

The Fall of the Contras: Why Nicaragua's Rebel Forces Failed

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EMILIE DUNS, JAN 20 2025

Nicaragua was characterised by political unrest for a large part of the 1900s. The Sandinista uprising against the Somoza government in 1979 was supposed to mark a new time in Nicaraguan history.[1] However, the Sandinistas failed to sufficiently improve the economic state and societal standards in the country. As a reaction to the poor governance and doubts regarding the intentions of the new government, the Contra insurgency developed. Despite strong efforts, they were unsuccessful in overthrowing the Sandinista government. At the end of the '80s, the Sandinistas and Contras agreed to a ceasefire, and the insurgency had to gradually disarm.[2] After a long revolution that weighed heavily on Nicaragua, the insurgency no longer posed an active threat to the government and ended in failure. This essay will explore why the insurgency failed and argue that it failed due to a combination of inadequate external support, insufficient military, and lack of support from the population.

The first section of the essay will explore how the US support affected the insurgency and how the loss of it helped lead to its failure. The second section will consider the military factors that led to the Contra failure. Finally, the essay will consider how the lack of support from the Nicaraguan population was the final factor that led to the insurgency's defeat. The essay will conclude that the reason for the insurgency's failure was not a single mistake, but a combination of all these factors, culminating in the Contras collapse.

Before answering the question, I see the need to define what an insurgency is. For the purpose of the essay, the definition will be based on O'Neill's definition of insurgency. An insurgency is, therefore, a nonruling group that "consciously uses political resources [...] and violence to destroy, reformulate or sustain the basis of legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics." [3] The scope of the essay will be limited to only consider the time after the Sandinistas had already overthrown the Somoza government and become the legitimate government in Nicaragua. There is some inconsistency amongst academics regarding whether the Contras were the insurgency or counterinsurgency, as the Sandinistas started as a revolutionary movement against the Somoza regime. However, as the essay discusses the time after the Sandinistas became the official government, the Contras were an insurgency.

Inadequate external support

The Contra insurgency developed as a response to the dissatisfaction with the Sandinista government in the 1980s and was fuelled by the socioeconomic differences between classes.[4] While the Sandinista government originally was intended to be democratic, doubts regarding whether or not this was the case, added to the concerns and tension surrounding the regime.[5] It consisted of a combination of three different active fronts, ex-soldiers from the national guard during the Somoza regime in Honduras, Mosquito Indians, and The Democratic Revolutionary Alliance in Costa Rica.[6]

The Sandinista-Contra war was largely affected by the ongoing Cold War tensions, and while the insurgency partly developed organically, some academics argue that they were organised fully by the American government as a way to contain the feared spread of Marxism in Central America.[7] The United States openly disapproved of the Sandinista government and had incentive to support the Contras due to the Sandinista politics being rooted in communist ideology. As a way of weakening the government's position, the US allocated resources to fund the

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insurgency in the guise of defending the freedom of the Nicaraguan population and protecting democracy.[8] In addition to providing funding, the CIA supported them through covert operations in the early 1980s.[9] The US government aided the insurgency with training, recruiting, and intelligence collection.[10] Considering this, it is clear that the US aid to the insurgency played a significant role in allowing it to gain momentum in its early stages. However, the US and the Contras soon faced significant challenges, and the help that was initially meant to secure the insurgency's success became a detrimental factor in its downfall.

In 1984, it became public that the US and the CIA had contributed to the insurgency in mining Nicaraguan harbours. At the time, President Reagan had recently made the case for covert aid to halt the Sandinistas. However, the mining scandal led the administration to face criticism, and the government could not be convinced to authorise the previously promised aid.[11] The Contras were still able to remain active and continue to cause destruction despite the public retracement of the funding.[12] This was due to Congress only initially banning support to the Contras from the CIA and Department of Defence.[13] Therefore, the insurgency was still able to receive support from other agencies and actors.

When the news broke about National Security Council professionals having funnelled profits from arms sales to Iran into the Contras in 1986, support for the insurgency received even more criticism.[14] Part of the NSC had privately engaged in deals with Iran, where they had traded arms for hostages, and some of the profits from the exchanges had been diverted to the organisation.[15] The controversy became known as the Iran-Contra affair.[16] The scandal was the beginning of the end for them, as they struggled to uphold their activities without funding. It was clear that the survival of the Contras was dependent on American aid, and indirectly, this helped the Sandinista's prospects of defeating the insurgency. In counterinsurgency theory, cutting off the insurgency from its support is a factor that can promote the defeat of the insurgency.[17] When the Contras were cut off from the US support, this worked in the Sandinista's favour. Due to the number of controversies these events had generated in the international arena, partly due to the proceedings in the International Court of Justice, the insurgency was unlikely to receive support from other international actors, and was left to fend for itself.[18] This shows that the inadequate external support the Contras received was one of the factors that led to their failure.

Insufficient military

The second main factor for the group's failure to overthrow the Sandinista government was their insufficient military. Their military capabilities were severely lacking compared to the Sandinistas. While the funding from the US helped and did improve their ability to grow and train their fighters, the Sandinistas were improving their own capabilities at the same time. Due to the US strategy of Low Intensity Warfare, comprising of attacks from the insurgency forces while implying to Nicaraguan intelligence that an invasion was on the horizon, the Sandinistas were forced to gear up their forces.[19] The combination of having to prioritise defence against a prospective US invasion and attacks simultaneously, led to an increased amount of Nicaragua's national budget going into military forces. By 1985, almost 50% of their budget had been devoted to the military.[20] Even though the Sandinistas had superior military capabilities, they were heavily impacted by the fear that the Contras were only a distraction to lure their forces away so US troops could attack urban defences.[21] This illustrates that the Contras, with the US support, were able to constitute a real threat towards the Sandinista military, as they did enough damage in Nicaragua to make the government devote an extensive amount of resources to hinder them. As the US never invaded, the Sandinista regime proved to be capable of defending itself against the insurgency. Their campaign was successful in preventing the Contras from gaining power.

The Sandinista government building up their forces to prepare for a potential US invasion was not the only thing that challenged the insurgency's military capabilities. In *Blood of Brothers*, Kinzer writes that: "It was Contra practice to attack lightly defended targets and then withdraw before government troops arrived. Militarily they were underdogs and they knew it." [22] This encapsulates how the insurgency had to adapt to be able to inflict damage on their targets, as they were not strong enough to face battles head-on. Furthermore, their fighters were young boys from poor social classes whose only motivation to join the insurgency was the intolerable Sandinista rule.[23] While they could be trained when the insurgency had support from the US, their odds of becoming trained fighters decreased once US-aided training disappeared. Therefore, Kinzer's description indirectly illustrates the lack of experience and

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military capability of the enlisted troops. Inexperience, especially in combination with reduced funding in the aftermath of the Iran-Contra affair, gave the Contras even lower odds of defeating the Sandinistas, who had always been militarily stronger.

A final contributor to the insurgency's insufficient military capability was the ineffective leadership and lack of internal support and cohesion. One of the key variables determining the outcome of the military success in an insurgency is the internal solidarity of a fighting force.[24] This means that there needs to be leadership that fosters dedication amongst the fighters and that the troops must feel unified with each other and the leadership for an insurgency to survive. Due to the structure of the insurgency, with members spread over different countries, they were never able to act like a single force.[25] Hence, it was of even greater importance that the leadership remained strong and respected. The insurgency leadership consisted mainly of ex-soldiers, which in itself should imply that the Contras could have had the opportunity to train new members and improve their military standing. However, the leadership grew stagnant, and the previous soldiers from the Somoza government's primary driver was revenge against the Sandinistas.[26] This did not align with the peasantry's causes for joining the organisation, which led to a disconnect between the fighters and the leadership.[27]

When the members realised that these were not the type of people that should be in leadership in the case of success, the insurgency leadership faced the challenge of maintaining support from within. Nasution argues that the leaders of a guerrilla must remember that they are directed by the people and should act like spearpoints.[28] In the case of the Contras, the leadership was not able to adapt to the needs of the people due to their own priorities, which cost them vital support from within the organisation. The combination of going up against the strength of the Sandinistas without support from the US, inexperienced recruits and weak leadership made a military victory impossible for the Contras. The combination of these struggles was a factor that evidently led to the insurgency's failure.

Lack of support from the population

The Sandinistas were originally appreciated by the Nicaraguan people as they improved education, healthcare, and economic development, compared to the Somoza regime. However, their rule grew similar to the previous government in terms of neglecting rural areas and parts of the population that were severely affected by poverty.[29] This should have given the insurgents ample opportunity to recruit civilians in the fight against the regime, considering that it grew from socioeconomic disparities.[30] However, the Contras quickly became known for being aggressive and violating human rights. Kidnapping, torture and rape were only some of the human rights violations they committed against Nicaraguan citizens.[31] This was detrimental to their ability to be successful in the revolution, as their reputation made it hard for them to get enough support from the population, regardless of how many people were unhappy with the Sandinista regime. The organisation struggled to gain support due to the damage they were inflicting on the population. They destroyed ports, vehicles, health care centres, and schools, areas that are crucial for social development.[32] Moreover, some of their main targets were technically trained workers and civilians with vital functions in society, such as teachers and health personnel.[33] The material damages, in combination with the economic repercussions these damages inflicted, were harmful to an already fragile society.

The Nicaraguan government was forced to attribute resources to the destruction the Contras caused, which led to even less compassion for the insurgents' cause. The Sandinista government's inability to provide for the population should have given the insurgency an advantage. However, the atrocities the insurgents were committing against civilians turned them against them.[34] The extensive resources demanded from them in a country that was already in a fragile state accelerated the animosity. Production of goods that served as the Nicaraguan economy's backbone, such as coffee, beans, and cattle were located in conflict zones.[35] On top of the young inhabitants who were forced to fight against the insurgents, the population also had to account for mobilising people to physically protect workers from attacks. For instance, people were being mobilised to protect coffee pickers.[36] This symbolises yet another way the Nicaraguan civilians had to sacrifice resources to uphold the little economic capital that they had.

Unsurprisingly, Nicaraguans living in poverty who originally were inclined to support the insurgent group became

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hostile to the revolution, as the economic burden was too much to bear.[37] Guerrilla soldiers have to be rooted in the "soul of the people" and can only truly thrive if the people are the foundation of the movement.[38] It is essential for success that a "favourable climate" is maintained to foster support for the revolution.[39] Considering the circumstances in Nicaragua throughout the Contra war, it is evident that the Contras did not maintain a beneficial environment. On the contrary, they had the conditions lined up for them to recruit a large part of the population that felt neglected by the regime. Although they managed to gain enough support to cause destruction, they sabotaged themselves by inflicting damage in the wrong places and alienating the people who could have become their allies.

Conclusion

This essay has explored why the Contra insurgency failed in Nicaragua and has argued that it failed due to inadequate external support, insufficient military and a lack of support from the civilian population. In the end, the Sandinista-Contra war cost Nicaragua more than 150,000 victims.[40] The discontent with the Sandinista regime created optimal conditions to recruit civilians for their movement. Initially, with US support and funding, the insurgency was able to cause considerable destruction and pose a serious threat towards the Nicaraguan government. However, as the external support the organisation received got taken away, they were left fending for themselves in unfavorable conditions. These challenges were intensified by the inexperience of Contra fighters and a weak leadership built of ex-Somoza fighters with personal desires for revenge. The inability to fight as a unified front significantly reduced the level of their military capabilities. Finally, the insurgency alienated groups that would have been the target population for gathering support. The damage they caused on infrastructure and the atrocities they inflicted on civilians made them an unattractive force to join. This was the final mistake in a line of many that ultimately led to their failure.

Notes

[1] Richard J. Regan, 'Revolution and Civil War in Nicaragua (1978-90)', in *Just War, Second Edition* (Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 163-68, p. 163.

[2] Regan, 'Revolution and Civil War in Nicaragua', p. 163.

[3] Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare* (Washington: Brassey's (US), 1990). p. 13.

[4] O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism*, p. 4.

[5] Regan, 'Revolution and Civil War in Nicaragua (1978-90)', p. 163.

[6] Spencer C. Tucker, *Encyclopedia of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: A New Era of Modern Warfare* (New York, UNITED STATES: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2013), p. 118-119.

[7] Robert P. Hager, 'The Origins of the "Contra War" in Nicaragua: The Results of a Failed Development Model', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10, no. 1 (March 1998): 133-64, p. 133.

[8] Philip W. Travis, *Reagan's War on Terrorism in Nicaragua: The Outlaw State* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), p. 36.

[9] Alex Douville, 'The Iran-Contra Affair', CASE STUDIES WORKING GROUP REPORT (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2012), p. 97.

[10] Douville, 'The Iran-Contra Affair,' p. 98.

[11] Ibid., p. 99.

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[12] Stephen Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua*, 1st David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies ed (Cambridge, Mass. ; London, England: David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University, 2007), p. 310.

[13] Tucker, *Encyclopedia of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, p. 119.

[14] Douville, 'The Iran-Contra Affair,' p. 101.

[15] Douville, 'The Iran-Contra Affair,' p. 88.

[16] Ibid., p. 100.

[17] Thomas Rid and Thomas A. Keaney, eds., *Understanding Counterinsurgency: Doctrine, Operations and Challenges*, Cass Military Studies (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, [England] ; New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 93.

[18] Tucker, *Encyclopedia of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, p. 119.

[19] S. Gabriel and V. M. Satish, 'Us Intervention in Nicaragua: A Success or Failure?', *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 4 (1990): 565–79, p. 572.

[20] Gabriel and Satish, 'US Intervention in Nicaragua,' p. 572.

[21] Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers*, p. 295.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., p. 296.

[24] Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, 'The Role of Military Power', in *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America, A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 60–91, p. 60.

[25] Close, 'Responding to Low-intensity Conflict', p. 11.

[26] Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers*, p. 296.

[27] Robert Langlois, 'Becoming a Contra: The Dilemma of Peasants during the Revolution in Nicaragua', *International Journal* 52, no. 4 (1997): 695–713, p. 713.

[28] Abdul Haris Nasution, *Fundamentals of Guerrilla Warfare* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1965), p. 13.

[29] Gabriel and Satish, 'US Intervention in Nicaragua,' p. 572.

[30] O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism*, p. 4.

[31] Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers*, p. 206.

[32] Gabriel and Satish, 'US Intervention in Nicaragua,' p. 569.

[33] Gabriel and Satish, 'US Intervention in Nicaragua,' p. 569.

[34] Francis A. Boyle, 'Determining U.S. Responsibility for Contra Operations Under International Law', *American Journal of International Law* 81, no. 1 (January 1987): 86–93, p. 88.

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[35] Gabriel and Satish, 'US Intervention in Nicaragua,' p. 567.

[36] Ibid., p. 573.

[37] Ibid., p. 574.

[38] Nasution, *Fundamentals of Guerrilla Warfare*, p. 26.

[39] Ibid., p. 26.

[40] Dirk Kruijt Álvarez Eduardo Rey Tristán, Alberto Martín, ed., *Latin American Guerrilla Movements: Origins, Evolution, Outcomes* (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 136.

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