

History shows us how to get it all wrong in Central America By Warren Hern

Guest Opinion

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Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua was a quiet little town with dirt streets when I visited there in 1962. I was a first-year medical student from Colorado on my way to a mining camp in Nicaragua's eastern jungle region. It was hot at mid-day, and not much happened. An occasional dog would wander across the street in front of the Hotel Manhattan and seek relief in the shade under the board sidewalk. The dog had found a suitable hole in the latticework that attempted to give the hotel's sagging front porch some dignity. At night, you see, the hotel surrendered its dignity to the backwoodsmen and prostitutes who met there for mutual purposes.

One of these back-woodsmen, an elegant black man, told me of his illegitimate parentage by a local woman and a U.S. Marine who had been stationed in Nicaragua in the 1920s. He and others told me of the rebellion led by Augusto Sandino, who wanted Nicaragua free of American domination.

Local legend has it that the U.S. Marines captured Sandino, cut off his ears, and impaled his head on a pillar just outside of town. His fellow rebels suffered a similar fate. The American Marines who were sent to keep Nicaragua from becoming "another Mexico" were despised.

Actually, history records that Sandino was murdered by Anastasio Somoza, the military dictator installed in 1933 by the U.S. Marines, after Sandino decided to lay down his arms and work with the new government. Somoza went on to become one of the most ruthless of Latin American dictators under the indulgent eye and sponsorship of the U.S. government. He was assassinated in 1956, leaving power to his two sons.

During one of my brief stays in Puerto Cabezas, General Anastasio Somoza Jr. ("Tachito") came to town to visit his military officers. As he prepared to leave, a small crowd gathered at what passed for a landing strip near town. The people were sullen and silent as the tall military figure reminiscent of MacArthur strode to his plane. It was a small, expensive twin-engine turboprop surrounded by heavily armed guards. The *Gurardia Nacional* was a hated symbol of Somoza everywhere in Nicaragua.

In Managua, Nicaragua's capital, an American citizen seeking his country's embassy in 1962 would be directed toward the Somoza presidential palace. Walking up the residential street from the downtown district, one encountered a broad parade ground about a quarter of a mile long. The palace, across the parade ground, was surrounded in front by a 20-foot high wall fortified with armed soldiers and gun emplacements. The wall curved toward the parade ground at each end.

Behind the palace, an equally high wall rose on the rim of an extinct volcano and curved around the crater's walls. The American embassy was located between the two walls at one end of the Somoza palace grounds. The symbiosis between the American government and the brutal Somoza regime was a source of fear and resentment for Nicaraguans.

Somoza is gone now. President Kennedy said that those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable. The Sandinistas and their allies swept Somoza from power in 1979 and are determined to run Nicaragua without American interference.

Whether the United States government likes the Sandinistas or not, they are in charge in Nicaragua and have the popular support of the vast majority of Nicaraguans. They are also supported by many democratic governments in Latin America friendly to the United States. Increasingly, as President Reagan's rhetoric toward the Sandinistas becomes more hysterical, paranoid, and delusional, as he mines Nicaraguan harbors, supports efforts to overthrow the Sandinistas, and virtually declares war on Nicaragua, the Sandinistas are seen with sympathy throughout Latin America.

President Reagan romanticizes the *contras* and exaggerates the threat of the Sandinistas to the hemisphere. He forgets, if he ever knew, that the American government has controlled events in Nicaragua almost continuously since 1909, including 19 years of military occupation by the Marines, and that the people of Nicaragua didn't like it. He forgets that the U.S. trade embargo of Cuba has not turned Fidel Castro into a capitalist or lover of the United States, nor has it caused him to kick out the Russians.

Now Reagan and members of Congress are astonished and dismayed when Daniel Ortega, who is the leader of a sovereign nation, takes a trip to friendly countries and asks for help. Why shouldn't he? Reagan is doing everything possible short of invasion to destroy Ortega's government. Should we expect him to come to the Pentagon and ask for arms for self-defense? Can he ask the American government for help to rebuild his nation's shattered economy? Of course he will go to the Russians and become more dependent on them. What else?

The trade embargo against Nicaragua is bad economics, stupid politics, disastrous for U.S. foreign policy in Latin America, and it won't work. It is a step toward war with a neighbor.

President Reagan behaves as though we have learned nothing from the last two centuries of history and political change in the world. While Reagan evokes the demon of communism, he forgets that our ragged band of American revolutionaries did not go begging, hat in hand, to the English king to ask for independence. We fought for it. The English king could not prevail. We did not get arms from England for the struggle. We made them ourselves and got help from France.

Why should we expect the Sandinistas to do less to free their country and run it as they see fit? To them, we are the English king, and worse.

Warren Hern is a Boulder physician who has worked and traveled throughout South America, Central America, and the Caribbean since 1962. He served as a Peace Corps physician in Brazil (1966-68) and recently returned from an extended research trip to Peru