fold fighting against the Somoza dictatorship.

While the FDN regularly received negative publicity over its Guardia composition, the ARDE was lauded for its ex-Sandinista credentials. An early ARDE communiqué closed with the refrain, “Without totalitarianism or a return to the past (*sin totalitarismo ni regreso al pasado*).”<sup>137</sup> This presented the ARDE’s dissatisfaction with the Sandinista regime, while providing a not-so-subtle dig at the potential for a return to dictatorship presented by the FDN. Just as the CIA wanted, Pastora spoke extensively to European and North American journalists and even traveled to U.S. college campuses.

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<sup>136</sup> “Alfonso Robelo Callejas The Struggle in Nicaragua,” YouTube video.

<sup>137</sup> “Postulados para el Rescate Democrático de la Revolución Nicaragüense ([September?] 1983),” Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 24, folder 2, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

What one author terms Pastora's "pose as the true revolutionary" shed a positive light on the contras by playing up revolutionary bona fides over more problematic ties to the Somoza years.<sup>138</sup>

But ultimately Pastora's independent streak and unwillingness to consult with the U.S. government on military matters (while readily accepting U.S. financial and military aid) strained the ARDE's ability to effectively oppose the FSLN: "The democratic world, the timid world, does not want to give us rifles. They do not want to give us rifles because we are nationalists."<sup>139</sup> In reality, the ARDE was the exact kind of contra group that moderates in North America and Europe might have been willing to support. The CIA envisioned a two-front war involving a force in the south, but the fact that Pastora was judged to be too much of an unpredictable rogue was part of the reason they were not funded on the same level as the FDN.<sup>140</sup>

Another factor was the ARDE's poor military leadership. Even FSLN observers noted that "[f]orces in the south" were not as integrated as the FDN, "which was more unified." The FSLN had their own fraught history in dealing with Pastora, ending with his open opposition to the FSLN in 1982, and they doubted the United States would have

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<sup>138</sup> Blanchard, *Neocolonialism American Style*, 82.

<sup>139</sup> Edén Pastora, "Pastora urges peasants to continue fighting [23 November 1984]," Voice of Sandino Radio, Declassified Documents Reference System, 2.

<sup>140</sup> "National Intelligence Daily 11/17/1982," CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room, accessed February 23, 2010, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>; "Codel Aspin: Meeting with Sergio Ramírez Mercado of GRN Junta [22 February 1984]," Department of State FOIA Electronic Reading Room, accessed February 20, 2010, <http://foia.state.gov/documents/FOIADocs/2518.pdf>; Department of State, "Alfonso Robelo meeting with Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Everett Briggs, Central American Affairs director L. Craig Johnstone [29 August 1981]," Declassified Documents Reference System, 2; CIA, "Overview of opposition to the Sandinista government [13 December 1982]," Declassified Documents Reference System; and Clarridge, *A Spy For All Seasons*, 213–226.

any better luck trying to control him.<sup>141</sup> The CIA readily recognized Pastora's propaganda value, but the assessment that Pastora's military victories were more "flash-in-the-pan outings" than "solid progress" began soon after he began his military campaign. For example, his lack of judgement was on particular display on September 9, 1983 when he ordered two cessnas to bomb the Managua airport hours before U.S. senators Gary Hart and William S. Cohen arrived at the same airport on a congressional fact-finding mission.<sup>142</sup> Pastora's "iron control over military matters" in the face of a sputtering insurgency tested the patience of his dwindling supporters in Washington.<sup>143</sup> When various U.S. government agencies began to angle for a more unified contra movement in 1984 to balance the relative strengths and weaknesses of the disparate groups, in particular the FDN and the ARDE, Pastora defiantly declared in an interview on Costa Rican television that "the CIA will have to kill me first" before joining with the FDN.<sup>144</sup> Pastora's prophecy ultimately did not come to fruition: no one would kill Comandante Cero, but neither would he see the end of the war as a combatant.

Pastora began 1984 by ordering a military stand down in an attempt to force the United States to designate him overall commander of contra forces.<sup>145</sup> Wounds sustained in an assassination attempt in May led ARDE leadership to replace him as military chief. By the time the U.S. Congress let contra funding run out in October of that year, he

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<sup>141</sup> "Codel Aspin," Department of State FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

<sup>142</sup> Clarridge, *A Spy For All Seasons*, 245. AP, "2 planes attack Nicaraguan port," *New York Times*, September 10, 1983.

<sup>143</sup> Clarridge, *A Spy For All Seasons*, 223, 235

<sup>144</sup> Sklar, *Washington's War on Nicaragua*, 281.

<sup>145</sup> "House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI) Hearing on the Central [31 January 1984]," CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room, accessed February 23, 2010, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

lamented that “we are fighting alone, immensely alone.”<sup>146</sup> By 1986, Pastora had formally left the ARDE and had started a shark fishing business in Costa Rica. He had alienated both CIA and more-sympathetic State Department officials, had never integrated the ARDE into the larger contra effort, and had trivial military gains to show for the U.S. support he received. Pastora was not alone in charting the ARDE’s course toward isolation and irrelevance. The group’s political directorate advocated for Somoza supporters who committed crimes to be handed over to any new Nicaraguan government—an obvious attempt to antagonize former Guardia and prevent any possibility of unification between the ARDE and the FDN.<sup>147</sup>

With Pastora’s removal in 1986, the ARDE’s political outlook did find somewhat greater influence within the larger contra movement. Despite “deep suspicions” on both sides, the northern, southern, and Atlantic Coast fronts began to coordinate to a greater extent following Pastora’s departure from the contra movement.<sup>148</sup> This explains how UNO, the FDN-aligned anti-FSLN coalition begun in 1985, was able to talk about “the consistent and permanent projection of the essentially nationalist character of our struggle” without seeming disingenuous.<sup>149</sup> The ARDE’s Alfonso Robelo was a more convincing spokesman than anyone the FDN could have put forward to make the pitch

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<sup>146</sup> CIA, “Eden Pastora admits prospects bleak in bid to topple Nicaragua government [5 October 1984],” Declassified Documents Reference System, 1.

<sup>147</sup> Eich, *The Contras*, 163.

<sup>148</sup> “National Intelligence Daily [30 December 1986],” CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room, accessed February 23, 2010, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>, 11.

<sup>149</sup> “Sintesis: Sobre algunos conceptos, mensajes y surgenencias (derivados del seminario de comunicación de la UNO/Miami – Octubre – 1986,” Resistencia Nicaragüense records, box 18, folder 2, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

that the contras deserved “the full support of the liberals in the United States.”<sup>150</sup> The ARDE leaders also participated in and influenced the RN when it was formed out of UNO and the Southern Opposition Bloc (BOS), a southern anti-Sandinista political organization, in 1987. FDN military chief Enrique Bermudez, himself a former member of Somoza’s Guardia, stated, “I have learned to live with many individuals who have differing viewpoints on many issues. We share a common objective though—the liberation of our homeland from a totalitarian government and foreign powers.”<sup>151</sup> The FDN and the ARDE became two parts of a more effective whole after overcoming the divisions attributable primarily to conflicting personalities. However, by the time they came together in a meaningful way, the contra movement was in decline as U.S. funds and political support diminished in the twilight of the Reagan administration. Ironically, the Bush years would see the ultimate dissolution of the contras, as well as their final triumph.

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<sup>150</sup> Department of State and Department of Defense, *The Challenge to Democracy in Central America* (Washington, D.C., 1986), 44.

<sup>151</sup> Enrique Bermudez, “The Contra’s Valley Forge: How I View the Nicaragua Crisis,” *Policy Review* (Summer 1988): 58.

## CONCLUSION

Unity among the contras was elusive for most of their existence. From the onset of the Contra War there was an internal struggle between the FDN, the ARDE, and the Atlantic Coast forces over the contras' "essential values and beliefs and content of their collective identity."<sup>152</sup> Each group developed its own goals and vision around a generalized anti-Sandinista mission, even as they made a "self-conscious and strategic effort" to assimilate those disparate visions into a unified whole.<sup>153</sup> This did not happen effectively until May 1987 when BOS, UNO, the FDN, and the remnants of the ARDE's military force coalesced into the RN. The main factors precipitating this final drive for unification was the Atlantic Coast disengaging from the contra effort, the exit of Edén Pastora from any meaningful leadership position, and the cessation of U.S. military aid to the contras.

In 1982, MISURASATA leader Brooklyn Rivera stated that the Atlantic Coast contras' "principal objective is a negotiated agreement between the Indians of Nicaragua and the government of Nicaragua" that guaranteed property rights and autonomy.<sup>154</sup> This was a far cry from the absolutist mindset of the other contra groups for whom regime change in Managua was the only acceptable outcome of the Contra War. Contrastingly, the indigenous people who made up the ranks of the Atlantic Coast contras had always

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<sup>152</sup> Horton, "Constructing Conservative Identity," 169.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Rivera, "Statement on Indian Rights," 256.



maintained “clear-cut territorial objectives” that never gelled with the rhetoric of either the FDN or the ARDE.<sup>155</sup> MISURA and MISURASATA were ultimately not fighting for all of Nicaragua as the FDN and the ARDE claimed to be doing. Instead the Atlantic Coast peoples were motivated by “self-determination over [their] own territory and resource base.”<sup>156</sup> In his analysis of the Contra War, economist and member of the ARDE’s political directorate Donald Castillo Rivas admitted that neither the FDN’s nor the ARDE’s leadership fully understood the Atlantic Coast’s concerns and motivations, instead viewing the Atlantic Coast as a “semi-colony” through the same paternalistic lens with which the FSLN initially viewed the Atlantic Coast.<sup>157</sup> These regional goals that led the Atlantic Coast Indians to first reject Sandinismo ultimately kept them from fully integrating into the rest of the contras.

Upon realizing that the Atlantic Coast contras’ goals did not extend much beyond the region, the Sandinista government entered into negotiations with representatives from MISURA and MISURASATA, in addition to other indigenous and creole communities on the Atlantic Coast.<sup>158</sup> These negotiations culminated in the guarantee of Atlantic Coast autonomy through a series of laws, and ultimately in the 1987 Nicaraguan constitution. Despite sporadic fighting that continued into the following year, FDN military chief Enrique Bermúdez lamented that the Sandinistas had the “Atlantic front almost

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<sup>155</sup> Miranda, *Civil War in Nicaragua*, 255.

<sup>156</sup> Nietschmann, *The Unknown War*, 52.

<sup>157</sup> Castillo Rivas, *Gringos, contras y sandinistas*, 113. See also R. Pardo-Maurer, *The Contras, 1980–1989: A Special Kind of Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 55.

<sup>158</sup> For a detailed study of the autonomy process, see Sandra Brunnegger, *From Conflict to Autonomy in Nicaragua: Lessons Learnt* (Minority Rights Group International, 2007).

completely under their control” by 1988, as a result of autonomy guarantees.<sup>159</sup>

MISURA’s and MISURASATA’s preoccupation with autonomy was never integrated into the contra platform beyond lip service given to Indian rights in general. However, losing this front also meant the contras shed a major obstacle to unity. The RN no longer had to bring a region it never fully understood into the contra project, and could instead focus on uniting the northern and southern fronts.

Aside from the Atlantic Coast, Edén Pastora was perhaps the second biggest obstacle to unifying the contras. Members of the ARDE had begun to cooperate with the FDN politically, if not yet militarily in 1985. In June of that year, Alfonso Robelo joined UNO, lending the FDN-aligned group a more left-leaning voice, and a month later former-Sandinista Central Bank president Alfredo Cesar started BOS with an eye to “substitute military pressure and war with political negotiation.”<sup>160</sup> Both men would eventually join the RN leadership. Despite the fact that ARDE and non-FDN-aligned leaders were willing to make compromises, real headway was only made after Pastora was no longer in a position of influence within the contras beginning in late 1984. Contrast the ARDE’s initial position calling for agents of Somoza’s dictatorship to be punished (i.e. former members of the National Guard), with the later proposal for amnesty as an “essential condition” for the RN’s military demobilization.<sup>161</sup> Conversely, FDN-aligned elements softened to the more nuanced position on the revolution that the ARDE espoused, while all agreed on the uncontroversial baseline calls for individual

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<sup>159</sup> “Declaraciones del Comandante Enrique Bermúdez a Tomás Regalado Mayo 3, 1988,” box 5, folder 38, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>160</sup> Castillo Rivas, *Gringos, contras y sandinistas*, 174.

<sup>161</sup> “Press Release: Rebel Leaders Demand Sandinista Compliance of Democratization and National Reconciliation September 13, 1989,” box 1, folder 1, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

freedoms and new elections that the FDN had articulated since its inception. Both the FDN's and the ARDE's military were brought under the same umbrella as the Army of the Resistance North and South respectively. It is difficult to imagine this scenario with a figure as uncompromising and antagonistic as Pastora still influencing the ARDE's military direction and political agenda.

Finally, with U.S. support in decline and no promise of renewed military aid on the horizon, there was an added urgency to contra unity. 1986 was the last time the contras received overt U.S. military aid, with Congress approving a \$100 million aid package after a two-year funding ban.<sup>162</sup> However, a little over a month after the funding was approved, the inner-workings of the illegal sale of arms to Iran to fund the contras were exposed. Investigations into what came to be known as the Iran-Contra scandal continued until late 1987. Amid the scandal and the reticence of a new U.S. presidential administration to continue aggressively pursuing clandestine wars abroad, Congress easily voted down another \$36 million in lethal aid in 1988. Differences and disagreements among the contras had been ignored in the past so long as there was plenty of cash and training to keep everyone fighting. It used to be enough to simply “give the image of unity,” as one UNO document put it, to build bipartisan support for the contras

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<sup>162</sup> For more on the congressional ban on contra funding under the Boland Amendment, see “Understanding the Iran-Contra Affairs,” Brown University, accessed October 12, 2016, [https://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding\\_the\\_Iran\\_Contra\\_Affair/n-contrasus.php](https://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding_the_Iran_Contra_Affair/n-contrasus.php); Sklar, *Washington's War on Nicaragua*, 130–135; Larry Hancock and Stuart Wexler, *Shadow Warfare: The History of America's Undeclared Wars* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2014), 346, 371, 579; and Frank John Smist, *Congress Oversees the United States Intelligence Community, 1947–1994* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 226, 230, 247–248.

in the United States.<sup>163</sup> But as the funding dried up, the only way the contras could survive was through actual cooperation.

Outright military victory was always a long shot for the contras, if the possibility ever existed at all. Not only did they have to deal with the sophistication and might of an increasingly well-equipped and expanding Sandinista army, but they had the added stress of fickle funding linked to a shifting and sometimes contradictory U.S. foreign policy. Without funds to maintain the contras' pressure on Managua, as Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Langhorne Motley argued, "Why should the Sandinistas negotiate with them?"<sup>164</sup> By 1987, even the CIA conceded that a "stronger and more viable insurgency" might not be able to force the FSLN into accepting "diplomatic initiatives."<sup>165</sup> However, by simply surviving, offering resistance whenever possible and denying the FSLN an outright military victory, the thought was the contras could play a role in forcing democratic elections.<sup>166</sup> Perhaps ARDE military leader and eventual Conservative Party politician Fernando Chamorro best articulated the contras' ultimate goal when he said, "The contras should be maintained as a sword of Damocles hanging over the Sandinistas. But today, I believe that civilian politics should be our main battleground."<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> *Dasafío de Nuestra Diplomacia*, Hoover Institution Archives.

<sup>164</sup> Langhorne Motley, "Ends and Means of U.S. Policy," in *The Central American Crisis Reader*, ed. Leiken and Rubin, 580.

<sup>165</sup> "CIA Response to National Security Study Directive on Central America (W/ATTACHM [6 February 1987]," CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room, accessed February 23, 2010, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>, 2.

<sup>166</sup> George P. Shultz, "Nicaragua and the Future of Central America," in *Nicaragua and the United States*, ed. Kimmens, 68.

<sup>167</sup> Stephen Kinzer, "Managua Journal; Lifelong Rebel Is Home, Unarmed but Unbowed," *New York Times*, March 4, 1988,

In 1990, after 10 years and upwards of 30,000 deaths between contras, Sandinistas, and civilians, the Contra War came to an end with what most international observers agreed were free and fair elections resulting in the defeat of the FSLN at the ballot box.<sup>168</sup> The only U.S. money flowing was marked for “democracy promotion,” and even then it was a paltry \$9 million compared to the soaring aid at the height of the Contra War.<sup>169</sup> Contra troops never marched into Managua, or held any of the country’s most populous cities. Sandinista President Daniel Ortega even said, “It isn’t the contras that are going to defeat us, but our own collapsing economy.”<sup>170</sup> However, since the contras did not succumb to factionalism and collapse after U.S. funding dried up, instead finding a unified political and military force in the form of the RN, they were able to play a role in pressuring Managua to assure elections.<sup>171</sup> While some individual contras would become politicians, none of the contra groups formed into political parties and none participated directly in Violeta Chamorro’s successful 1990 presidential campaign. For its part, the FDN explicitly declared from the outset that it did not “deign to make itself

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<http://www.nytimes.com/1988/03/04/world/managua-journal-lifelong-rebel-is-home-unarmed-but-unbowed.html>.

<sup>168</sup> The Carter Center offers a concise accounting of the 1990 elections, The Carter Center, “Observing Nicaragua’s Elections, 1989–1990,” last modified May 1990, accessed April 26, 2016, <https://www.cartercenter.org/documents/1153.pdf>. For opposing opinions on the outcome of the 1990 elections, see Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy* (New York: South End Press, 1992), under “The 1990 Elections,” <http://zcomm.org/wp-content/uploads/zbooks/www/chomsky/dd/dd-c09-s07.html>; and S. Brian Willson, “How the U.S. Purchased the 1990 Nicaragua Elections,” last modified July 1, 1990, accessed April 26, 2016, <http://www.brianwillson.com/how-the-u-s-purchased-the-1990-nicaragua-elections/>.

<sup>169</sup> Philip J. Williams, “Elections and Democratization in Nicaragua: The 1990 Elections in Perspective,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 32 (Winter 1990): 13–34.

<sup>170</sup> Miranda, *Civil War in Nicaragua*, 35.

<sup>171</sup> Grossman, *Nicaragua: America’s New Vietnam?*, 178.

into a political party by way of being a military or ideological vanguard.”<sup>172</sup> The Atlantic Coast contras’ regional focus made the same true for them as well. While Edén Pastora would eventually return to Nicaraguan political life, the ARDE did not serve as his springboard to power.

U.S. funds had aided the contras in becoming a military force, but it was the coalescing of the disparate contra groups into a unified Nicaraguan resistance that partially proved an early FDN premonition: “none of the Nicaragua groups in exile can by itself overthrow [the FSLN].”<sup>173</sup> None of the contra groups managed to defeat the Sandinistas militarily, but they did survive long enough to see a democratic transition of power which rendered their continued existence unnecessary. The contras demobilized in the summer of 1990, in a final act of unity that had long eluded them.

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<sup>172</sup> *Principios y Objetivos de Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense (January 1983)*, Resistencia Nicaragüense records, Box 24, Folder 2, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

<sup>173</sup> CIA, “Opposition leaders accuse former Deputy Defense Minister Eden Pastora, ‘Commander Cero’, of dividing those who are struggling against the government of their country [31 July 1982],” Declassified Documents Reference System, 1.

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