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**WITH THE CONTRAS: A Reporter
In the Wilds of Nicaragua**By Christopher Dickey
Simon and Schuster
327 pages; \$18.95**By Doyle McManus**

Three years ago, in the spring of 1983, the CIA-directed contras fighting Nicaragua's leftist regime decided it was time to improve their image. A debate already raged in Washington over the United States' role in launching what was then still officially a "secret" war;

contra supporters in the Reagan administration believed that if the contras could succeed in casting themselves as freedom fighters, rather than "beasts"—which is what the Sandinistas called them—their cause in Congress would be immeasurably helped. And so, after consulting with their CIA advisers, the contras invited two reporters, Christopher Dickey of the *Washington Post* and James LeMoine, then of *Newsweek*, to trek into the jungle, join their troops in battle and interview their most charismatic guerrilla commander. The hero thus designated was a former sergeant in the Nicaraguan National Guard named Pedro Pablo Ortiz Centeno, better known by his ghoulish *nom de guerre* as *Comandante Suicida*—"Commander Suicide."

It was a singularly unfortunate choice. Suicida was not only less heroic than first advertised; he was gripped by an irrepressible drive toward self-destruction. Only two months after the first reporters wrote their (largely positive) profiles, Suicida and his lieutenants became increasingly violent. They raped women, murdered prisoners, shot some of their own men in the back, launched erratic, doomed offensives and finally

mutinied against the contra leadership in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa. At that, the leaders cracked down. They had Suicida captured, tried and shot in the fall of 1983 and denied any knowledge of his fate for several months.

This moral tale forms the centerpiece and guiding metaphor of Christopher Dickey's gripping book about the contras, the first full-length history of their six-year-old war. Dickey, then Central America correspondent for the *Post*, was one of the first reporters to visit Suicida's camp in the mountains of Jalapa.

His harrowing story of that journey is a nice piece of writing by itself. In addition to providing him with a good, long look at the gritty reality of the war, the trip to Suicida's camp also gave Dickey a basis for his reporting that, like the corner of a jigsaw puzzle, later enabled other pieces to fall into place.

As our first history of where the contras came from, of how the CIA built them into an ill-controlled army and why they collapsed in 1983, *With the Contras* succeeds admirably. It reads like a thriller, carries the authority of solid reporting and, for those of us who care about such things, comes with wonderfully scrupulous footnotes. Dickey's conclusions about the men the Reagan administration has chosen as its instruments will be criticized by the contras and their promoters, who have been waiting nervously for this book to land in the middle of Congress' renewed debate on the issue. But even his detractors will have to admire Dickey's enterprise in piecing together the story, and they will find themselves forced to take his analysis seriously.

For Dickey, the story of Suicida is nothing less than the contras' My Lai. "Just as the special case of My Lai grew from the common horror of Vietnam," he writes, "as the history of covert action against Nicaragua emerged . . . it was clear that [Suicida] represented much of what was wrong with the secret war, and much that could never be set right with it."

Two lessons emerge from Dickey's account. One is obvious but useful to repeat: that the truth about this war, like all others, is to be found not in Washington, but in the field. An intelligent and energetic foreign correspondent is sometimes worth an entire bureau of Washington reporters.

But Dickey's main message is that for all the president's rhetoric about freedom fighters, the real-life contras are brutal, squalid and—what may be most damning in the end—incompetent. These guerrillas are capable of harassing

Sandinista patrols and ambushing coffee convoys, but they have no clear goal beyond revenge and no hope of truly threatening the Sandinista regime. Although new recruits have swollen the contras' ranks to perhaps 15,000, "their leaders were still the *guardias*, the killers and the chosen front-men of the CIA," Dickey concludes. "The fight continued, now, with no end in sight and the constant threat that the Reagan administration, having committed itself to the Sandinistas' overthrow, would finally decide it had no option but open, direct U.S. military action . . ."

Now, that is a reasonable and defensible view. Roughly half the Congress shares it, as do, in private, a good number of administration officials. But it is also a view that needs defending, for the contras and their promoters have been working to rebut it for some time. It is here that Dickey's otherwise fine book falters. His sorties into straightforward analysis are intermittent and brief. The headlong narrative is charged with carrying the burden of analysis as well and is not always equal to the task.

Too many basic questions remain unanswered. Did Ronald Reagan really believe in 1981 and 1982 that Suicida's men could topple the Managua regime? Was Suicida's blood-lust an "anomaly," as the CIA put it? (Dickey says no, but does not offer much specific evidence—although plenty is available.) Most important for the current debate, are the contras of 1986 the same brutal thugs they were in 1983?

The contras and their backers in the administration say no; the contras of today, they insist, have reformed since the days of human rights abuses and assassination manuals. In making that argument, the contras' supporters tacitly accept much of Dickey's. The contras of 1983 were uncontrolled and incompetent, they now admit, but the contras of today are neither. One proof they offer, ironically, is the execution of Suicida by the commanders who once lionized him. Another is the steady trickle of new volunteers into the contras' camps (although that is a tricky measure of virtue; by most accounts, there are still more volunteers in the Sandinista army).

Dickey's book cannot answer those arguments fully, for its story runs only to the middle of 1984, when the covert CIA pipeline collapsed and the contras were forced to concentrate on producing at least the appearance of reform. But *With the Contras* is an indispensable starting point for the debate. It will find its way quickly into briefcases from Capitol Hill to Langley—and Managua and Tegucigalpa too. ●

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