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The Foregone Conclusions of the Fourth Estate

By Shirley Christian

Tomas Borge is a very important man in Nicaragua. He is the only surviving founder of the Sandinista National Liberation Front. A Marxist who spent most of his adult years in the bush before reaching power, he is Fidel Castro's oldest friend and Muammar Gaddafi's newest friend in Nicaragua.

In the nearly three years since Anastasio Somoza Debayle fled the country and the Sandinistas took power, Tomas Borge has become one of the most important of the former guerrilla commanders who now run Nicaragua—the Sandinista Front. His empire is the Interior Ministry which includes the security police. Younger members of his faction organize the neighborhood defense committees—a kind of a cross between the PTA and the Ku Klux Klan.

It is Borge and his people who killed one business leader, who throw others into jail for criticizing the government, who send mobs to attack the newspaper *La Prensa* and radio news programs they do not like and keep Nicaragua in a state of disruption with their regular charges of plots allegedly afoot against the government.

Among students of Latin American guerrilla movements, Borge has achieved an almost mythical stature in the last two decades. And yet, the

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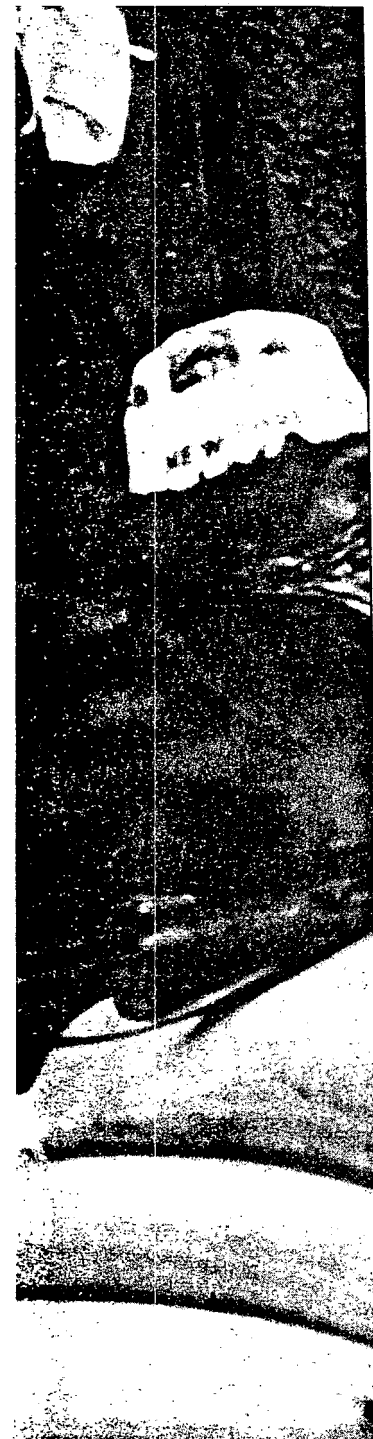
Washington Post, the *New York Times* and CBS television barely mentioned him in their coverage of the Nicaraguan insurrection in 1978 and 1979.

Despite Borge's historical importance to the Sandinista movement since its beginnings, reporting by correspondents from these three news organizations virtually ignored him as a potential post-Somoza power. Nor was Borge's Marxist ideology, or that of most of the other top Sandinistas, given much attention in the few stories they wrote about the kind of government that would succeed Somoza.

The important news of the insurrection, as reported by the American press, was not Tomas Borge or others like him. The issue was Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the corruption and cruelty of a regime that had stayed in power too long. Somoza was easy to hate. When he cried wolf—that communists were trying to take over Nicaragua—reporters either contradicted him or said it simply did not matter. His opponents, by contrast, seemed—at least in their public face—easy to love. Tomas Borge was only rarely part of that public face as it was reported by correspondents for American newspapers and television.

Why did the American press fail to see the coming importance of Tomas Borge and others like him? Did American newspaper and television reporters, in their acknowledged enthusiasm for ridding Central America of Somoza, misrepresent the Sandinistas to the American public, or in other ways fail

Awaiting counterattack by National Guard in Matagalpa.



their obligations as objective reporters?

To find out, I studied 244 *Washington Post* stories, 239 *New York Times* stories and 156 CBS broadcasts on Nicaragua from January 1, 1978 to July 21, 1979. The time frame opens with the assassination of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, publisher of *La Prensa*, which was a major event in unifying Somoza's opponents. It closes with the Sandinistas taking power.

First, some personal disclaimers: Nicaragua was not my war. I was living in Chile which is farther, geographically and culturally, from Nicaragua than almost any corner of the continental United States. I had not previously read or heard the coverage of Nicaragua by the *Times*, the *Post* and CBS. I approached this critique somewhat like the juror who has not previously read or heard accounts of the case she is about to try.

I have, however, been covering Nicaragua since Somoza fell and the Sandinistas came to power, and I have been covering civil wars and guerrilla movements elsewhere in Central America. As a result, much of what I say constitutes as much a soul-searching of my own work as an analysis and criticism of the work of others. It is done, I admit, with the brilliance of hindsight and without any particular scientific expertise. Finally, I do not know whether I would have done it differently or better had I been there.

Some cool-minded historian of the future will undoubtedly conclude that Somoza got a raw deal from the foreign correspondents who covered his downfall. Somoza said his National Guard was fighting a bunch of communists, and he turned out to be partly right. He said Panama's Omar Torrijos was shipping them arms and men, and he turned out to be right. He said the president of Venezuela was sending arms and ammunition, and he turned out to be right. He said his democratic neighbor, Costa Rica, was giving the guerrillas bed and board and tender loving care, and he turned out to be right. Finally, he said that Cuba, too, had jumped in with weapons and ammunition, and he turned out to be right.

A future revisionist historian, however, will not have known this third, and last, member of the Somoza family to reign over Nicaragua or why reporters came to hate him. Somoza did not do the things that traditionally make reporters hostile. He was, by the standards of most national leaders, extremely accessible to foreign correspondents. (One reporter who covered the war in Nicaragua for an American wire service has told me he could get Somoza on the telephone in five minutes, day or night.) Nor was access to

the war's battlefronts restricted. The only limits on a reporter covering Somoza's war were courage, time and initiative.

The American press disliked Somoza because of the corrupt way they had seen him run the country for years and because he was Somoza. A big, blustery man who spoke in World War II American slang, he used anti-communism as his rallying cry and bought everyone around him. He was called, disparagingly, The Last Marine, in a country that was once a United States Marine fiefdom. Add the brutality of his National Guard, witnessed by American reporters during his last year in power, and you have a kind of leader that 99 percent of American reporters cannot stomach.

The antagonism of American reporters towards Somoza was no secret. In May, 1978, Somoza's public relations representative in Washington wrote a letter to the *New York Times* accusing Alan Riding, the *Times* correspondent in Nicaragua, of trying to be the "Herbert Matthews" of Nicaragua—a reference to the *Times* correspondent of 25 years ago who searched out Fidel Castro and his small band of guerrillas in the Sierra Maestra and, some think, resurrected Castro's cause.

Given this press hatred, by no means limited to Riding, it perhaps was not surprising that reporters covering the war saw Somoza's opponents, the Sandinistas, through a romantic haze. This romantic view of the Sandinistas is by now acknowledged publicly or privately by virtually every American journalist who was in Nicaragua during the two big Sandinista offensives, the general strikes and the various popular uprisings. Probably not since Spain has there been a more open love affair between the foreign press and one of the belligerents in a civil war.

That was the mood of the time. Since then, the mood has changed abruptly. There have been many anguished second thoughts both inside Nicaragua and in Washington about the Marxism of the Sandinistas, about whether their victory could have been prevented, whether their policies and goals can now be modified.

How the Sandinistas and other opponents of Somoza were described ideologically is not the only standard by which to judge American press coverage of the period, but given the controversy that has since arisen about the government now in power in Nicaragua, it would seem to be the central one. This is not to suggest that American reporters should constantly drum home that a political or guerrilla figure is Marxist and has ties to Cuba. It is to say that these are elements that can-

not be ignored or lightly dismissed.

There was remarkable similarity in the tone of reporting in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* on the ideology of the Sandinistas. (CBS did not take up the ideology issue seriously until a month before the Sandinistas took power in mid-1979.)

Neither the *Times* nor the *Post* denied or ignored the Marxist roots and Cuban ties of the Sandinista Front since its founding in 1962. There was a distinct tendency, however, to stress the reassuring impression that the Sandinista movement had been taken over in recent years by non-Marxists, many of them the sons and daughters of the bourgeoisie who had become guerrillas after seeing their parents frustrated in their efforts to defeat Somoza peacefully. Faced with this, the Marxist old-timers in the movement had supposedly given up their plans for installing a socialist state immediately after taking power. The sources quoted on this trend were primarily the non-Marxists themselves, most of whom are now in exile or otherwise disillusioned with the government.

Riding of the *Times*, who was probably the most informed on the Sandinista structure and the movement's internal disputes, explained in an analytical piece on May 14, 1978: "Ironically, the current offensive against the regime began last fall after a faction of the country's guerrillas, known as the Sandinist (sic) National Liberation Front, concluded that they alone could not overthrow General Somoza. They therefore abandoned their immediate objective of bringing socialism to Nicaragua and formed a loose alliance with numerous non-Marxist groups that were also disenchanted with the corruption and repression of the Government, agreeing to work together for the ouster of the regime and the establishment of democracy."

Riding went on to say that the so-called *Tercerista* faction, which included most of the non-Marxists, had in recent months seen the protest movement slip from its hands and into the control of the more radical factions, the Prolonged Popular War group (headed by Tomas Borge) and the Proletarian group. These groups, he said, were "placing the battle against the regime clearly within the broader context of a 'class struggle.'"

But later, in a *Times* Sunday magazine article in July, 1978, Riding ignored the importance of the two other groups and wrote a finely detailed story of how the *Terceristas* whose leaders, the Ortosa brothers, were themselves Marxists, had made their appeal to non-Marxists. He also told how those people, in turn, had formed

an alliance with a respected group of business and professional men of center and center-left views. The latter group, known as 'The Twelve,' was later to supply several Cabinet ministers and two junta members to the Sandinista government.

In a passage that explains why many moderates were attracted to that alliance, Riding wrote: "In May 1977, the well-to-do lawyer, Joaquin Cuadra Chamorro, flew to Honduras for a secret meeting with his son, the guerrilla officer. 'He explained to me that socialism was not immediately possible, and that struck me as sensible and realistic,' the older man recalled. 'He said the guerrillas wanted to ally themselves with other groups and that I could play a role. So we reached an agreement with the clear understanding that socialism was not possible for Nicaragua. I saw my role as trying to rescue our youth from radicalism.'"

Karen DeYoung, who did most of the reporting from Nicaragua for the *Washington Post*, gave this explanation of the Sandinistas a few months later, on September 25, 1978: "Somoza has generated some nervousness in such countries as the United States by calling the Sandinistas terrorists and communists, bent on turning Nicaragua into another Cuba. The Sandinistas, however, have never been terrorists in the mold of the Red Brigades or Baader-Meinhof gang.

"Rather, they are revolutionaries in the Cuban sense whose activities have been politically oriented and directed toward Somoza and the National Guard.

"At the same time, it is not at all certain, despite their open advocacy of a socialist government, that the Sandinistas have either the will or the power to effect that transition rapidly. They have maintained fairly close contact with the conservative political opposition and say they would participate in a democratic government."

The following month DeYoung gained access to a Sandinista training camp and wrote three widely acclaimed articles. In one of them, carried on the front page of the *Post* under the headline, "Sandinistas Disclaim Marxism," she wrote: "Sandinista political leaders interviewed here recently denied that they are Marxists. They denied that they want Cuban-style communism in Nicaragua. Instead, they said, they are fighting for a 'new Nicaragua' that will be a 'pluralistic democracy' built on the ashes of the destroyed Somoza dictatorship."

As for Tomas Borge, the Sandinista Marxist and father figure who has been so prominent since the change of government, the brief mentions of him by both newspapers during the

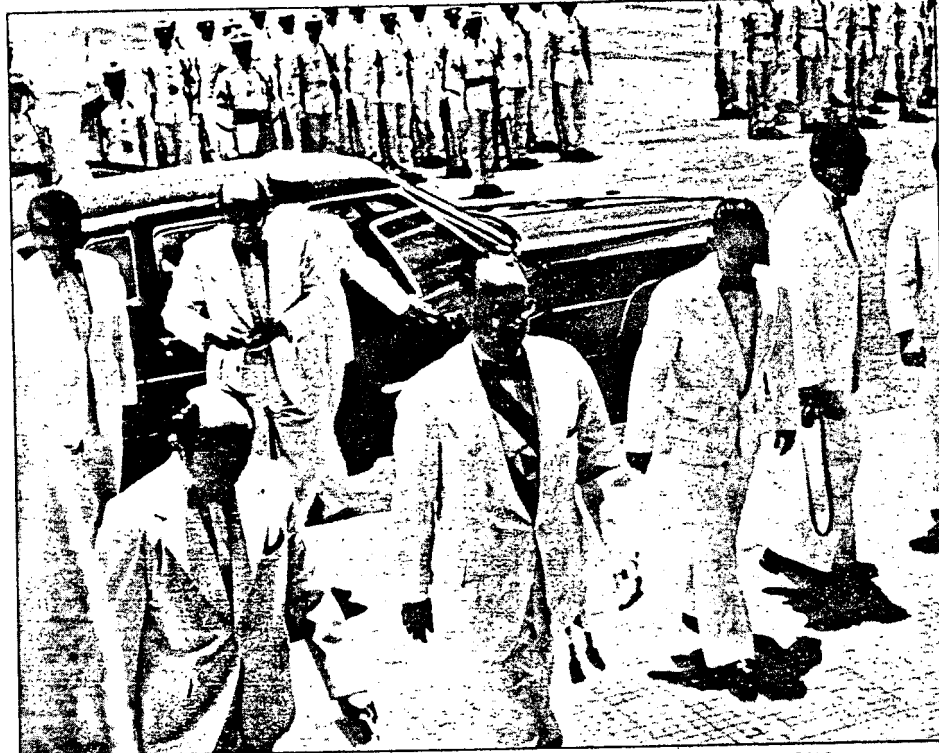
period could be counted on the fingers of one hand.

When he was named to the cabinet of the provisional government a few days before Somoza fled, Riding wrote: "Only one Cabinet member, Tomas Borge, named to be minister of the interior, is a leader of the Sandinist National Liberation Front. The sources said that as head of the 'prolonged popular war' faction of the

'there' also many among us dedicated to representative democracy as practiced in the United States.'"

The question, Rather concluded, was not easy to answer.

In the coming days, CBS took longer looks at the Sandinista movement, including discussions between Marvin Kalb, CBS State Department correspondent in Washington, and various correspondents in the field. In



Somoza opening new session of National Congress, June 1978.

guerrilla movement, Mr. Borge should be in a position to control the most radical elements among the rebels."

DeYoung wrote on the same day: "Perhaps the most interesting on the list is Sandinista leader Tomas Borge as interior minister. Borge, a self-declared Marxist, is considered a pragmatist. He heads the Prolonged Popular War faction..."

"As interior minister, political analysts said, Borge will also serve as director of police functions and thus will be in a better position to keep mavericks from his faction in line."

CBS generally dealt with the question of the Sandinistas' ideology in simplistic terms—referring to them in passing as leftwing or Marxist guerrillas or even terrorists—until June 14, 1979, when Dan Rather began a morning news commentary by asking, "Who are these guys?"

After tracing the charges of Cuban or Soviet connections, he said: "The Sandinistas themselves flatly deny that they are Communists. 'Yes,' their leadership says, 'there may be Communists among us. But,' they say,

general, Kalb, perhaps reflecting the concerns of many in the U.S. government, was more suspect of the Sandinistas' motives, while those in the field were more open-minded. (These discussions, it should be noted, followed by a few days the killing of ABC correspondent Bill Stewart by a member of Somoza's National Guard, an event that had further solidified the animosity of foreign journalists toward Somoza, even though the shooting had obviously been outside his control.)

On Thursday morning, July 19, 1979, the day Nicaragua officially fell to the Sandinistas, Bob Schieffer asked Chuck Gomez in Managua whether he agreed with Kalb's assessment that the "new group" coming in was Marxist. Gomez replied that it was "inaccurate, at best" and as proof pointed to the many non-Marxists who had been named to posts in the new government. They included two of the five members of what was to become the governing junta and the majority of the cabinet.

I do not suggest that journalists on the scene in Nicaragua intentionally misled their readers about what the

SUSAN MEISEL/MAGNUM

Sandinistas were or would become. Much of the difficulty lay in understanding the amorphous nature of the opposition to Somoza. As Alan Riding wrote early on, it was a national mutiny more than anything else. The Sandinistas were the only ones in the mu-

ny who had guns. The others—businessmen, labor unions, political parties, the church leadership—made so much noise and played such a dominant public role in the mediation attempts that it was easy for most reporters to assume they would share power when

the revolution was over.

Most of the sources quoted in the *Post* and the *Times* about the nature of the Sandinistas or the likely future government were not Marxists, but members of the so-called moderate or conservative opposition to Somoza, most of whom, significantly, have since broken with the government. Some have left the country altogether; others are now internal dissidents.

The most startling example is Eden Pastora, the famous Sandinista leader during the war, the man who caught the world's attention when, as "Commander Zero," he captured the National Palace in August, 1978 and bargained the lives of more than 1,500 hostages to win freedom from prison for Tomas Borge and a number of other Sandinista guerrillas.

The stories of the war period that I analyzed inevitably described the charismatic Pastora as the main guerrilla leader, almost ignoring the shadowy presence of the nine other top commanders. It was the nine others who eventually were named to the unified directorate—formed at the insistence of Fidel Castro, who also reportedly insisted that Pastora be excluded.

Presumably this was because Pastora, as he told many journalists who interviewed him, was not a Marxist. The *Washington Post* once described him, in his own words, as a conservative Roman Catholic. When DeYoung visited him at his camp, he told her he wanted to lead a Nicaraguan government modeled after Costa Rica's social democracy and said the only thing he had in common with Castro was that both had been educated by the Jesuits.

Today, Pastora is in exile. He had very little power in the new government and left Managua last July under mysterious circumstances. Though the Sandinista Front suggested he had gone off to fight on behalf of guerrillas elsewhere, stronger evidence indicates that he has been in Costa Rica, Panama and Venezuela trying to make up his mind whether to challenge his former colleagues for control of Nicaragua.

Aside from Pastora, the overwhelming majority of sources quoted by CBS, the *Post* and the *Times* about the nature of the rebels were the business leaders, opposition politicians, professionals, and intellectuals who were, by their own admission, hoping to wean the Sandinista Front away from its Marxist-Leninist ideology and had no idea whether they would succeed. The man, for example, who was regularly called upon to respond to charges of Cuban involvement with the Sandinistas was millionaire industrialist Alfonso Robelo, who was probably not even taken into the Sandinistas'

Chronology of the Nicaraguan Insurrection

January 10, 1978. Murder of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, publisher of opposition newspaper *La Prensa*. Despite lack of concrete evidence linking President Anastasio Somoza to killings, a national strike and demonstrations follow.

February 1978. Anti-Somoza uprising in Indian artisan village of Momimbo; continues for months in face of efforts by National Guard to crush it.

July 1978. Return from exile of "The Twelve," the prominent professionals, businessmen, and priests who backed the Sandinista National Liberation Front in effort to oust Somoza.

August 22, 1978. Sandinista guerrillas led by Eden Pastora—Commander Zero—capture National Palace, taking more than 1,500 hostages whom they trade for the freedom for 58 prisoners, many of them other Sandinistas, and \$500,000 ransom.

September 1978. Uprisings and fighting in cities of Masaya, Esteli, Managua, Leon, Chinandega, and Matagalpa, coupled with national strike called by business groups.

October 1978 thru January 1979. United States, with backing of OAS States, conducts unsuccessful mediation effort intended to bring about Somoza's resignation through a plebiscite.

March 1979. Three factions of Sandinista movement announce unity pact, reportedly forged at urging of Fidel Castro, and name a nine-man directorate.

April 1979. Fighting resumes in various towns.

Late May 1979. Sandinista column invades from Costa Rica for final offensive. Business and unions begin new general strike and lockout.

Early June 1979. Towns begin falling to Sandinistas.

June 16, 1979. Rebels name five-member junta as provisional government in Costa Rica.

Late June 1979. United States, acting on OAS resolution, proposes to Somoza that he step aside for interim government. United States also begins an attempt to expand junta in Costa Rica so non-Marxists will be dominant and to save part of National Guard.

July 17, 1979. Somoza resigns and flies to Miami.

July 18, 1979. Three of five members of new junta fly from Costa Rica to rebel-held town of Leon where fourth member waits. Acting President Francisco Urcuyo, after less than two days in office, resigns and flies to Guatemala; National Guard breaks up, many members flee.

July 19, 1979. Sandinistas take capital city with little resistance.

July 20, 1979. The junta is installed as Government of National Reconstruction in mass celebration in front of National Palace.



National Guard reinforcements enter Masaya.

confidence about the subject.

This raises questions about the difficulties confronting journalists who cover guerrilla wars and popular front movements. Should such movements be taken at face value? Does, or will, the man out in front have real power? Or is he out in front because he looks respectable to the West?

In Nicaragua the respectable-looking Sandinista was Pastora. Apparently not a Marxist, he was always identified by reporters as the top guerrilla commander. There were also moderates in the five-member junta in exile set up by the rebels in Costa Rica that supposedly would run the future government. As it turned out, Pastora and his followers were largely excluded from jobs of influence after the victory, and the junta became little more than an administrative organ answerable to the nine-man Sandinista Directorate.

Much of the war coverage which I examined did not ponder what kind of government would succeed Somoza but dwelt instead on the brutality of his National Guard and its bombardment of civilian areas, and on efforts to remove him. Coming face to face with scenes and stories of atrocities committed by the Guard apparently made the political coloration of the Sandinista Front seem pale by comparison.

DeYoung of the *Post* and various CBS correspondents gave vivid accounts of their visits to towns and neighborhoods that had been recap-

tured or bombarded by the National Guard. DeYoung's reporting on killings by the National Guard in the town of Leon during the September, 1978 offensive appeared to have prompted the U.S. government to request an OAS investigation of atrocities. That investigation probably was a major factor in the rest of Latin America eventually lining up against Somoza.

DeYoung's story reported that 14 young men had, according to family members, been executed by the National Guard as they begged for mercy.

"The eyewitnesses' story of the executions is supported by physical evidence on the scene and by countless similar reports, primarily here in Leon, of National Guard atrocities during nearly four weeks of civil war," she wrote.

Much later, as the United States government agonized over how far it should go to save part of the National Guard as a possible counterbalance to the Sandinistas in the future government, DeYoung suggested in an article on July 9, 1979 that it was not worth saving.

After writing of the daily discoveries of the bodies of young men in the tall grass on the edge of Lake Managua, she said: "President Anastasio Somoza says the National Guard does not carry out summary executions. Yet similar groups of young men—shirtless and blindfolded—are seen daily being

marched, single file with their hands on each other's shoulders, through Managua's central jail compound."

David Dick of CBS, in a report from Masaya during the same offensive, interviewed a teacher who reported on the torture of a student by the National Guard as it tried to put down the rebellion there. "They tortured him," the teacher said. "They took his testicles, you know, with a glove, and they pressed—this was well known. After that they took some electric shocks... After that they put the barrel of the gun in his anus, you know."

Two weeks later, Bruce Hall of CBS reported from Estelí: "Most of those killed were civilians caught in the crossfire. There were reports of atrocities by both the National Guard and the rebels, but nothing like that in Leon last week, where the Red Cross says several hundred people may have been executed by the National Guard."

There were almost no reports in the *Post*, *Times* and CBS of noncombat brutality by Sandinista forces against government supporters. One paragraph in a story mentioned charge that the Sandinistas were taking reprisals after they had captured Leon but reported no investigation of them. There were also brief mentions of "government informers" being threatened.

One reason, undoubtedly was

that nearly all Nicaraguans gave reporters the impression of being, if not in favor of the Sandinistas, at least against the National Guard. More importantly, virtually every journalist I know who covered the war was convinced that the overwhelming share of the unnecessary violence was committed by the government troops. Everything they saw or heard first hand convinced them of that.

There is another consideration, that has to do with our capabilities as journalists to cover adequately guerrilla wars and popular insurrections. While it was undoubtedly true that the National Guard reacted with the heaviest hand imaginable, it is also apparent that the Sandinistas, by their strategy, almost invited the Guard to attack the provincial towns and the poor neighborhoods of the capital.

They used two kinds of actions. In one, a few of them with the help of local *muchachos*—the sympathetic and unemployed neighborhood youth—would actually set off the “insurrection” by setting a few fires or throwing a few small bombs. In the other, larger groups of Sandinistas would set up barricades to take over a town or neighborhood.

The Guard soon learned that it was easier to fight the Sandinistas with heavy bombardment or even bombings than face them in the streets. The result was that more civilians were killed than Sandinistas, who had the mobility to quickly withdraw when things became hot. This also meant that the civilians were left behind to bear the brunt of the Guard's animosity when it reclaimed the area.

It may not have been intentional on the part of the Sandinistas to force civilians to suffer, but Riding suggested in an analytical piece in the *Times* early in 1978 that some guerrilla movements had as their objective the provoking of repression by authoritarian regimes as a means of increasing popular discontent. He suggested that the thesis had more validity among guerrilla groups in El Salvador and Guatemala and said that it had been rejected by the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. His quoted source, however, was a member of the Pastora camp.

One of the reasons the violence in Nicaragua had such an impact on reporters was that the press was much closer to the Nicaraguan war than it had been to others. Nicaragua, an agricultural nation of fewer than 2.5 million people, is somewhat like an extended small town where everybody seems to know everybody else or to be related. Most of the newspaper correspondents and some of the television people spoke Spanish at a level ranging from adequate to excellent. Some had

worked in Nicaragua off and on for years and had acquaintances there on all sides of the issue. The Hispanic-Indian, Roman Catholic culture of the country was not totally foreign to them.

As a result, this war was covered from a more personal level than wars in Third World countries on other continents, where the language and culture are more unfamiliar to Americans. It was as easy to go among the people in Nicaragua and find out what was happening to them as it is in, say, Cincinnati.

While stories having to do with the structure and ideas of the rebels were complex to write and difficult to obtain, those having to do with the victims of violence were more vivid and close at hand. Probably not since World War II in Europe have American correspondents felt such proximity to the victims. But in that war, news reports were censored.

I cannot help asking whether the horrors that journalists saw in Nicaragua constituted a reign of brutality and terror by an especially repressive regime or whether they were the horrors of any kind of war, seen without censorship and language and cultural barriers.

While concentrating on abuses of power by the National Guard and often linking the abuses to the arms and training the troops had long received from the United States, the *Post*, *Times* and CBS generally paid little attention to the question of arms and ammunition reaching the Sandinistas and the assistance given them by other countries. Their reporters in Nicaragua brushed off Somoza's charges that the Sandinistas were receiving arms first from Venezuela through Panama and Costa Rica and later from Cuba. The few times that these issues were raised by correspondents in Washington they received only slightly more serious consideration from the three news organizations.

Yet, it would have been relatively easy to investigate the charges that the guns were coming in from the south, through Costa Rica, which is a very open place. Costa Rican congressional investigators have since uncovered vast and unchallenged evidence of wholesale gun trafficking through their country to the Nicaraguan rebels. However right the cause against Somoza and however much the Costa Rican people supported it, this was a story that demanded to be reported thoroughly—and was not.

Reporters from some news organizations did write that Costa Rica's Guanacaste Province on the border with Nicaragua was virtually occupied by Sandinistas during the war. Everybody saw it who went there. Among

other things, Sandinista hospitals for the war wounded operated openly in the area, and not in makeshift conditions but in fairly decent buildings.

Yet, the *Times* and the *Post* reported on the Costa Rican link only very late and in a very limited way, even though they often had correspondents in the Costa Rican capital covering the activities of the rebel junta and its negotiations with the United States. CBS, for all practical purposes, ignored the situation in northern Costa Rica.

By not digging into the gun-running charges and the rumors, even then, of flights directly from Cuba to northern Costa Rica, a major story of the war was largely missed—the cutoff of Venezuelan guns to Pastora and his followers after the new Venezuelan president took office in March, 1979 and the nearly simultaneous beginning of Castro's shipments of ammunition and guns to the Marxist factions of the Sandinista movement. This is most likely what cost Pastora a stronger hand in Nicaragua's post-war power structure.

Reporters missed or underreported other important stories of the insurrection, such as the very effective organization set up by Sandinista sympathizers to control poor Nicaraguan neighborhoods, the Sandinista lobby in Washington, and the feuding between the National Security Council and the State Department over how far the United States should go in forcing Somoza to resign during the first mediation period, in late 1978, a good six months before he finally left.

The sad truth, however, is that almost no one in the American press cared about how the Sandinistas got their supplies, or that the main foreign government source had suddenly changed from Venezuela to Cuba. The American media, like most of the United States, went on a guilt trip in Nicaragua. The U.S. government, for its part, was so burdened by half a century of mistakes in Nicaragua that it could not deal with the present. Journalists carried that guilt on the one hand, and on the other the conviction learned from Vietnam that U.S. foreign policy was never again to be trusted.

As a result, the press got on the Sandinistas' bandwagon and the story that reporters told—with a mixture of delight and guilt—was the ending of an era in which the United States had once again been proved wrong. Obsessed with the past, journalists were unable, or unwilling, to see the tell-tale signs of the future. Intrigued by the decline and fall of Anastasio Somoza, they could not see the coming of Tomas Borge.