

THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THE STRATEGIC CULTURE OF  
NICARAGUA

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The strategic culture of Nicaragua has extremely deep historical roots and has evidenced remarkable consistency over the centuries. With some significant evolutionary steps in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which I shall detail in this paper, the evidence of the historical continuity is present in the political context of contemporary Nicaragua and there are elements of the historical strategic culture which remain as pertinent today as they were one hundred or even two hundred years ago.

In the beginning - the colonial period -there were cattle and coffee; there were regional elites in competition for power. After independence from Spain and the breakup of the short-lived Central American Confederation, there were foreign filibusterers who wanted to build a railroad or a trans-isthmian canal.

The period of Spanish domination is important in building the history of Nicaraguan strategic culture for two reasons. First, the area was a frontier between centers of Spanish control and was primarily a source of foodstuffs for the mining areas in New Spain or Mexico and Colombia. The Pacific coast was an area divided between two agricultural zones, each of which was dominated by a landowning elite that competed for influence within the empire and maintained local labor and private armies that supported their economic and political influence.

The second reason the Spanish period is significant in understanding the present is that the Atlantic Coast never was under Spanish control. Virtually isolated from the Pacific, the Atlantic was a region of indigenous people and ports that were subject to frequent incursions by the British and by pirates. After independence from Spain, the new nation made little effort to establish control over the East Coast and that region became dominated by the British who introduced Afro-Caribbean labor from the islands of the Caribbean to work in the ports or on the extensive plantations of bananas or other crops

exported directed from the Atlantic ports. The separation of the East from the West coast remains an important issue in strategic culture to this day.

Strategic culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century remained essentially a regional economy and a struggle between groups of elites – northern ranchers and their urban allies vs the coffee traders and their urban allies in Granada or Managua. There was no national project, no serious effort to create a single nation. Each faction, calling themselves Liberals or Conservatives, continued to monopolize and keep private the use of force, and confined its political activity to achieving control over the weak state and maintaining itself in power once it had succeeded in ousting the other.

The east coast continued to be virtually separated from the nation. It had its own ties to the Caribbean and its own racial mix.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century episodes of the intervening foreign filibusterers were evidence of the lack of a national project or even a sense of nationhood which might identify an “other” taking advantage of the national polity. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this penetration of the polity by outsiders became one of the central features of Nicaraguan politics and an enduring feature of the country’s strategic culture.

As the United States became more and more involved in the region, after precipitating the independence of Panama from Colombia and beginning to construct a canal in Panama,, there was the assumption of hegemonic privilege at first in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, set against British influence or pretensions, and then, in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the exercise of hegemony through diplomatic representatives who came to exercise proconsul-like influence over local politics.

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States was a player in Nicaraguan politics and Nicaragua had become a penetrated nation. The curious feature of this penetration, a feature which continues to this day in one form or another, is that politics had become a triangle in which the United States was an active player between the rival Liberal and Conservative factions. As the U,S, moves to intervene, first under the Taft-Root formula and then under the more expansive Wilson-Bryan formula, Nicaraguan politics were contested in Washington.<sup>1</sup>

The paradigm of the penetrated polity and the absence of a national project can be seen in the work, in Washington, of the lawyer (lobbyist) Chandler P. Anderson. He was hired by Emiliano Chamorro, the leader of the Conservative faction, to represent him and his faction in Washington. Anderson, who had many Latin American clients and several United States firms doing business in Latin America, such as United Fruit, had direct access to Frank Polk, Undersecretary of States under Woodrow Wilson.

The private papers of both Anderson and Polk chronicle the frequent and candid exchanges between them in which Anderson worked to maintain the influence Chamorro enjoyed in the Wilson Administration. Anderson was close as well to Secretary of State

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph S. Tulchin,, *The Aftermath of War* (1971)

Robert Lansing. Curiously, he did not have access to Wilson's first secretary of state, William J. Bryan, who negotiated a treaty with Chamorro, when the later was chief of state, which provided the United States with protectorate privileges over Nicaragua. During this entire period, politics in Nicaragua was conducted as much in Washington as it was in Managua.

During the entire war period, 1914 – 1918, the United States navy patrolled the east coast of Nicaragua. Chief of the naval force was in constant communication with the U.S. ambassador in Managua. As sea-land communications improved with the introduction of the radio telegraph during the war, the U.S. ambassador knew more about what was happening on the east coast than did the Nicaraguan government and he knew it sooner. It was not in the interest of the U.S. to improve communication between the government in Managua and the settlements on the east coast, nor was the government in Washington interested in enhancing the control of the government in Managua over its territory on the Atlantic.

Beginning in the 1920s, this protectorate status began to wear on both principal factions of the political elite in Nicaragua. It was at this time that we can see emerging a text or rhetoric hostile to the U.S. and that contained elements of a prehensile nationalism. The point here is that anti-Americanism comes from the left and the right, from the religious elite and from the economic elite, and that anti-Americanism grows stronger as does the sense of nationalism in the country.<sup>2</sup>

The culmination of the anti-Americanism and nationalist movement was the uprising against the U.S. occupation declared by Augusto Sandino. Sandino, who was depicted as a bandit operating on his own for his own gain both by the government in Managua and by the U.S. government, proved to be extremely resilient and impossible to eliminate. Some sources claim there were as many as four hundred armed clashes between forces led by Sandino and the U.S. Marines were sent to hunt him down.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, in their effort to put down the insurgency, the U.S. Government decided that it would create a Nicaraguan counter-insurgency. This decision had a major impact on the strategic culture of Nicaragua. To begin, the U.S. decided that it was important to bring control over violence into the hands of the state, thereby creating the first crucial element in a national project. To do that, the Marines created a National Guard and trained its leadership and its forces. The head of the force was a minor political figure named Anastasio Somoza.

The story of Sandino's betrayal and murder plays into the evolution of the anti-U.S. text of Nicaraguan nationalism. Sandino was martyred and became a national hero whose

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream. Nicaragua Under U.S. Imperial Rule* (2005)

<sup>3</sup> For a broader look at anti-Americanism in Latin America, see Alan McPherson, *Yankee No! Anti-Americanism in U.S.-Latin American Relations* (2003).

name and banner would become the iconic symbols of opposition to the Somoza regime and, by extension, of hostility to the U.S.

In the evolution of Nicaraguan strategic culture, the Somoza regime represents two important additions or changes. First, Anastasio Somoza created a national state. For the first time, the country had a state apparatus that represented the nation. Somoza succeeded in bringing control of the instruments of violence into the public sphere for the first time in the country's history. As important, he succeeded also in creating a state bureaucracy, a public administration that acted in the name of the nation.<sup>4</sup>

During the Somoza rule, organized interest groups that represented economic groups or social classes began to contest for power and for space in the national polity. Somoza was skillful in playing these groups off against one another, just as he had played off the old political factions against one another when he first came to power. Through the period of the second world war, Somoza succeeded in compromising the economic elites and making all of them beholden to him in one way or another.

Through all of this, it is important to remember that Somoza was dictatorial, brutal to his opponents, and rapaciously corrupt. He and his entourage became wealthy at the expense of the Nicaraguan state and the Nicaraguan people. Through this entire period, Nicaragua continued to be a penetrated polity, with the U.S. exercising influence in any way that it could. There was an apocryphal story according to which President Franklin Roosevelt said of Somoza, "He is a son of a bitch; but he is our son of a bitch." That statement was only half true. Somoza was evil. He never was completely in the hands of the U.S. In fact, as had been the case with dictators elsewhere in the Caribbean Basin – Trujillo, Batista, Duvalier among others – the U.S. government never succeeded in controlling Somoza so that he would do the bidding of handlers in Washington or Managua. Somoza was careful to stay within bounds; but it was a curious dance in which he maintained a considerable amount of autonomy to do as he wished even, on occasion to act against explicit requests by the government in Washington.

The limitations on hegemonic control are part of the strategic culture of Nicaragua as is the constant struggle for space for autonomous action. As had been the case though the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Somozas and their Sandiista successors gave repeated evidence that their ultimate goal was the preservation of their power, their government. In other words, despite the fact that Somoza created a national state apparatus, he, his son and his brother all wanted above all to keep their power and would do anything in their struggle with the hegemonic power to keep their hold on the state. That is what is happening today with the Ortega government.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Knut Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza* (1993).

<sup>5</sup> On the repeating pattern of intervention and partial control, see Robert A. Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition. The United States and Nicaragua* (1987)

One of the lasting achievements of the Somoza regime was to clarify the anti-U.S. rhetoric of the nationalist text. The Sandinista revolt had a powerful anti-U.S. tone. Even the moderate democratic opposition to Somoza, led by a member of the Chamorro clan, despite the fact that the U.S. was an obvious, positive model for them, had to establish their nationalist bona fides which meant independence from the U.S. The fact that the Reagan government openly created and backed the “Contra” opposition to the new Sandinista government did no good for the democrats among the Nicaraguan politicians. Again, as they had fifty years earlier, Nicaraguans fought over political influence in Washington as much as in Managua.

In the period since the Sandinista revolution the strategic culture of Nicaragua has changed very little, except in one respect. The government of Violetta Chamorro and her successors have made the first effort in the history of Nicaragua to incorporate the east coast the ethnically mixed population of that large region. Indigenous groups, descendants of African slaves and others are for the first time playing a role in national politics. It is still early in the process; but it is clear that incorporating this huge territory and opening Nicaragua to the Atlantic Coast will over time have an impact on the nation’s strategic culture.

One final point about strategic culture. Under the Ortega government, which in many ways is a throw-back to traditional politics in the sense that he is interested only in holding onto power and using external actors as instruments in his consolidation of power, the army is making a valiant effort to maintain itself as an independent, national, and professional institution. Ortega continues in his effort to politicize the military and to bend it to his will and to make it a support for his private control of the state. How this will play out will be important in the evolution of the country’s strategic culture.

It is clear that the national project that Somoza began continues to evolve. Even as Ortega attempts to consolidate his control over the state for his private project, the sense of nationalism that emerged from the dialectic of Somoza-Sandinista opposition survives. As Ortega abuses the formal institutions of democracy, the split between the population of the country and the state becomes more pronounced. Ortega may succeed in holding onto power; but, as he undermines the institutions of democracy, he will create an opposition that will seek internal and external support to change the government. Whether that external influence will be Venezuela or the United States remains to be seen. In either case, Nicaragua will continue to be a penetrated polity.