

# AMERICAN INTERVENTION IN NICARAGUA

1972-1990

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*To what extent were American actions in Nicaragua justified?*

On our understanding of the events, America did not have a legal right to intervene in Nicaragua. Moreover, we believe that it was wrong for the USA to intervene with the Nicaraguan revolution and we will present evidence in favour of that argument. The US Government positioned and supported the dictatorial Somoza regime both financially and militarily. They ruled for almost half a century until the formation of the FSLN (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* or *The Sandanista National Liberation Front*) who took full control of Nicaragua establishing a revolutionary government in its place. The US then made several accusations about the new Nicaraguan government including the claim that the FSLN were Communists supported by the Soviet Union. We will explore the central claims in order to determine their validity. We will also consider the argument in favour of intervention from the perspective of the US in anticipation of any counter argument.

The first claim became known as ‘the domino theory’. The main principle of it was that Communist infiltration in a particular country would ‘infect’ bordering nations who would then also become an effective Soviet satellite state. It was evidently false because other countries which had adopted Communist policies did not influence their bordering nations. For example, the countries bordering Nicaragua (the nation of concern for the domino theory) were Costa Rica and Honduras. In 1978 Honduras’ political ideology was broadly right wing. 8 years later Costa Rica adopted neoliberal economic policies. This was at the same time as the Nicaraguan revolution which started in 1978 and ended in 1990. Thus the US Government’s theory was false, at least in the case of Nicaragua.

American business interests in Nicaragua were a key element of Nicaraguan poverty and continue to be. America remains the chief market for Nicaraguan goods and resources. Total Nicaraguan exports to the United States add up to 100 million US Dollars per year but

Nicaragua also imports \$100 million of American goods per year. There are two consequences for Nicaragua as a result of this trade relation. Firstly, America is in effect exploiting Nicaragua's natural resources and compelling Nicaraguans to buy back their own goods. Secondly, equivalent imports and exports mean that Nicaragua lacks financial surplus in order to invest in their social infrastructure. Companies such as United Fruit provide a good example of how and why Nicaragua is unable to develop its social infrastructure. Companies such as this and others owned and headquartered in the US, own 90% of the lumbering market in Nicaragua, 80% of the mining market and 80% of commercial fishing. This monopoly of Nicaraguan industry means that social infrastructure is not being developed as it could be. The effect of these financial restrictions can be seen for example, in Nicaraguan education. 68% of schools in Nicaragua are private therefore the majority of parents have to pay for their child's education. The fact that families can't afford the costs of their child's entry into private education leaves 63% of Nicaraguans illiterate. Healthcare was also severely underfunded resulting in a low life expectancy of 50-55. These circumstances will improve if more money is spent on social infrastructure but the economic relationship Nicaragua is compelled to adopt with the United States and its corporations renders that almost impossible. The American government benefited from their trade relationship with Nicaragua by the purchase of cheap resources and the sale of products at a profit. This presents a good argument for intervention from the perspective of the U.S government. Nevertheless, the argument is at best, morally questionable because it involves what amounts to extortion on a national scale.

The U.S government supported the Somoza's reign for 43 years until the revolution in 1979. The last of the Somoza's, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, was elected on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1967. During his reign he instated a law which allowed him to stand for re-election in 1974. He did this by creating a three man Junta which would take over the presidency until he was legally allowed to return while he remained in control of the National Guard. This meant that he remained *de facto* leader of the country. This was done with the full support of the U.S government. The U.S also supported the Somoza's financially; one such example is the U.S owned Long Leaf Pine Company which directly paid the Somoza family millions of dollars in return for favours and benefits. Another way the U.S supported the Somoza's was militarily; training young soldiers in the School of the Americas (SOA). By the end of the Somoza's dynasty, Nicaragua was in a \$6.5 billion debt. They also presided over a period of 81% malnutrition and 70% infant mortality. Moreover, the Somoza's killed up to 10,000 of

their own civilians while 600,000 people were left homeless due to a combination of these factors.

Conversely, circumstances under the FSLN dramatically improved. Under the Somoza's the literacy rate was at 45% but rose to 86% after the revolution. Furthermore under the Somoza's fewer than 100 students a year would pass their medical course; under the Sandinista's, 550 passed per year. In addition to these changes, in 1981 the FSLN took control of 30% of industry in Nicaragua including 20% of the cotton industry, 50% of the tobacco industry and 60% of the staple cereal industry. In comparison, the Somoza's controlled 60% of all business. Above all, from 1981 to 1985 the FSLN expropriated thousands of acres of land and turned them into peasant collectives. Taking all of this into account these statistics describe the direct improvement to the lives of the majority of Nicaraguan people.

These improvements were over shadowed by a US financed rebel group known as the 'Contras'. They were formed in 1979 almost immediately after the revolution and continued to be a key factor in the hindrance of the development of Nicaraguan social infrastructure. Nicaraguan social reform was affected by the Contras both directly and indirectly. Direct effects included physical attacks upon health care clinics and workers; seizing civilian properties or burning them down as well as attacking civilians. Some of the indirect effects of the Contras in Nicaragua included endangering candidates who would run for election and the general voting public. A Human Rights Watch report stated the following:

The policy of keeping the *contras* alive, through so-called "humanitarian" or non-lethal aid, sustains a force that has shown itself incapable of operating without consistently committing gross abuses in violation of the laws of war. *The policy also has placed in jeopardy the holding of elections by encouraging contra attacks on the electoral process.* Thus, while the Bush administration proclaims its support for human rights and free and fair elections in Nicaragua, it persists in sabotaging both.

It later adds,

The *contras* were major and systematic violators of the most basic standards of the laws of armed conflict, including by launching indiscriminate attacks on civilians, selectively murdering non-combatants, and mistreating prisoners.

Of course the presence of the Contras provided a good reason for American intervention because, as the US government stated, there was a civil war in Nicaragua erupting out of an attempt to overthrow the FSLN. But this presents a glaring contradiction; the contras *were the intervention*. The US government, funded, supplied and placed the Contras. They were also supported and trained by the CIA. The Contras were made up of ex-Nicaraguan National Guard serving under the Somoza's. Therefore their actions could not constitute a civil war because the contras were the same people as those who were the original cause of the revolution. American intervention on this basis is thus invalid.

Despite any good intentions from the US government or any individual involved in the intervention, the facts show they had neither a moral nor legal right to intervene in Nicaragua. The claim that Communist nations will influence surrounding countries is factually and historically inaccurate. Neither Argentina nor Peru adopted Communist or Socialist policies during the same period that Salvador Allende was the first democratically elected Socialist President of Chile though both are bordering nations. Business would provide a good excuse for intervention from an American perspective only on condition that one ignores the needs of Nicaragua and its people. The removal of the Somoza's did not provide a valid reason for intervention because the Somoza's were installed by the US. The Contra presence in Nicaragua only reflects the same problem insofar the Contra's were made up of ex-Somozaists. Therefore any excuse given by the US is completely invalid on any basis. Moreover, this is not a description of a unique event but a phenomenon that extends throughout South America.