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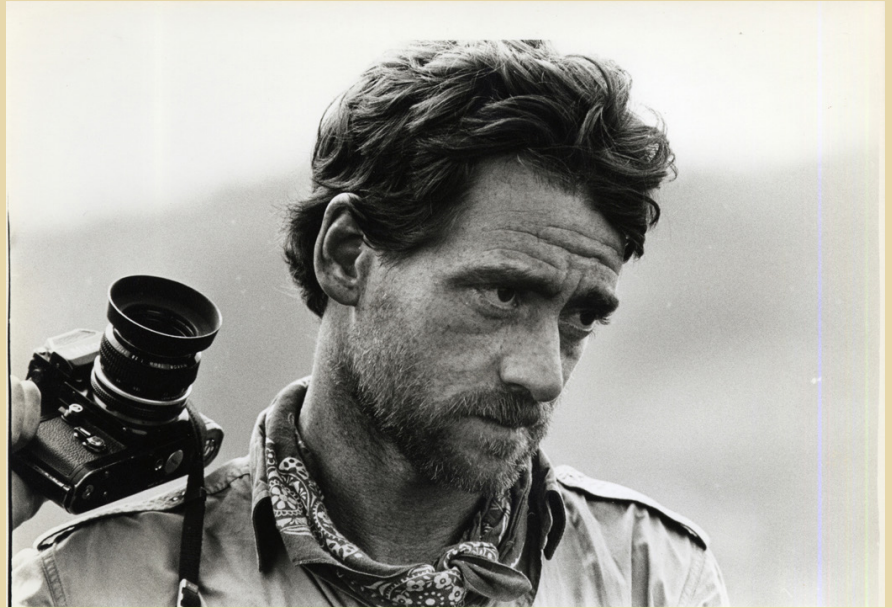
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Central America and the Bitter Fruit of U.S. Policy

by Bill Gentile

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Bill Gentile in Nicaragua in the mid-1980s / Courtesy Bill Gentile

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The **Center for Latin American & Latino Studies (CLALS)** at American University, established in January 2010, is a campus-wide initiative advancing and disseminating state-of-the-art research. The Center's faculty affiliates and partners are at the forefront of efforts to understand economic development, democratic governance, cultural diversity and change, peace and diplomacy, health, education, and environmental well-being. CLALS generates high-quality, timely analysis on these and other issues in partnership with researchers and practitioners from AU and beyond.

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Cover photo: Courtesy Bill Gentile

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I. The Revolution (1978-1979)

MANAGUA, Nicaragua — Like many journalists who covered Nicaragua, I have been deeply affected by my long relationship with that country and her people. I lived and worked here during some of the most formative years of my life, as well as the life of Nicaragua herself. It's here where I first witnessed war. It's here where I first saw violence used to achieve political and social change. It's here where I met my first wife. It's here where I came to recognize privilege and power as enemies.

Nicaragua also is where I came to understand and to cherish my role as journalist. So here begins the story of what I discovered about war, about journalism, and about myself.

Forty years ago this summer, on July 19, 1979, members of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) overthrew the Somoza family dynasty first installed in Nicaragua by U.S. Marines in the 1930s. In response to what the administration of Ronald Reagan claimed was an existential threat to the United States' national security, the U.S. covertly directed and supported anti-Sandinista contra rebels fighting to overthrow the leftist government. The policy was part of a broader U.S. strategy in Central America to halt the alleged advance of Communism in the United States' own "back yard."

Today, Central America once again is in turmoil, as tens of thousands of the region's citizens flee to the United States' border seeking safety and new lives. The Trump administration claims the exodus has caused a national emergency.

During a brief visit in the summer of 2019 to witness the 40th anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution, I looked for clues to explain what happened. And what I saw left me deeply unsettled. But first, here's how it all started:

Night Moves

In a small complex of cabañas tucked away under coconut trees on the outskirts of the Nicaraguan capital, Managua, where a contingent of international journalists had set up a base of operations, I was up late one night listening to stories of war. Guy Gugliotta was a Miami-based correspondent for the Miami Herald. Tall and lanky with a soft voice and tired eyes, he didn't easily fit my preconceived notion of a Vietnam combat veteran and former Swift Boat commander.

I've never been to Vietnam, but I grew up on imagery of that war in the pages of *Life* magazine. Huge color photographs made by some of the most courageous and most talented photojournalists of the era arrived each week at my home in the steel town of Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, about 40 minutes northwest of Pittsburgh. They planted within me a lifelong fascination with imagery and journalism.

In Managua that night, I smoked Marlboro reds while Gugliotta and I worked on a bottle of Nicaraguan rum and he talked about how he kept himself and his men alive in Vietnam while executing one of the most dangerous assignments of that decade-long war; how he anticipated and calculated for every contingent; how his eyes scoured every curve in the rivers that he and his men were assigned to patrol; how a flash of light off a metal surface or a reflection from the river bank could be the precursor of an ambush and the death of him and the men under his command; how he would instruct his men to respond; and, ultimately, how he would help get himself and his men back home.

In the background, I remember Bob Seger singing “Night Moves” on a cassette plugged into the recorder I used to file reports for ABC Radio News.

I didn’t know then that Gugliotta’s lessons on guerrilla warfare might help save my life in the not-so-distant future.

The Somozas and Sandino

It was 1979 and I was a freelance journalist on a trip through Central America to see first-hand the stories that I had been editing on the desk of United Press International (UPI) at my base in Mexico City. The bureau there covered not only Mexico, but Central America and the Caribbean as well. I also freelanced for ABC Radio, the *Baltimore Sun*, and the *Kansas City Star*. At the time, I was more a print guy than a photo guy.

I landed in Managua only days before the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), or Sandinista National Liberation Front, declared its “final offensive” against the U.S.-backed rule of President Anastasio Somoza, who had inherited the regime from his father in 1957.

A popular insurgency against Somoza family rule had been festering for years and the FSLN managed to seize the leadership role and channel the rebellion into a final push against the regime.

The United States’ role in Nicaragua is not one that most Americans can be proud of. U.S. Marines invaded and occupied the country on numerous occasions and for various periods of time beginning in 1909. The first Somoza—Anastasio Somoza García, known as “Tacho”—was installed as the head of the Nicaraguan National Guard, set up by the U.S. as a supposedly non-partisan constabulary. It did not remain that way for long.

Augusto César Sandino, who had led a guerrilla war against the U.S. Marines, finally agreed to make peace in 1934, only to be murdered by Somoza’s National Guard with U.S. complicity. And Tacho seized all power in 1937.

In return for its role as staunch U.S. ally and anti-communist bulwark in Central America, the United States supported the Somoza dynasty for four decades. (In 1939, Franklin Roosevelt is supposed to have said of Tacho, “He’s a son of a bitch, but he’s our son of a bitch.”) This despite the regime’s consistent record of grotesque human rights violations.

Then, for six weeks in the summer of 1979, Nicaragua suffered a national convulsion that left some 30,000 of her citizens—in a country of only about 2.5 million inhabitants at the time—dead.

A Bullet in the Head

As it became clear that the successor to the dynasty, Anastasio “Tachito” Somoza Debayle, was in trouble, journalists from around the world converged on Managua. These included a team led by ABC television correspondent Bill Stewart, and since I was a “stringer,” or freelancer, for ABC Radio, I briefly worked with Stewart and his team as a translator.

NIP071917-7/19/79-MANAGUA: Citizens of Nicaragua drag the huge statue of the father of Nicaraguan strongman Anastasio Somoza, Anastasio Somoza Garcia, through the streets of downtown Managua here 7/19. Sandinista rebels ended the 43 year reign of the Somoza family when the National Guard surrendered to advancing rebel forces in the capital today. UPI (NICARAGUA) jca/William Gentile



Courtesy Bill Gentile

By 1979 I was pretty fluent in Spanish, an asset essential to negotiate one's freedom or one's life with mostly young, scared, poorly trained, often exhausted, and sometimes very pissed-off soldiers. Stewart had arrived on the scene after covering the revolution in Iran. He spoke no Spanish.

On June 20, 1979, a squad of Somoza's national guardsmen manning a Managua checkpoint stopped the van carrying Stewart and his colleagues. (As it happened, I had left the ABC team a couple of days earlier.)

Stewart and his Nicaraguan translator approached the soldiers as the camera and sound men in the van secretly filmed the event through the windshield. The guardsmen made Stewart kneel, and then lie face down on the city street. One of them pumped a single bullet into the back of his head. They also killed Stewart's Nicaraguan translator, out of sight of the cameraman inside the van.

The global broadcast of that footage crushed support of the Somoza regime. Even its most stalwart anti-communist U.S. congressional defenders could not continue to support the family's continued rule.

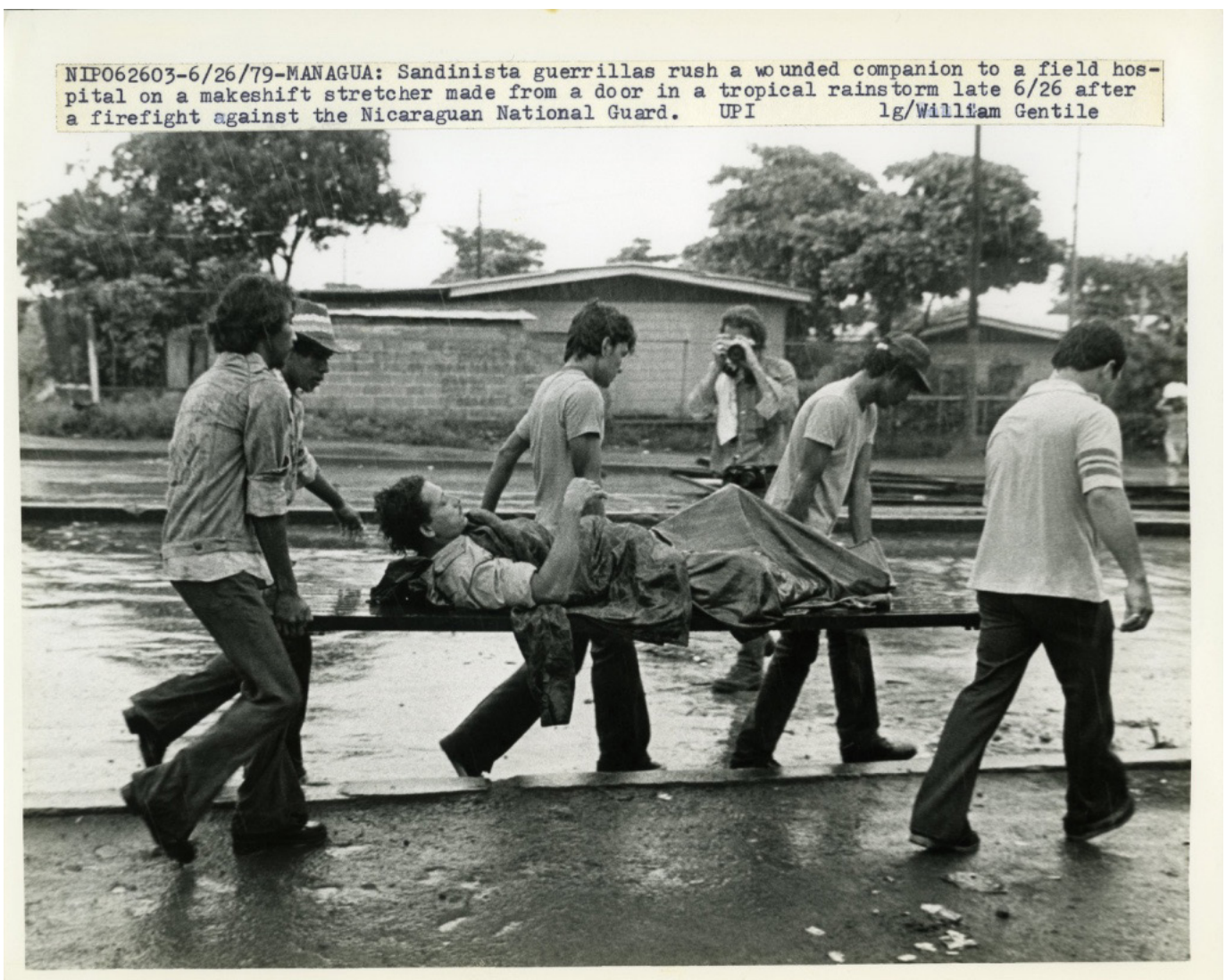
Suicide Stringers

In response to the killings, the vast majority of journalists covering the revolution evacuated the country, some in protest and others out of concern for their own safety. I was one of a handful who stayed.

John Hoagland was another.

He was freelancing for the Associated Press (AP), making \$25 for every picture the international wire service transmitted from Nicaragua to its headquarters in New York City. John was a surfer from California, and he looked it: tall and tanned with sun-tinged hair. Rumor was that he once was a bodyguard for Angela Davis and carried a .357 Magnum while on the job. A bold Fu Manchu moustache added to his reputation as a take-no-bullshit dude but masked the decency and the kindness at his core.

Young, hungry, and determined to “make it,” John and I began to work together despite the fact that we worked for competing wire services. (I had turned my full attention back to my primary ‘string,’ UPI.) We took risks that perhaps more sensible journalists might not take. The Somoza regime’s use of small aircraft to bomb and strafe the eastern *barrios* of Managua had become routine during the final offensive.



John Hoagland, center with camera, makes pictures during the 1979 Revolution / Courtesy Bill Gentile

Sandinista cadres had taken positions there and the regime conducted air raids every afternoon, so most journalists stayed away from there until the raids were over—but not John and me.

We made our way one afternoon past rebel barricades and checkpoints along the Carretera Norte that connects the capital to the international airport. We wanted to get close to insurgents confronting a National Guard position along the same key route. As one of the regime's planes fired rockets at the insurgents, John ducked for cover and I ran toward the open door of a nearby house in a bid to do the same. That's when a rocket from one of the planes plowed through the roof of my intended refuge, blowing debris through the front door. Three steps faster and I would have eaten a shrapnel sandwich.

After that incident, our colleagues began calling John and me the “suicide stringers.”

Covering the final offensive was a non-stop scramble for information as fighting between the National Guard and the Sandinista-led insurgency moved from one city to another on an almost daily basis. Death tolls. Body counts. Casualty reports. Refugees. Press conferences. Sandinistas seizing control of towns and cities across the country. More casualty reports. To stay abreast of these always-moving events, the UPI team relied heavily on our “secret weapon.”

In his early 60s and blessed with an authoritative demeanor, Leonardo Lacayo was a long-time journalist and local stringer for UPI. At his home on the outskirts of the city, “Don Lacayo” had a short-wave radio system he used to monitor communication between Somoza and his national guardsmen in the field. So we often knew what was happening before it actually happened. Lacayo was such a closely guarded secret in the super competitive world of breaking news coverage that the UPI journalists were forbidden to use his real name even in private conversation, out of concern that our competitors would find him out – and then buy him out. We were allowed only to refer to him as “*El Hombre*”—The Man.

The Bunker

Anastasio Somoza's bunker, or command post, was a stone's throw from the Intercontinental Hotel in what remained of Managua. The city was severely damaged in a 1972 earthquake that killed tens of thousands of its citizens. On the morning after the dictator and his family fled the country, Nicaragua's National Guard disintegrated as its members stripped off their uniforms and fled. Many tried to pass themselves off as civilians and headed north to the border with Honduras.

A few yards from the bunker, two national guardsmen were trying to jump-start a car to join their fleeing colleagues. They asked me and colleague David Helvarg to help them push their car so they could be on their way. As Helvarg and I took our places behind the trunk of the car, we could see the bodies of two guardsmen lying on the back seat. The fleeing guardsmen were taking their dead with them as they retreated from the incoming Sandinista fighters. Next to the bodies was a case of Scotch.

The following day and not far down a main street from Somoza's bunker, the plaza in front of Managua's metropolitan cathedral filled with thousands of Nicaraguans welcoming the incoming Junta of National Reconstruction, victorious Sandinista fighters, and their followers.

MNPO97902-9/1/79-Managua, Nicaragua: Interior Minister Tomas Borge addresses a crowd of some 10,000 in the Plaza of the Revolution here 9/1, in commemoration of the 1967 Battle of Pancasan, the first historical battle between Sandinista guerrillas and national guardsmen. Here Borge warns against Somoza or any of his followers who would launch a counter-revolutionary invasion. UPI wfg/william gentile



Courtesy Bill Gentile

II. “Terrible and Glorious Days”

He was a small man, but one not to be taken lightly. The only surviving member of the group that founded the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in 1961, he was cunning and resilient. He had been tortured in the prisons of the Somoza dictatorship but lived long enough to help overthrow the regime.

In Managua’s newly named Plaza of the Revolution, Sandinista Commander and Interior Minister Tomás Borge delivered a rousing speech warning Nicaraguans what to expect in the wake of the Sandinista defeat of the Somoza dictatorship. A fiery orator, Borge understood that Washington would not quietly accept the demise of a long-time client and supposed bulwark against the advance of Cuba-supported Communism in its own “back yard.”

This was 1979, and the Cold War still raged, and to the great misfortune of the people of Central America their countries, particularly Nicaragua and El Salvador, soon would become the last battleground of that conflict.

“Nos esperan días terribles y gloriosos,” Borge warned. “Terrible and glorious days await us.” Perhaps even Tomás Borge did not imagine how terrible the coming days would be—I certainly did not.

Los Contras

Some of those same men from the Somoza dynasty’s Nicaraguan National Guard whom I saw fleeing the incoming Sandinista fighters in July 1979 found their way to Honduras and into the welcoming hands of U.S. supporters. When Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, and William Casey took over the Central Intelligence Agency, the search began for ways to assist the defeated members of Somoza’s National Guard, and anybody else, who would fight to overthrow the Sandinistas.

Using secret (and illegal) funds to support the effort, the U.S. government financed and directed the war against the Sandinista government even when Congress tried to stop it. Its new allies would come to be known as “contras,” as in *contrarevolucionarios*, or counter-revolutionaries, declaring the new organization’s stand against Sandinista rule and outlining the scope of its purpose and singular reason for being.



Contra rebels patrol the northern mountains in Nicaragua / Bill Gentile/Corbis via Getty

The Contra War bore little resemblance to the 1979 revolution. Unlike the uprising that swept through small towns and large cities across Nicaragua, the Contra War unfolded almost exclusively in the northern mountains. Fighting never really came to the capital, which posed special challenges for those of us who wanted to cover the conflict. To do so, we had three options: (1) Insert ourselves into units of Sandinista Peoples' Army fighting in the northern mountains. (2) Insert ourselves with contra fighters infiltrating Nicaragua from bases in neighboring Honduras. (3) Respond to reports of fighting or other conflict-related activity that too often became public only days after the event had occurred.

To really cover the conflict, journalists had to spend inordinate amounts of time roaming the mountains with one or the other of the armed groups, sometimes for weeks, before seeing any real action. And "real action" means the ugly reality of men killing and being killed with high-powered weapons capable of tearing through human flesh and bone with ferocious, stunning, horrifying efficiency.

I spent most of my time covering the Contra War haulin' ass over unpaved mountain roads searching for stories and images in my 1969 International Scout (I called it "La Bestia," or, The Beast), tramping through hills and valleys with the Sandinistas or the contras, or in contra training and staging camps just across the border in Honduras. Most journalists didn't have the time, the physical and mental stamina, or the will to spend long days or weeks in the mountains, risking death and permanent disfigurement, drinking questionable river and stream water, eating cold rice and beans or the occasional cow or monkey that the young Sandinista soldiers hacked up for meat.

There were very few pitched battles between the two armed groups. Instead, the war played out in a series of ambushes or surprise attacks preceded by long stretches of slogging through tropical highlands and followed by more of the same. You walked for days under a burning sun or a tropical downpour. Then the jungle exploded and men began to bleed. Then you slogged again.

The Contra War resembled the Vietnam War more than it did the Sandinista-led Revolution of 1979. And it was on those long journeys in Nicaragua's tropical highlands that I would begin to implement the lessons of Guy Gugliotta, the Swift Boat commander turned newspaper man, for surviving guerrilla warfare.

When inserted with the Sandinistas, the best place to position yourself was at the tail end of the *exploradores*, or explorers, a handful of men trained to lead a column of soldiers in single file through the mountains without leading them into ambush and untimely demise. If an encounter did take place, the explorers ordered the men to fan out to the flanks and counterattack. Placing yourself at the end of the explorers gave a photographer the chance to make pictures of men actually firing at the enemy, without exposing yourself to the extreme risk of being at the front of the column to be taken out like a duck in a shooting gallery. Positioning yourself too far to the rear of the single-file line could make it impossible to capture powerful images.

"*Quiénes son?*" ("Who are you?") one of the Sandinista explorers asked the leader of another column of uniformed men who stumbled into each other as the columns rose from opposite directions to the crest of a hill.

"*Quiénes son USTEDES?*" ("Who are YOU all?") the other fighter responded.

"*Battalion Simón Bolívar,*" the Sandinista soldier said, citing the name of his elite special forces unit.



Sandinista soldiers care for the wounded after an ambush / Courtesy Bill Gentile

And the killing began.

La Montaña

Despite the hardship and danger, the northern highlands known as La Montaña, or The Mountain, occupy a special place in Nicaragua's rich lore of conflict. Perhaps it was Omar Cabezas, a popular Sandinista combatant and hero of the 1979 Revolution, who best captured and defined the mystique in his book, *Fire from the Mountain*. For Cabezas, La Montaña was an anvil upon which one tested, forged, and molded oneself into a true revolutionary.

For me, La Montaña was a place of purification. It was a place where I sought refuge from pack journalism, from staged press conferences, from the constant stress of chasing the latest picture for any given story, from the painful distance from my family, from the lure of time wasted at Managua social gatherings pounding down Flor de Caña rum. I longed for, and then basked in, the purity, the discipline, and the rush of the anvil.

Like many of the journalists working in Nicaragua at that time, I felt that our work was more a "humanitarian mission" than a "job." We gave voice to the poor working class, the peasants, the laborers, whose voices would never be heard in their own country, and certainly not beyond the borders of their country, had it not been for us, the international media. With passion and empathy we told their stories

and revealed to the world their misery, in the hope that outside forces could help change their lives for the better.

It was a different time then—the international media were largely regarded as independent observers and unbiased professionals seeking the truth in some of the darkest and most complicated corners of the world. We were respected. We were sought after. People wanted us to tell their stories. When I entered a restaurant or a city plaza with professional cameras—worth more than most people earned in a year—hanging from my neck, people took notice.

At a demonstration in San Salvador, a young, attractive woman walked up to me and pushed a piece of paper into the pocket of my photojournalist vest, then walked away. On the paper she had written her name and a telephone number along with this request: “*Llárame.*” (“Call me.”)

We were even feared. On a highway in Honduras I was pulled over by a policeman who tried to squeeze me for money for not having reflectors used by motorists on the shoulder of a highway while fixing a flat tire or cooling an overheated radiator.

“Is this how the police in Honduras treat international journalists?” I asked the cop as I brandished my Newsweek identification card. He let me go.

We were regarded with suspicion by protagonists on both sides of the political spectrum. For example, the Sandinistas saw us as possible CIA agents while the contras suspected we might be communist sympathizers. But each side knew they had to play ball with us because we controlled, to a high degree, how the world perceived them. We controlled how they would appear to their benefactors in the U.S. Congress and administration—upon which they depended for their survival.

Covering the war with either side presented a powerful moral quandary: You want it to be over. You want to be there only long enough to get decent pictures of the drudgery of patrolling through the mountains—but you also need pictures of war. Shooting. Fighting. Dead and wounded. Once you get that, you can return to your base of operations where you will find safety, decent food, a real bed and, if you are fortunate as I was, the love and support of family.

So you want to document fighting. But you don’t want any of the people in your group (or the opposing group, for that matter) to get hurt. You want to make pictures of dead and wounded. But you don’t. You want to capture powerful images like the ones I saw growing up in Life magazine during the war in Vietnam. But you don’t. You want to show the suffering that U.S. foreign policy is inflicting upon this poor, underdeveloped country. You must. You will. I did.

Ríndense!

The Batalliones de Lucha Irregular (BLI), or Special Forces Battalions, were the Sandinista Army’s elite fighting forces designed to defend Nicaragua from the U.S.-backed contras staging deadly incursions into the country from camps in Honduras. It was early in the war and late in the afternoon when explorers of the BLI unit I was traveling with spotted a group of contras camped out on a nearby hilltop.



Sandinista soldiers fire a mortar round / Courtesy Bill Gentile

Just before sundown, the Sandinistas unleashed a ferocious attack with small arms and mortars. The next morning as the Sandinistas approached the hill to survey the damage, two gravely wounded contras opened fire. Apparently too seriously wounded to escape during the assault, they were left behind as their colleagues fled.

“Ríndense!” one of the Sandinistas demanded. “Surrender!”

The contras answered with fire.

“Ríndense!” More fire from the contras.

Now the Sandinistas returned fire, killing them both.

This was a turning point in my measure of the level of the contras’ hatred for, and perhaps determination to defeat, the Sandinistas. I had just watched two men reject an offer to surrender and live, choosing instead to resist and die.

Tomás Borge was right. These were terrible days, indeed. And there were more to come.

“Imperialismo norteamericano”

I had responded to reports of a fire devouring a small factory just off the Carretera Norte connecting the capital city of Managua with the international airport.

By the time I got there, the flames had died down and local civilians had joined firefighters and police scouring the charred remains of the property trying to save whatever they could. This happened at a time when the United States had ramped up its aggressive policies toward Nicaragua, imposing economic sanctions, mining its harbors, and funding and training the contra forces invading the country from camps in its northern neighbor, Honduras. I don't remember that the cause of the fire ever was determined, but the immediate assumption was that the blaze was set by infiltrators loyal to the anti-Sandinista contras and their U.S. sponsors.

As I made pictures of the damage, a young woman turned to me and, pointing an accusing finger at what once was a place where scores of working-class Nicaraguans labored to earn money to support their families, said, “*Imperialismo norteamericano!*” or, “North American imperialism!”

I said, “*Yo sé,*” (“I know”) guessing she was right.

This happened somewhere in the early 1980s. It was a time when I still could argue that the United States of America had a functioning, though imperfect, democracy. I could argue that U.S. policy toward Nicaragua was an aberration that did not reflect the will of the American people. What I did not understand then was that the United States government was under assault by corporate and special interests that today largely rule the country. I understand that now.

My exchange with the woman also was a measure of Nicaraguans' generosity of spirit. They recognized the difference between American (U.S.) people and American (U.S.) policy, and they allowed me to work relatively freely in their country. I don't think most Americans under similar assault would be so generous, as the reaction to the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon would prove. Just think of the violence unleashed against Muslims in the wake of those incidents.

El Salvador: “Get me out of here.”

I never liked El Salvador. It had extracted too much blood from too many people and too many of its victims were my friends and colleagues. A tiny and overcrowded country, it had a menacing, sinister feel about it. Death squads prowled the streets at night and frantic, heart-broken family members combed the city dumps each morning desperately trying to find the remains of their loved ones.

Even the metropolitan cathedral where Archbishop Oscar Romero delivered his sermons ordering government forces to “stop the repression” made me uneasy. Its interior walls were unfinished concrete, giving the place a cold, cavernous, medieval feeling. The gray exterior was graceless and looked nothing like “the house of God” where my Italian immigrant parents took me to mass every Sunday as a child.

I spent a lot of time in El Salvador covering the civil war and elections there. I had to. Not only was El Salvador a part of my immediate area of coverage, but it was linked organically to Nicaragua. In fact, every country in Central America was linked to others in the area. Almost nothing happened in one country without rippling into others: weapons, training camps, refugees, wounded and, eventually, cocaine.

Every time I traveled to El Salvador, my stomach tightened from the minute I touched down on the airport tarmac until the time I was on an outgoing flight leaving Salvadoran airspace and asking the flight attendant for another glass of just about anything with alcohol in it.

Covering conflict in El Salvador was extremely dicey. It's one thing to be embedded with the Sandinistas or with the anti-Sandinista contras. Either side protects you precisely because you are embedded with them. They protect themselves as best they can and, de facto, they protect you as well. It's quite another thing to arrive at an ongoing firefight and insert yourself deep enough into the fight to make powerful images.

And that's exactly what we did. El Salvador is so small and the conflict was so widespread that, after hearing a radio report about fighting in just about any corner of the country, we could jump into a taxi and haul down the road to cover it. I had become a full-time photojournalist for Newsweek magazine. Unlike print correspondents who can do their work from a distance or by following up after an important event, visual journalists have to be on site and on time when and where the shit was actually hitting the fan.

John Hoagland, my "suicide stringer" partner from the Sandinista Revolution, had moved shortly after the Nicaragua conflict to El Salvador where an ugly, savage civil war had erupted, and where he would earn the coveted post as Newsweek magazine's Contract Photographer in Latin America and the Caribbean.



Civilians flee fighting in San Salvador, El Salvador / Courtesy Bill Gentile

It was 1984. John and a small group of colleagues responded to reports of a firefight not far from the capital of San Salvador. The scene was chaotic as the journalists tried to get close enough to the fighting to make powerful pictures. One of the government soldiers shot and killed John Hoagland.

In 1985, about a year after John Hoagland was killed in El Salvador, I signed an agreement with Newsweek magazine as its contract photographer for Latin America and the Caribbean, in effect picking up John's former assignment. In practice, I spent most of my time in Central America, because that was the center of the regional storm. Nicaragua and El Salvador were the eye of that storm.

The Reagan administration saw the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, and behind them the Cubans, and behind them the Soviets, as the reason for the war in El Salvador, and some in Washington would say frankly that by supporting the contras the Reagan administration was "trading one little war for another little war." In the spring of 1989, although in fact the end of the Cold War was only months away, the wars in Central America were still hot, and still very deadly.

In March of 1989 elections were scheduled in El Salvador. The guerrillas did not launch an offensive but they did seize the hamlet of San Francisco Javier. I arrived there a few hours after the hamlet was seized. It was me and Julio, a Salvadoran whom I trusted and routinely hired as my driver in El Salvador, plus two of my friends and colleagues, in Julio's taxi. A Dutch camera crew arrived at the scene a bit later. As we all filmed, photographed, and interviewed rebels and civilians in the aftermath of battle, the Salvadoran Army returned with reinforcements to re-take the town. New fighting broke out.

We were fucked—caught in a crossfire between two armed forces—the absolute worst place you could be. I turned a corner during the chaos to see Dutch cameraman Cornel Lagrouw lying in the dirt and it was here that the lessons that Guy Gugliotta shared with me during the Nicaraguan insurrection years earlier kicked in. The response to an emergency has to be reflexive, immediate, pre-programmed and I had tried for a long time, through many close calls, to steel myself for a situation like this.

I tore off the cameras from around my neck and threw them into the back seat of Julio's taxi, and told him to take my two colleagues down the dirt road, out of town. I stayed with Cornel, his girlfriend and his team, loading Cornel onto the rear, open door of their station-wagon. Eventually we took the same escape route out of town, Cornel's girlfriend and I hanging on to the vehicle, trying to keep him from falling out onto the dirt road.

Cornel died.

There were more terrible days in 1989, and November brought some of the worst. In Europe, the Berlin Wall was being torn down, the Soviet Bloc was crumbling. But in Central America the fighting still raged.

On November 16, one of the Salvadoran Army units that had been trained and advised by the U.S. murdered six Jesuit priests at the Central American University in San Salvador along with their housekeeper and her teenage daughter. The priests, including the rector of the university, had advocated peace talks.

The next day, British foreign correspondent David Blundy was shot by a sniper during street fighting in the capital.

“Get me out of here,” was the last thing I heard David say as I helped carry him to a nearby vehicle and rush him to a hospital. David did not survive his wound.

When I went home, in those days, it was to Managua, where I lived from 1983 through 1990, mostly with my Nicaraguan wife Claudia and her family, who took me in as one of their own. With Claudia’s help, I published [Nicaragua](#), a well-received book of photographs that captured, I hoped, something of what the country and her people had lived.

In February 1990, Nicaraguans went to the polls, and the Sandinistas led by Daniel Ortega expected to win. But when the results came in, the victory went to the opposition.

The morning after, Managua felt like a city that had sinned. The streets were empty, most residents holed up in their homes waiting for the reaction to their vote. Perhaps in their wisdom, Nicaraguans voted the Sandinistas out of power after more than a decade of their rule. Many feared that another six years of Sandinista government meant six more years of U.S.-sponsored war.

Washington had made it perfectly clear it would keep up economic pressure, at least, unless Ortega was ousted. The Contra War already had claimed the lives of some 30,000 people—in addition to a similar number lost during the 1979 revolution. Perhaps Nicaraguans felt that was enough.

Claudia, who valiantly supported and protected me as I worked to understand and to document her country, and who had such high hopes for her revolution, lay exhausted and curled up on the bed in our home.

“Now it’s me who needs your support,” she said, her voice cracked with emotion.

It was time to move on.

III. Revolution Betrayed

Journalists follow the news. So when peace came to Central America at the beginning of the 1990s, I knew it was time for me to leave. The story that had dominated front pages and nightly news for more than a decade dissipated almost overnight.

In any case, I was ready to expand my work from Latin America and the Caribbean to more distant frontiers and Claudia, my Nicaraguan wife, was glad to escape the pressure cooker of a country mired in perpetual crisis. So we moved to Miami, a blend of developed and developing countries, where I still could cover major national and international stories, where my experience in conflict reporting and fluency in Spanish would be assets, and from where I could cover not just the region but stories far beyond.

It was a difficult transition. The logistics made sense, but the profession itself faced growing threats. By the end of the 1980s and especially at the beginning of the 1990s, the craft of photojournalism was contracting. Digital photography was becoming accessible to everyone; social media began to compete with the old mainstream operations, and 24/7 cable meant legacy outlets like Newsweek, my employer, became the platforms of old news before the magazines even hit the street stands.

I eventually moved to Philadelphia and began working for Video News International (VNI), the first company in the nation to use the new digital “prosumer” cameras to generate television content. Claudia and I had separated and eventually divorced. When VNI fell apart, I turned to freelancing with video. By the year 2000 I had begun teaching as my main gig and freelancing as much as time and energy would allow.

This was a difficult period. And it’s a lesson about how journalists sometimes build an identity around the work we do and how difficult it can be when that identity is disrupted.

Gone were the days when I could roar through La Montaña in my International Scout with total freedom in my quest for stories and pictures defining Nicaragua, the Contra War, and myself. As my divorce from Claudia impacted my finances, I had to sell off most of my cameras, clinging (to this day) only to some of my prized Nikon F3s and a few lenses, unable to part with those vestiges of a time—and an identity—gone by. Gone were my marriage and my stability with Claudia.

I was in a deep, dark hole, and it would take a number of years to climb out of it.

But Nicaragua never left me. And I never left Nicaragua.

“The World Stopped Watching”

White Pine Pictures is a Canadian documentary film production company whose members in 1986 produced *The World Is Watching*, about coverage of the Contra War in Nicaragua by Western media. I was one of the featured journalists. In 2002, some 16 years later, White Pine contacted me to ask whether I would be willing to return to Nicaragua to film a sequel.

“Absolutely.”

I proposed we scan a handful of images from my book, *Nicaragua*, and publish them in the country’s newspapers. We’d ask people to contact our producer in Managua if anyone recognized the people in the pictures, then we’d follow up on their stories since the Sandinista victory on July 19, 1979.

It worked. Sandinista soldiers. Contra fighters. Peasants. Workers. Our producer’s phone rang off the hook. And in the end? I found myself trying to explain how terrible those days had been, in large part because they failed to advance the Sandinistas’ plan for a more equitable Nicaragua than the one they inherited from the Somoza dictatorship.

Calling their sequel *The World Stopped Watching*, the White Pine filmmakers produced a documentary explaining how the absence of international media loosens the restraints on the bad guys, who can do whatever they want because we, the international observers and watchdogs, are not around to hold them accountable. And that’s exactly what has happened, at least in part.

At their electoral defeat in 1990, the Sandinista government accepted the process and, with no small amount of urging by former President Jimmy Carter, handed over power to a new government. It was the first time in Nicaragua’s history that a sitting government peacefully handed over power as the result of a legitimate, internationally recognized election.

NICO4:ORTEGA;MANAGUA, NICARAGUA, FEB. 22- Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, inaugurating an institute for aiding war veterans, delivers tough speech here Friday denouncing Reagan administration policy toward Nicaragua. REUTER
bg/Bill Gentile 1985



Courtesy Bill Gentile

At a news conference recognizing their landslide loss, Sandinista leaders, including ousted President Daniel Ortega, showed up with pallid, drawn faces. Most of the international press corps was stunned by the results as well.

“El cuadro está pintado,” one high-ranking Sandinista official declared just days before the vote. “The painting is complete,” he said, assuring me with blind confidence that the Sandinistas would crush the opposition. The result was a measure of how deeply the Sandinista leadership was disconnected from the people.

But at a rally not long after the vote, Ortega promised his followers that, “We will rule from below.” In other words, the highly organized Sandinista party would flex its muscles and get its way no matter who was president.

Malign Neglect

Anthony Quainton is a former Distinguished Diplomat in Residence in the School of International Service (SIS) at American University in Washington, DC. He spent 38 years in the U.S. foreign services as a diplomat in Nicaragua, Peru, Kuwait, and the Central African Republic. He also served as Coordinator of the Office for Combating Terrorism.

At a recent conference, Quainton delivered a keynote speech titled, “Managua and Washington in the Early Sandinista Revolution,” calling his assignment in Nicaragua in the early 1980s “Mission Impossible.”

He argued that had the United States made a major and long-term commitment to the social and economic development of the region and backed off its support for corrupt regimes, “some of the problems we are now encountering might have been avoided or at least ameliorated. Unfortunately, when the Sandinistas were eventually voted out of power in 1990, the United States largely lost interest in the region. We are reaping the whirlwind of that neglect in the refugee and gang crises we are now facing,” he said.

“Opportunities to create a more stable Central America existed four decades ago,” said Quainton. “They were lost. Both sides could not see beyond their ideologies. Neither could escape from its history. The Sandinistas believed that they were a vanguard party and that history had entrusted them a revolutionary mission. ... They could not escape from the troubled history of Yankee intervention. We could not escape from Vietnam and the experiences of the Cold War. Bridging the historical, ideological and emotional divide between us was more than I or my colleagues could do. Try as we could, the Mission was always impossible.”

Quainton’s argument is balanced and cogent, but it presumes there was some kind of parity in 1979 between a little country devastated by earthquakes and wars with no tradition of good governance, and a stable, global, functional democracy and superpower some 200 years old. Prior to 1979 much of the Sandinista leadership lived in La Montaña and in clandestine cells. They had little or no institutional foundation to build on. No Harvard or Oxford background to draw from. No Jefferson, Washington or Lincoln to emulate.

Instead, they were forced to cope with political, economic and military aggression by the single most powerful nation on earth. To justify that action, Ronald Reagan warned a group of conservative supporters that defeat of the contras would create “a privileged sanctuary for terrorists and subversives just two days’ driving time from Harlingen, Texas.” He warned that “feet people” trudging north would be “swarming into our country” to escape communism.

But if, as the Trump administration claims, Central Americans are now headed north in huge numbers, it’s because of the complete failure to address their hopes, their needs, and their safety.

Rule and Ruin

Yet none of this justifies what Sandinista rule has become.

Today, most of the original Sandinista leadership has abandoned the Ortega regime, viewing it as a betrayal of the organization’s original promises to the Nicaraguan people. Daniel Ortega has been president, once again, for the past 10 years. His wife, Rosario Murillo, is vice president.

During anti-government protests in the spring of 2018, Sandinista police and Sandinista-backed armed thugs killed an estimated 325 people. Media outlets are constantly harassed and shut down. Even international non-governmental organizations whose only agenda is to help the poor and underprivileged have abandoned the country because of government restrictions and intervention. Nicaragua continues to be rated as the second poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere.

So where do journalists and journalism fit into all this? How do we see our role? Four decades after my first arrival in Managua, have I helped bring about positive change? Did I do any good here?

I certainly hope so. I hope the images I created and published via UPI, *Newsweek* magazine, my Nicaragua book, and other outlets, have contributed to the visual record of that time and that place in history. It's important to remember that, at the time when I was covering the region, there was no Facebook, no Google, no Instagram, no email. There was no internet! Television was limited to ABC, CBS, and NBC. CNN was just beginning. Fox did not exist. So most of the world relied on a handful of magazines including *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report*, *Life* and *National Geographic*, for its visual explanation of the globe. Major newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* published only black and white pictures back then.

A handful of women and men, including myself, were privileged to be part of a small cadre of photojournalists entrusted with the mission of providing the world with a visual explanation of itself. And



A Sandinista soldier holds a flower / Courtesy Bill Gentile

we did so sometimes despite great peril.

But there is another dimension to what we do, perhaps more important than our impact on the wider world. And that is the mere act of practicing our craft defines and validates us. Like La Montaña for the Sandinista guerrillas, journalism is the anvil upon which we journalists test, forge, and mold ourselves into what we aspire to be.

And I am at peace with that.

IV. Requiem

I've seen a lot of hard things in this country since first coming here to cover war 40 years ago. But what I saw during my four-day visit in the summer of 2019 was just as unsettling.

During the Sandinista “final offensive” that toppled the Somoza dictatorship in 1979, I photographed charred corpses set on fire to reduce the spread of disease and then torn apart by animals scavenging for food. I watched National Guardsmen pile like cord wood the ravaged bodies of Sandinista rebels. I made pictures of Red Cross workers inspecting bodies of men tortured and killed.

During the 1980s Contra War, a young combatant told me coldly how he and his colleagues dispatched some prisoners they had taken while fighting in the northern mountains.

“They had faces like dogs,” he said, as if that explained everything. As if that were true.

I photographed families on both sides of the political divide traumatized by the death or injury of their young men sucked into a war that would benefit neither side.

They were times of great hardship but they also were times of great hope. Hope for a new beginning in a country tired of living for too long in the grip of a U.S.-backed dictatorship.

I returned to Nicaragua in July 2019, in part, to witness the July 19 celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution. To be clear, none of the things I saw during my trip measure up to the horrors of the 1979 insurrection or the decade-long Contra War. But what I found was the foundation for a new cycle of violence.

Discontent with their Sandinista rulers has been festering for years among many Nicaraguans fed up with the corruption, nepotism, arrogance, and lies of a government led by former Sandinista guerrilla leader and now President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo.

The top blew off in April 2018 when students conducting peaceful protests of government pension reforms were met with lethal force by government forces and [pro-Sandinista thugs known as “turbas”](#) who killed at least 325 people and wounded 2,000 others, according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Since the violence, some 60,000 Nicaraguans have fled the country in fear for their personal safety.

Ortega was a member of the five-person Junta of National Reconstruction that took power immediately after the overthrow of the U.S.-installed Somoza dictatorship. He was elected president in 1984 after

clean, internationally supervised elections, inspiring nearly universal support and hope that his country would break the banana republic tradition that had become the rule for so many years in so many Central American countries. He was voted out in 1990 and, for the first time in Nicaragua's history, relinquished power in a peaceful handover to a successor, in this case Violeta Chamorro.

After years of "ruling from below," Ortega and the Sandinista party won the presidency again in 2007, and since then have cut devilish deals to perpetuate their hold on power with some of the most abhorrent sectors of Nicaraguan society. He rigged the constitution to potentially allow him to be president for life. He now controls the vast majority of news and information outlets. His policies allow the rich to get richer—this in the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. To win the backing of the Catholic Church, he passed legislation banning all abortion—even when the mother's life is at risk by proceeding with a pregnancy.

I attended a rally in the main plaza of the capital city of Managua. And although the plaza and the avenues leading to it were packed with tens of thousands of Nicaraguans, I saw a different Nicaragua there—a Nicaragua seemingly void of the altruism and the idealism I saw in the early days of Sandinista rule. I saw a Nicaragua deeply divided between supporters and opponents of Sandinista rule. I felt uneasy. Too many people watching me from the corners of their eyes or from behind dark glasses.

I rode through the neighborhood where Ortega and his wife live, and saw a cordon of concrete, steel, and men with guns barricading traffic to the presidential house from at least five blocks away in every direction.

I saw government paramilitaries dressed in black guarding a radio and television station raided and sacked by government forces who also jailed the station's owner. I visited a church where government forces and their thugs killed two protesters who had taken refuge with dozens of others after being pursued by police and pro-Sandinista mobs. I saw where bullets slammed into the church, gouging deep into its concrete walls, and imagined the awful wounds inflicted on protesters not protected by those walls.

I watched a seasoned war correspondent fight back tears while describing the April 2018 uprising and how government forces and allies killed with abandon on the streets of the capital city of Managua.

Journalists told me they are attacked online and in the streets just for doing their job. Many have fled the country. I saw articles published in opposition newspapers openly referring to the Sandinista government as a "dictatorship," and calling Ortega and Murillo "dictators." I read venomous online posts by government supporters threatening critics of the Sandinista regime.

I saw the giant decorative steel trees erected across Managua on the orders of Vice President Murillo—about 150 of them all over the country. Each reportedly costs about \$25,000. I heard reports that the importation of steel to make the trees, the installation of lights on each of them, and the guards needed to protect them against citizens who see them as the embodiment of poor governance and corruption, all are handled by businesses owned by Ortega's and Murillo's children. And about half of them have been torn down by protesters.

I visited shopping malls, restaurants, bars and hotels—now largely devoid of foreign tourists who once flocked here to bask in the tropical sun and to enjoy the warm, good-humored hospitality this country is known for.



A Sandinista rally in front of trees erected by Vice President Murillo / Courtesy Bill Gentile

I listened to one former Sandinista supporter voice deep concern that current government policies could spark yet another round of violence—meaning all the blood and sweat of the past 40 years was spilled for nothing. When all peaceful means of change are met with violent repression, this person said, a violent response becomes inevitable.

In conversations with Nicaraguans, I listened carefully and waited for some signal of their political leanings, wary not to offend. The Sandinistas still have support in Nicaragua. Critics argue, however, that the Sandinistas purchase that support with special privileges, material favors, or the security of a decent job.

I asked one ardent Sandinista supporter how Ortega could allow things to get so out of control.

“Ortega no controla ni verga!” this person said of the 73-year-old president (“Ortega doesn’t control a fucking thing!”) instead blaming the current state of affairs on the president’s wife, a version of events that I heard repeatedly during my trip.

As I toured this country that I have learned to love, I wondered what Augusto César Sandino, or the founders of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, would say of today’s system called *“Sandinismo.”* I wondered if they would think today’s version of Sandinismo is a valid reflection, or a mutation, of their original ideals.

On the morning of my departure from Nicaragua, I packed my bag and paced the hotel room. Through the hotel windows I watched the palm trees sway in the summer breeze, the sky outside a joyous, bright blue utterly inconsistent with the gloom in my heart. I paced some more, trying to process all the hard things I had seen here. I sat on the edge of the bed, contemplating the specter of another national convulsion of violence.

For this trip, I had seen enough.

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