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A GRIM REALITY BEHIND SANDINISTA PROMISES

INTRODUCTION

"We cannot continue tolerating those who want to take advantage of the space the revolution has permitted them."¹ With this, Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega explained why his police on July 10, 1988, tear gassed, kicked, beat and arrested demonstrators in the town of Nandaime, 36 miles south of Managua.² And with this, Ortega demonstrated that the Sandinista definition of "democracy" has little in common with how the word is used in the United States.

In fact, in the nine years that the Sandinistas have been in power, they continue to deny the freedoms and democracy repeatedly promised to the Nicaraguan people. The Sandinistas have proved that their promises cannot be trusted and that they only respond to pressure from the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance, also known as the contras. But since Congress cut off U.S. aid to the Resistance in February, there has been little pressure on the Sandinistas. Indeed, Sandinista repression has worsened. In the days following the Nandaime protest, the Sandinista regime closed down the newspaper *La Prensa* for 15 days and the Catholic Church's Radio Catolica indefinitely. Six prominent opposition leaders and 33 demonstrators were jailed and given prison sentences of up to six months.³ On July 11, the U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua, Richard Melton, and seven other embassy officials were branded "state terrorists" and ordered to leave the country within 72 hours.⁴ Nicaragua's largest remaining private company, the San Antonio Sugar Mill, was confiscated by the Sandinista government on July 12, 1988.

Democracy still can triumph in Nicaragua. It can do so, however, only if the U.S. decides to help the Nicaraguan Resistance with appropriate and sustained military aid — and only if the U.S. Congress stops being fooled by the Sandinistas' empty promises.

1 As quoted by Charles Krauthammer in *The Washington Post*, July 15, 1988.

2 *The Washington Times*, July 11, 1988.

3 The verdict later was cancelled so they could be tried before a Sandinista judge. They now face prison terms of two to six years.

4 *The Washington Post*, July 12, 1988.

A PATTERN OF DECEPTION

The Sandinistas have achieved and kept power by skillfully exploiting the enormous capacity for self-deception of Western democracies. The Sandinistas have understood perfectly the practical value of making false promises, starting in 1979 what has become a pattern of deception.

On June 17, 1979, when dictator Anastasio Somoza still ruled Nicaragua, a Sandinista-dominated Junta of the Government of National Reconstruction (GRN) was formed in Costa Rica to replace him. Three of the five Junta members were Sandinistas, including Daniel Ortega. The non-Sandinista members were Violeta Chamorro, now editor of the opposition newspaper *La Prensa*, and Alfonso Robelo, who served for several years as a member of the Nicaraguan Resistance directorate. One day after being formed, the Junta held a press conference at which it declared that its plan of government was truly democratic and that it would respect Nicaraguans' fundamental liberties, including, among others: freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and freedom for labor unions, and that it would establish a mixed economy, a non-aligned foreign policy, and a minimum permanent military organization.

OAS 1979 Resolution. Less than a week later, on June 23, 1979, the Organization of American States (OAS), with U.S. support, adopted a resolution calling for:

- 1) "Immediate and definitive replacement of the Somoza regime."
- 2) "Installation in Nicaraguan territory of a democratic government, the composition of which should include the principal representative groups which oppose the Somoza regime and which reflects the free will of the people of Nicaragua."
- 3) "Guarantee of the respect for human rights of all Nicaraguans without exception."
- 4) "The holding of free elections as soon as possible, that will lead to the establishment of a truly democratic government that guarantees peace, freedom and justice."⁵

Formal Pledge of Democracy. On July 12, 1979, five days before the collapse of the Somoza regime, the Sandinista-dominated Junta sent a letter to the Secretary General of the OAS. Attached to the letter were two other documents: a "Plan to Achieve Peace" and a formal "Program of the Nicaraguan National Reconstruction Junta." These documents constitute a formal pledge to establish democracy in Nicaragua. The letter states that the "Plan to Achieve Peace" was developed "on the bases of the [June 23, OAS] resolution" which "backs the installation in our country of a broad-based, democratic government of the kind we ourselves are establishing."⁶ The letter also talks about "Our firm intention to establish respect for human rights...", "Our decision to enforce civil justice...", "The plan to

⁵ Organization of American States, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, "Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Republic of Nicaragua," OEA/Ser.L/V/II.53 doc. 25, June 30, 1981, p. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

call Nicaraguans to the first free elections that our country will have in this century..." and ends by asking the governments of the Western Hemisphere "to bring democracy and justice to Nicaragua."

The "Program of the Nicaraguan National Reconstruction Junta" promised: "Freedom of publication, information, and expression of thought," "Freedom of worship," "Freedom of Organization by unions, trades, and popular movements," "Annulment of unlawful trials and judgments," "Organization of a new national army," "National police," "Independent foreign policy," "mixed economy," and many other fundamental liberties.⁷

Promises Violated, One After Another. These promises, later violated one after another, helped the Sandinistas achieve power. Eight years later, under intense military pressure from the Nicaraguan Resistance, the Sandinistas again made promises. They apparently were confident that they could still rely on the self-deceptive penchant of liberals in the U.S. Congress. On August, 7, 1987, the Sandinistas signed the Central American Peace Agreement, commonly known as the "Arias Peace Plan" (named after Costa Rican president Oscar Arias). In it, to stay in power and to convince Congress to cut off aid to the Nicaraguan Resistance, the Sandinistas promised democracy — as they did on March 23, 1988, in the truce agreement at the Nicaraguan village of Sapoá. These promises, like those of 1979, repeatedly have been broken.

BROKEN PROMISES TO THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES

The Sandinistas took power on July 19, 1979, and almost immediately started breaking promises made to the OAS.

Promise: A broad-based democratic government.

Reality: The Sandinistas unilaterally decided in April 1980 to boost from one-third to two-thirds the number of seats they were guaranteed in the Council of State, the legislative body that was supposed to include all forces that fought against Anastasio Somoza.



Promise: Full respect for human rights.

Reality: The Sandinistas have murdered thousands of political opponents since taking power.⁸ Hundreds were killed immediately. The independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (CPDH) alone documents the disappearances and likely deaths of 785 persons captured by Sandinista authorities between July 1979 and September 1980.⁹ In addition,

⁷ Programme of the Nicaraguan National Reconstruction Government Junta, July 9, 1979.

⁸ U.S. Department of State, *Human Rights in Nicaragua under the Sandinistas*, December 1986, p. iii.

⁹ Humberto Belli, *Breaking Faith* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), p. 120.

according to CPDH, tens of thousands of peasants have been forcibly relocated to encampments. Today, Nicaragua has at least 8,200 political prisoners; many of them are tortured in jail.¹⁰



Promise: Free elections.

Reality: The June 23, 1979, Organization of American States resolution called for, and the Sandinistas promised, free elections. Since coming to power, the Sandinistas have made it clear that they have no intention of allowing free elections involving all major political parties in Nicaragua. Said Interior Minister Tomas Borge: "We are not going to lose at the polls what we have won through arms." Said top Sandinista party member Rafael Solis: "Elections in Nicaragua will not be for the purpose of disputing power, but to fortify the revolution."¹¹ As for the well-publicized 1984 elections, the leftist French newspaper *Le Monde* reported that they "do not deserve to be dignified by the name" elections.¹² In a letter to Ortega, Carlos Andres Perez, the former Venezuelan president, a leader of the Socialist International, and early Sandinista supporter wrote, "Those of us who believe we have done so much for the Sandinista Revolution feel cheated, because sufficient guarantees were not provided to assure the participation of all political forces."¹³ Perez was joined in his condemnation of the "elections" by most Latin American heads of state. The Sandinistas even have admitted the validity of this criticism. Comandante Bayardo Arce, a top Sandinista party director, said that the 1984 elections were a stratagem to "disarm the international bourgeoisie," and were to reinforce a one-party state.¹⁴



Promise: Trial by the civil courts in accordance with the pre-revolutionary laws for members of the Somoza regime accused of crimes against the Nicaraguan people.

Reality: The Sandinistas instead created "Special Courts." In August 1980, the United Nations International Commission of Jurists concluded: "An impartial observer must reach the conclusion that the Special Courts constitute exceptional tribunals handing down purely political justice."¹⁵ An extraordinarily high share, 78 percent, of the 6,000 tried by the "Special Courts" were convicted and received sentences of up to 30 years imprisonment. The Special Courts began operation in November 1979, were dissolved in February 1981, but were revived in early 1983 as the Popular Anti-Somocista Tribunals (TPAs) allegedly to deal with the growing number of accused "counterrevolutionaries." Like the Special Courts,

10 The Nicaraguan Permanent Commission on Human Rights, in its June 1988 report, "Human Rights in Nicaragua: A Summary During the Peace Process," estimates that Sandinista jails hold no fewer than 6,200 prisoners accused of being "counterrevolutionaries" and some 2,000 accused of having belonged to the Somoza National Guard.

11 Quoted in "The Meaning and Destiny of the Sandinista Revolution," *Policy Forum*, August 1987, pp. 7-8.

12 Quoted in Belli, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Secretaria de Estado de los Estados Unidos, "Discurso Secreto del Comandante Bayardo Arce ante el Partido Socialista Nicaraguense (PSN)" Publicacion 9422, Serie Interamericana 118, March 1985.

15 Belli, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

the TPAs operated outside the legal system until they were abolished in January 1988. Sentences imposed by the TPAs were not subject to appeal or review. TPAs were severely criticized by many international organizations including the Organization of American States and the United Nations.



Promise: Freedom of expression.

Reality: Within weeks after taking power, the Sandinistas took control of one of Nicaragua's two daily newspapers, all television stations, and most of the radio stations. The newspaper was converted into the official Sandinista newspaper, called *Barricada*. The television stations became the Sandinista party-owned "Sandinista Television System." The other newspaper, *La Prensa*, while not confiscated, was censored by a Sandinista-controlled union, then closed, and then erratically allowed to reopen.



Promise: Freedom of religion.

Reality: The Nicaraguan Catholic Bishops welcomed the overthrow of Somoza in 1979 and no bishop criticized the Sandinistas for over a year, despite repeated Sandinista attempts to politicize religion and compel Christians to join organizations of the Sandinista National Front of Liberation (FSLN), the Sandinista party. In October 1980, however, the Catholic hierarchy published a document expressing its reservations about the Sandinistas' intentions. This triggered a Sandinista campaign of verbal attacks against the bishops. They were accused of being enemies of the people and counterrevolutionaries, and of representing "the Church of the rich." On July 7, 1981, the government suspended the televised mass that the archbishop of Managua, Miguel Obando y Bravo, had celebrated for many years. Several Moravian missionaries, meanwhile, were imprisoned and several others were killed by the Sandinistas. The Catholic Bishop Pablo Antonio Vega was attacked and stoned by a Sandinista mob. Continuing their campaign to discredit the Catholic Church, in August 1982, the Sandinistas forced Father Bismarck Carballo, a leading Catholic Church spokesman and director of Radio Catolica, to walk naked in front of TV cameramen and a Sandinista mob.¹⁶



Promise: Free labor unions.

Reality: In 1979 the Sandinistas created their own labor unions: the Sandinista Confederation of Labor (CST) for urban workers and the Association of Agricultural Workers (ATC). The following year, the CST joined the World Federation of Trade Unions, the Marxist organization headquartered in Prague. Independent labor unions, such as the Nicaraguan Confederation of Labor (CTN) and the Council of Trade Unification (CUS), which maintains links to the U.S. AFL-CIO, are branded counterrevolutionary and instruments of "U.S. imperialism." Sandinista troops shot up the CTN's Managua

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

headquarters in December 1979. CTN's General Secretary, Carlos Huembes, was beaten by Sandinistas at Managua airport in February 1981 and his house vandalized. The Sandinistas banned all labor strikes in September 1981.



Promise: A nonaligned foreign policy.

Reality: Cuban advisors arrived in Nicaragua exactly when the Sandinistas took control of Managua on July 19, 1979. By that November, there were approximately 200 Cuban advisors in Nicaragua. The following year, an additional 4,000 Cubans came to Nicaragua as teachers, physicians, and health workers. The Cubans were joined by "advisors" from the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, and East Germany.

Daniel Ortega delivered a speech in Havana in September 1979 outlining Sandinista foreign policy: uncritical support of the Soviet Union and its allies and unflagging criticism of the U.S.¹⁷ He expressed his support for Marxist movements around the world and demanded the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea. In 1980, when the U.S. was still the main source of financial assistance to Nicaragua, the Sandinistas signed a series of government-to-government agreements with the Soviet Union on economic, technical, scientific, and cultural matters. Reportedly, they also signed a mutual support agreement between the Sandinista party (FSLN) and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.¹⁸ The treaty fully endorses all major tenets of Soviet foreign policy while condemning the U.S. At the United Nations, the Sandinistas abstained from condemning the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Soviet attack on Korean Airlines flight 007 in 1982.



Promise: A mixed economy.

Reality: The week they came to power, the Sandinistas nationalized the banking system and foreign trade companies. The state-owned banking system immediately began to discriminate against the private sector by charging higher interest rates on loans to private enterprises and by cutting back on bank credits. The nationalization of foreign trade meant that producers of such major export products as coffee, cotton, and sugar would have to sell their products to the government, the only existing buyer. The result: coffee production has plummeted from 140 million pounds in 1979 to 80 million pounds in 1986; and cotton production in the same period dropped from 500,000 bales to 200,000.¹⁹ While Nicaragua's total exports in 1978 were \$646 million, by 1986 they were only \$218 million.²⁰

17 Speech before the plenary session of the Sixth Summit Conference of Nonaligned Countries, Havana, Cuba, September 3, 1979.

18 Nina M. Serafino, "Nicaragua: A Selected Chronology of the Sandinista Revolution July 17, 1979 to December 31, 1983," Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, March 20, 1984.

19 Speech by Enrique Bolanos, president of the Nicaraguan Supreme Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP), before the Nicaraguan-American Bankers Association, Miami, September 15, 1987. *Diario Las Americas*, September 20, 1987.

20 *Ibid.*

At first, confiscation of private property for the most part was limited to the holdings of the Somoza family and its close friends and associates. Later, the property of many anti-Somozist Nicaraguans was confiscated. In their effort to monopolize control of the nation's food, the Sandinistas created the Nicaraguan Institution for Basic Foods (ENABAS), which intended to function as the sole official broker between farmers and consumers. Farmers refused to deal with buyers from ENABAS, who on occasions would be accompanied by Sandinista military to force peasants to sell to them. ENABAS has used food as a weapon, distributing scarce supplies on the basis of political allegiance so that Sandinistas ate first. Ration cards at times have been denied to those who have criticized the Sandinista regime.

THE ARIAS PEACE PLAN AND SAPOA – NEW PROMISES

Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega joined the presidents of Central America in Guatemala City on August 7, 1987 for the signing of a democratization plan known as "Arias Peace Plan." It commits the signatories to settle internal conflicts and make democratic reforms. The provisions of the plan were to be in place by November 5, 1987, and the Central American presidents were to review compliance the following January. Key elements of the plan include: dialogue with all unarmed internal political opposition; amnesty for political opponents; cease-fire with local insurgent groups; democratization, including respect for human rights, complete freedom of press, radio and television, rights of political parties to have full access to the media, to associate, and to proselytize; termination of outside assistance and safe havens provided to irregular forces; negotiations to limit regional militarization under the Contadora Act for Peace and Cooperation in Central America.

The Sandinistas virtually ignored the November 1987 deadline for complying with the provisions of the Arias Peace Plan, limiting their actions to the October reopening of the newspaper *La Prensa* and Radio Catolica.²¹ In January 1988, Ortega proposed extending the deadline for complying with the plan. The democratic presidents of Central America refused and demanded immediate compliance.

This demand, coupled with the possibility of renewed U.S. aid to the Nicaraguan Resistance, prompted Ortega to announce that Nicaragua would lift the five-and-a-half-year-old state of emergency, abolish the political tribunals, begin direct talks with the Resistance, and grant conditional amnesty to political prisoners. Ortega's announcement obscured Sandinista noncompliance with the Arias Peace Plan, fueled new expectations for democracy, and gave the U.S. Congress the rationale to terminate aid to the Nicaraguan Resistance, which it did on February 3, 1988.



21 The Sandinistas shut down *La Prensa* on June 26, 1988, and Radio Catolica on January 1, 1986.

Promise: Dialogue with all unarmed internal political opposition.

Reality: The Sandinistas and the internal civic opposition, composed of several political parties, labor unions, and the private sector, opened a dialogue on October 5, 1987, in accordance with the Arias Peace Plan. On November 26, opposition party representatives presented a 17-point constitutional reform proposal. The Sandinistas refused to address the civic opposition key proposal calling for an end to Sandinista control over the army and police. By April 26, after 24 sessions, the Sandinistas had not considered seriously any of the 17 constitutional reforms. To date, the situation remains unchanged. However, they did score important international propaganda points, especially in Western Europe, by "talking" with the internal civic opposition.



Promise: Amnesty for political opponents.

Reality: Since the signing of the Arias Peace Plan the Sandinistas have released 16 foreign and more than 1,000 domestic prisoners. Yet, according to the independent Nicaraguan Permanent Commission on Human Rights (CPDH) at least 8,200 political prisoners remain in Sandinista jails. Many of those released, moreover, have complained of being harassed and threatened by the Sandinista security police.²² The Sandinistas have refused to grant Miguel Cardinal Obando y Bravo, President of the Commission for National Reconciliation, his request for an official list of political prisoners. And the Sandinistas have stated that prisoners would only be released after the Nicaraguan Resistance surrendered its weapons.



Promise: Work toward a cease-fire.

Reality: The Sandinistas have reneged on their promise to sign an enclave agreement. This would establish territorial zones that the Resistance troops would occupy during the truce. The Sandinista refusal to establish enclaves has prevented the Resistance from receiving in Nicaragua the humanitarian assistance approved by Congress on March 30th of this year, thus forcing the Resistance to retreat to neighboring countries, and has given the Sandinistas an excuse for not freeing more political prisoners.

Despite talk of cease-fire, on May 18, 1988, Ortega promised to "annihilate" the resistance if negotiations failed to produce a cease-fire. In the last round of talks between the Sandinistas and the Resistance, held in Managua in June 7-9, 1988, Defense Minister Humberto Ortega reportedly threatened to kill the resistance representatives present in the room.



²² The CPDH reports that a former member of the Nicaraguan Resistance, Efren Mondragon, was killed by Sandinista State Security Agents after accepting amnesty. June 1988 report, *op. cit.*

Promise: Democracy, including respect for human rights, complete freedom of expression, full access to the media for all political parties, and freedom of association.

Reality: Reports the Nicaraguan Permanent Human Rights Commission earlier this summer: "Within Nicaragua laws violating human rights, as well as actions by both the military authorities and the *turbas* [Sandinista mobs], have been used to close the few political spaces that were opened. These actions are directed against citizens who in an attempt to exercise their rights dare to dissent from the politics of the Sandinista Party."²³ *Turbas* have been used to terrorize the opposition. On January 22, they attacked the offices of the Nicaraguan Democratic Coordinator (a broad umbrella organization of opposition groups) and the "January 22 Mothers of Political Prisoners Movement" peaceful demonstration. Sandinista police did nothing to stop the attacks. Press censorship has become common despite repeated Sandinista promises for "unrestricted freedom of the press" contained in both the Arias Peace Plan and the Sapoa agreements. Nicaragua's Law of Means of Communications allows the Sandinistas to close, temporarily or indefinitely, any media outlet. Executive decrees prohibit the dissemination by the media of information related to military action or food prices unless such information has first been "confirmed" or cleared by the Sandinista government. Since they signed the Arias Peace Plan the Sandinistas have 1) closed, on July 11, 1988, the newspaper *La Prensa* for 15 days and Radio Catolica indefinitely; 2) used the Law of Means of Communications on several occasions to shut down news programs on Radio Corporacion, Radio Mundial, and Radio Noticias; 3) withheld newsprint from *La Prensa*;²⁴ and 4) refused to allow independent TV stations to begin broadcasting.



Promise: End to assistance and safe havens for guerrilla forces

Reality: A former top Defense Ministry official who defected to the U.S. last October, Major Roger Miranda Bengoechea, revealed that as recently as October 1987, Nicaragua was training Salvadoran guerrillas in the use of surface-to-air missiles.



Promise: Negotiations to limit regional militarization under the Contadora Plan for Peace and Cooperation in Central America

Reality: Nicaragua's military build-up continues to threaten Central American stability. Since signing the Arias Peace Plan, the Sandinistas have received some 7,300 metric tons of military hardware from the Soviet Union and its allies. Last December Major Roger Miranda Bengoechea discovered Sandinista plans to continue Nicaragua's military build-up, including increasing the size of the armed forces and reserves to 590,000 and upgrading the air force with Soviet Mig-21 jet fighters by 1995. Defense Minister Ortega brashly announced a strategy to arm 600,000 Nicaraguans in "the national defensive system." Instances of forced conscription of young Nicaraguans into the Sandinista Army have

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ The Sandinista government is the only supplier of newsprint. Official newspapers, such as the Sandinistas' *Barricada*, always have plenty of newsprint.

increased after the signing of the Arias Peace Plan and further escalated since the Sapoa agreements. The day after the Sapoa signing, for example, Sandinista military patrols conducted pre-dawn army recruiting raids on homes in Managua and other cities, forcibly conscripting young men.²⁵

CONCLUSION

To achieve power, the Sandinistas in 1979 promised the Organization of American States that they would establish a democratic government in Nicaragua. They did not keep their promise. Eight years later, when they felt threatened in the battlefield by the Nicaraguan Resistance, they made new promises by signing the Arias Peace Plan. Again, they have not kept their word.

The Sandinistas have demonstrated that they have no intention of establishing democracy in Nicaragua or to respect the sovereignty of their neighbors. Concessions that they have made in the past have been forced by the military pressure of the democratic Resistance. When this pressure lifts, the Sandinistas become more violent and oppressive. Only military pressure from the Nicaraguan Resistance can force the Sandinistas to keep the promises that they have made to the Nicaraguan people and to the Western hemisphere. The U.S. can force the Sandinistas to keep their promises by providing military aid to the Nicaraguan Resistance.

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²⁵ Nicaraguan Permanent Commission on Human Rights, *op. cit.*