

The Sandinista Revolution in Christian Periodicals

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Introduction

Events in Nicaragua have long been absent from the public eye in America. However, the Sandinista revolution made Nicaragua impossible to ignore. The issue of Nicaragua was one that was polarizing for the Christian Community, and was an issue that Christians were on both sides of. On one hand, most of the support in the United States for the Sandinista government came from Protestant churches. On the other hand, the Christian right vehemently opposed the Sandinista government, and supported Reagan's efforts to overthrow it. How did Christian publications deal with the events in Nicaragua during the 1980s? To answer this question, let us look at two Christian Protestant periodicals, one conservative (*Christianity Today*), and one liberal (*Christian Century*). By examining *Christianity Today* and *Christian Century* from 1978 through 1990, we can better answer this question. In this paper, we will first look at a general history of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Then we will look more in depth at Protestant periodicals, and *Christianity Today* and *Christian Century* in general. Next we will look at the feedback each magazine received from its readers. Afterwards, we will examine one article in detail, before examining the two magazines year by year, and finally we will draw some conclusions.¹

In looking at the United States attitude towards the Sandinistas, Christian periodicals are of interest because Christians were heavily involved on both sides of the debate.

Many Protestant churches were pro-Sandinista. In fact, Protestant groups such as

¹ It should be noted that *Christian Century* has an "Events and People" section, in which updates about events, like the civil war in Nicaragua, are included. While I do make use of this section, when I use the word "article" in this paper I am not counting these selections.

Witness for Peace traveled in Nicaragua to try find out what was really happening down there and contrast it to the reports the Reagan administration was giving. These people believed that the Sandinistas were a truly great form of government. They thought that the Sandinistas were Christian democratic socialists. Because of their support for the Sandinistas, and because they traveled Nicaragua in Sandals, they were called “Sandalistas” by the Nicaraguans.² On the other side was the Christian right. They believed the Sandinistas were a totalitarian communist government, which was actively violating human rights and suppressing the church. Pat Robertson, who prayed on television that God would help those in Nicaragua who are fighting against communism, and raised money through his television show for the Contras, was an example of this.

The Nicaraguan Revolution

To fully understand the history of Nicaragua, it is necessary to go back to 1893, when Jose Santos Zelaya of the liberal party was elected President of Nicaragua. Zelaya ensured Nicaraguan sovereignty by taking Nicaraguan’s Bluefields and the Miskito Coast back from the British. Zelaya also attempted to stop the growth of United States (U.S.) influence on Nicaragua. He accepted U.S. aid to get the British off the Caribbean coast, but refused to grant the United States the right to build a canal, and imposed restrictions on American investors. The United States grew upset with Zelaya, and attempted to remove him from power. Diplomatic and eventually military support went to Nicaragua’s Conservative Party, which overthrew Zelaya and established a government more acceptable to U.S. interests. However, the conservative government proved ineffective.

² Stephen Wykstra, Personal Interview, 15 November 1999.

Social and political unrest grew, and a young liberal, Benjamin Zeledon, formed a rebellion. Because United States investors would be in serious jeopardy if Zeledon won, the U.S. sent the Marines into Nicaragua to help put down the Rebellion in 1912. The conservative government of Nicaragua accepted the United States Marines, and the economy was placed under the control of the New York banks. The presence of United States troops, however, only served to increase the resentment felt by the Nicaraguan people against the conservative government. When the Marines tried to leave in 1926, the Conservative Government faced armed resistance, and the Marines returned. The United States attempted to work out a compromise between the Conservative Government and the Liberal Resistance. However the Liberals, led by Augusto Sandino refused to lay down their arms. Sandino's tactics of guerilla warfare prompted the U.S. to create a National Guard out of the indigenous population. Anastasio Somoza Garcia, who had lived in the United States as a car dealer, was made the head of the National Guard.

The United States troops withdrew in 1933, leaving Somoza in charge of the National Guard. Somoza entered into negotiations with Sandino, and when Sandino came to negotiate he was ambushed and killed by Somoza's National Guard. This was followed by massacres of hundreds of men, woman, and children who lived in former guerilla territory. Somoza encouraged his men to be corrupt and to engage in various forms of exploitative activity. This isolated them from the people, and made them more dependent on Somoza. In 1936, Somoza overthrew the elected president, and had himself inaugurated president.

Somoza and his National Guard were in control of Nicaragua. Somoza's National

Guard acted as a kind of legalized Mafia, where citizens wishing to engage in any legal or non-legal activity had to make sure to give the National Guard kickbacks. However, Somoza retained United States support by having his regime consistently back United States foreign policy. Somoza was entertained repeatedly at the White House.

In 1956 a young poet named Rigoberto Lopez Perez infiltrated a party given in honor of Somoza, and shot Somoza five times. Although Somoza died a few days later, his sons Luis and Anastasio became leaders. Luis died in 1967, and Anastasio became President until 1979. In 1972, an earthquake destroyed much of Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua. International relief poured in for the rebuilding of this city, but much of that relief money ended up in Somoza's own pocket. This incident caused many Nicaraguans to be convinced of Somoza's depravity, and increased the opposition to include a mixture of every class. In 1974, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) stepped up its attacks. Martial law was imposed, causing businessmen and Church leaders to speak out even more against Somoza. Somoza's human rights were so bad that the Carter administration cut off aid to Nicaragua. (However, Carter would later praise Somoza for improving his human rights record, angering the Sandinistas). In January 1978, Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, leader of the moderate opposition to Somoza, was assassinated. Although the identity of his assassins was never established, most of Nicaragua blamed Somoza. In September of 1978, the FSLN was able to set off a massive popular uprising against Somoza. In desperation Somoza used planes and tanks against his own people, killing more than 2000. Somoza would often use airplanes to bomb cities the Sandinistas occupied then send in his troops to mop up. His troops would

usually kill any young men who had the misfortune of being of fighting age. However, despite Somoza's efforts on July 19, 1979, FSLN entered Managua triumphant.³

The Sandinista revolution worked out so well because all classes were able to unite against Somoza. Once the common enemy was gone, the problems began to appear. Somoza had looted the national treasury before he left, leaving Nicaragua with a huge debt and little resources to pay it off. The business community withdrew their representatives from the new government. Although many priest had fought beside, or in some cases even lead the Sandinistas, tension developed between the Sandinistas and the Catholic Church. The United States was fearful that the Sandinistas would turn out to be a Marxist government and align themselves with the Soviet bloc. Although the United States, under Jimmy Carter, initially extended them economic aid. Ronald Reagan, who claimed that Nicaragua was shipping weapons to the leftist guerillas in El Salvador, cut off this aid. Instead, the Reagan administration began direct military assistance to the exiled units of Somoza's National Guard. It was determined that it was illegal for the United States to help the Contras because that was getting involved in another country's civil war, which violated the United States constitution. However, the United States gave humanitarian aid to the Contras. It has been frequently argued that the food and medical supplies the United States supplied the Contras with enabled the Contras to spend more money on weapons.

Although the Sandinistas enjoyed aid from Cuba and the Soviet bloc, and they enjoyed popular support, they clashed with the organized business community, the

³ Thomas Walker, *Nicaragua: the Land of Sandino* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), 14-45.

Catholic church, Communist trade unions, Miskito Indians, and *La Prensa* (the leading newspaper). Furthermore, United States backed counterrevolutionaries (Contras) carried out acts of terrorism, economic sabotage, and raids inside Nicaragua's borders.

The two conflicts that received the most attention in the United States were the Catholic Church and the Miskito Indians.

The Catholic Church had supported the Sandinistas during the revolution. In many cases Catholic priests fought side by side with the Sandinistas. In some instances, Catholic priests even led Sandinista units. Tomas Borge, the only surviving founder of the Sandinistas by 1979, was openly Christian. However, tension began to appear. The Sandinistas tried to make the People's Church, a pro-revolution church created by the Sandinistas, into the official state church. The Catholic Church was skeptical of this, and refused to support the People's Church. Reports began coming out of Nicaragua of mistreatment of Catholic priests, and some members of the Catholic church became openly vocal in their opposition to the Sandinistas.⁴

The Miskito Indians, on the other hand, were ethnic Indians who considered themselves Miskito's first, Nicaraguans second if at all. The Miskito homeland was split right in two by the Nicaraguan/ Honduras border, but the Miskitos often disregarded this border. They were largely unaware of national politics, and when the Sandinistas showed up proudly declaring themselves as their liberators, the Miskitos thought they were just another group of foreign imperialists. The Sandinistas, not understanding the Miskitos, interpreted their resistance to Sandinista rule as counter-revolutionary activity. The

⁴ Humberto Belli, *Breaking Faith: The Sandinista Revolution and Its Impact on Freedom and Christian Faith in Nicaragua* (Westchester: Crossway books, 1985), 183-210

Sandinistas also wished to protect the environment that the Miskitos were living in. They tried to stop the Miskitos from cutting down trees. Misunderstandings on both sides led to sometimes violent encounters. The most shocking were cases where Miskito villages were burned and the inhabitants massacred. This was never Sandinista policy, and the Sandinista government officially condemned the acts, but they were done by Sandinista soldiers.⁵

On November 4, 1984, the Sandinistas held their first election. Although the United States did its best to undermine the elections, more than four fifths of Nicaragua's electorate voted, and the Sandinista candidate, Daniel Ortega, won two thirds of the vote. Every international observer outside of the United States declared the elections valid. However, the Reagan administration refused to recognize the election, and continued efforts to undermine the Nicaraguan government.

In 1985, the Reagan administration embargoed all United States-Nicaraguan trade, and increased the military pressure. Nicaragua declared a state of emergency. However, the Contras made little headway, and opposition in the United States was increasing to Reagan's policies. In 1987, the president of Costa Rica, Oscar Arias, proposed a peace plan. According to the peace plan, the Contras would disarm and internal democracy would be restored in Nicaragua. Both Reagan and the Contra leaders rejected the plan. However, when the United States congress cut off Contra aid, the Contras were forced to enter negotiation. Peace was eventually reached.

The height of United States media attention occurred in 1986 when it was

⁵ Belli, 106-117.

revealed that the United States government sold weapons to Iran in hopes that the Iranian government would be able to help free U.S. citizens being held hostage in Lebanon. The money made from this sale went to help the Contras. Since this was an illegal act by the United States government that many believe was overseen by the president himself, it received much media attention.

In 1990, the next elections were held in Nicaragua. Although almost all involved parties expected the Sandinistas to win, many Nicaraguans were afraid of continued pressure from the United States if the Sandinistas remained in power. Instead, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro (widow of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro) of the National Opposition Union won with United States backing. She was sworn in as President in April of 1990.

Protestant Periodicals

Before looking closely at *Christian Century* and *Christianity Today* it is worth making some general comments about Protestant periodicals, and Christian periodicals in general.

Religious periodicals have a long history in the United States. In fact they rank among the earliest of the periodicals published in the English Colonies that later became the United States and have been popular ever since.⁶ Religious periodicals also serve an important function. Charles Austin, a Lutheran pastor, wrote that religious periodicals are vital because secular media often will ignore religious events, or is inept at reporting them. Religious periodicals also serve as an alternative source of media in which current events are looked at from a perspective of faith.⁷

⁶ Charles Lippy, ed., *Religious Periodicals of the United States* (Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1986), xi.

⁷ Charles Austin, "The History and Role of the Protestant Press," in *Reporting Religion: Facts and Faith* ed. Benjamin Hubbard (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1990), 114-115.

Richard Ostling, news editor for *Christianity Today* in the 1960s once said, “All to many church periodicals are slow or sluggish in responding to the issues of the day”.⁸

Ostling brings up an important dilemma faced by the editors of Christian magazines.

Editors are often cautious about commenting too strongly on current day issues for fear they will offend their readers. However, if the magazine gets too bland, readers will turn away.⁹ This dilemma is clearly seen in the Nicaragua crisis.

For the purposes of this paper we will look at two Protestant periodicals, *Christianity Today* and *Christian Century*.

Christian Century can trace its history all the way back to 1884, when it was known as Christian Oracle. “The *Century*, characterized by its outspoken opinions on every aspect of contemporary life, grew to be one of the most influential religious periodicals in the United States”.¹⁰ The *Century* has sought to be the voice of Christian liberalism throughout its publication. Over the course of its run, it has moved from dogmatism to developing a greater appreciation for the complexity of the human predicament.¹¹

In 1972 James Wall became editor of the magazine, and has remained so all the way to the present. Although *Christian Century* is famous for its strong positions on contemporary issues, this became somewhat diminished under Wall (although it did not disappear completely). It was replaced by a “complex, pluralistic voice”.¹² Also under

⁸ Richard Ostling in Austin, 112.

⁹ Austin, 113

¹⁰ Annalee Ward, “Christian Century,” in *Popular Religious Magazines of the United State* ed. Mark Fackler and Charles Lippy, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 110.

¹¹ James Wall in Annalee Ward, 110.

¹² Ibid., 113.

Wall, the *Century* turned its interest more to the third world, and gives high priority to matters of social justice.

Christian Century has a high level of readership. Its circulation since the 1920s has remained at between 35,000 and 40,000. Because of the large number of libraries that subscribe to it, readership is probably much higher. By 1963, the *Christian Century* was the only religious magazine among the 20 most requested periodicals at libraries.¹³

Although a liberal Protestant magazine, it has among its readers and contributors Catholics, Jews, and Evangelicals. The typical subscriber to *Christian Century* is generally a religious professional, either in a teacher at a college or seminary or a worker in the parish setting.¹⁴

Christianity Today, the other magazine, was founded in 1956 as the conservative response to the Protestant liberalism found in *Christian Century*. Its first editor, Carl Henry, described its founding as an attempt to give *Christian Century* “a run for its biases”.¹⁵ Kenneth Dole wrote in the *Washington Post* and *Times Herald* that the magazine was “to conservative, fundamentalist, orthodox Protestants what the *Christian Century* is to more liberal believers”.¹⁶ Described as neo-evangelical, the magazine has sought to write about American life from a conservative, evangelical stance. Billy Graham himself co-founded the magazine with his father-in-law L. Nelson Bell.

In 1978, when the Sandinista revolution came into the focus in American media,

¹³ Martin Marty, et. Al., *The Religious Press in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 10.

¹⁴ Mark Toulouse, “The Christian Century,” in *Religious Periodicals of the United States: Academic and Scholarly Journals*. ed. Charles Lippy, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 112.

¹⁵ Carl Henry in Douglas Sweeney, “Christianity Today,” in *Popular Religious Magazines of the United States* ed. Mark Fackler and Charles Lippy, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 146.

¹⁶ John Merritt, “Christianity Today,” in *Religious Periodicals of the United States: Academic and Scholarly Journals*. ed. Charles Lippy, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 136.

Kenneth S. Kantzer was editor of the magazine. Kantzer was interested in increasing the sophistication of the theology in the magazine. However, Kantzer was concerned about nurturing the community of evangelicals, and not causing dissension. Kantzer promised not to “condone any departure from biblical authority” but also said, “no personal vendetta will be carried out against those who may not disagree with us”.¹⁷ V. Gilbert Beers was editor of the magazine from 1982 to 1985. Although Beers was not editor long enough to make an impact on the magazine, he continued the course set by Kantzer, and “steered the magazine into even calmer waters”.¹⁸ In 1985, *Christianity Today* went through a structural change as former publisher and President Harold L. Myra became “publisher and executive editor”. Myra led a committee of senior editors, which included former editors Beers and Kantzer. Described as “more of a businessman/ journalist than a theologian,”¹⁹ Myra successfully moved *Christianity Today* into an increasingly sophisticated market place.

Although the magazine began with a readership of intellectually sophisticated pastors and professors, it has moved to a mass audience over the years. This is reflected in the increasingly simple language used by the magazine. There has also been a shift in the authors of the magazine. Between 1959 to 1983, academics went from writing 58% of the material for *Christianity Today* to 36%.²⁰

Feedback

One thing of interest is the letters readers will write back to the magazine. This

¹⁷ Kenneth Kantzer in Sweeney, 147.

¹⁸ Sweeney, 148.

¹⁹ Ibid., 148.

²⁰ Merrit, 137.

shows not only what kind of audience the magazine has, but how much the audience supports the direction the magazine is taking. In 1979, when *Christianity Today* published its first few articles on the Sandinistas, not one reader response was printed. *Christian Century* did not print any reader response to its articles on Nicaragua either. Let us take three years in the 1980s where both magazines had articles on Nicaragua: 1981, 1985, and 1989. In 1981 *Christianity Today* published two articles on Nicaragua, and printed zero responses from readers. In 1985 *Christianity Today* published five articles on Nicaragua, and not one reader response was printed. In 1989 *Christianity Today* published two articles on Nicaragua, and again it printed zero reader responses. Since both magazines reserve for themselves the right to decide which letters will and will not be published, we should be careful about making the assumption that since no letters were published, that means no readers wrote in. Although both magazines frequently publish letters that are critical of the magazine itself or articles that appear in the magazine, nevertheless a selection process does occur. Since the criteria for selection is not known, no substantial conclusions can be drawn from the above data.

However, we may hypothesize that the lack of printed letters in *Christianity Today* could indicate the possibility that no readers responded. If this was the case (and as already stated we can not say for certain that it was) then we may conclude that the readers of *Christianity Today* were either not informed enough on Nicaragua to contest the articles in the magazine, agreed with the articles, or did not care. Since *Christianity Today* is pitched to a mass audience, perhaps the audience of the magazine was largely uniformed enough to contest the opinions of the magazine.

By contrast *Christian Century* contained two articles about Nicaragua in 1981, and printed one letter written in response. In 1985, *Christian Century* published twelve articles about Nicaragua and printed seven letters in response. In 1989, *Christian Century* published three articles on Nicaragua and printed one letter in response.

Many of the readers who wrote back to *Christian Century* were informed about the topic themselves. For instance, Paul Jeffery, who wrote a letter in 1981 in response to an article by Joseph Cassidy, would later write several his own articles about Nicaragua in *Christian Century*. In 1985, Penn Keble and Michael Novak wrote to *Christian Century* representing the Institute for Religion and Democracy (IRD). (Novak is also a well known rightist who has published several books and journal articles in addition to serving as a United States ambassador, a delegate for the United States, an advisor to the White House from 1974-1980, and a member of the faculty at Harvard and Notre Dame.)

²¹ Charles W. Bare also wrote in 1985, representing the Ecumenical Services Association. In 1989, Alan Wisdom wrote in representing the IRD.

Since, the subscribers to *Christian Century* are generally religious professionals, often teachers at Colleges and Seminaries, it should be no surprise that some of them are informed enough to respond on the Nicaraguan issue.

Article in Detail

By examining one article in more detail, it may be helpful to gain a broader understanding of what goes into an article in general. In the October second issue in 1987 of *Christianity Today* Stephen Wykstra, a philosophy professor at Calvin College had an

²¹ "Michael Novak." <http://www.aei.org/scholars/novak.htm> (17 December 1999).

article published on the situation in Nicaragua. I had the privilege of talking to Dr. Wykstra on November 15, 1999.

Wykstra said the article was written at a time when he was pro-Sandinista. Wykstra was trying to oppose the institute for Religion and Democracy (IRD), which, he believed, was trying to portray an untrue picture of the Sandinistas. Wykstra believed the media did not accurately represent what was going on in Nicaragua. After doing an intensive media analysis, Wykstra concluded that although the Contras were routinely butchering civilians, their atrocities never received much media attention. However, the Sandinista atrocities certainly caught the attention of the media.

The article is written in the style of objective journalism. That means, Wykstra said, that he quoted both sides without saying which side he thought was right. A reader, Wykstra said, reading an objective journalism article would not know what the opinion of the author was. The article quotes the accusations of the IRD are, and then includes a response to them by Ron Sider. Wykstra asserted he had to be careful in this article because of the conservative nature of *Christianity Today's* audience.

The article is about Gustavo Parajon, whom Wykstra actually met in 1984. Parajon was head of the Evangelical Committee for Aid and Development (CEPAD). Because CEPAD was sympathetic to the Sandinistas, it had been under attack by the IRD. Wykstra used Ron Sider to reply to IRD's accusations, because Ron Sider would have been well known to *Christianity Today* readers. Only a few months before Wykstra's article, *Christianity Today* published an article in its July 10 issue entitled, "A talk with Ron Sider."

Wykstra thought his article was balanced. People thought he was a little extreme in those days, so it helped to have his article published in a mainline publication like *Christianity Today*. He got a good response to it, although he doesn't remember any specific feedback. In fact, the only letter *Christianity Today* printed about Wykstra's article appeared in the December 11 issue, and was by a professor from Fullerton College named Derry Seaton. Seaton was upset about another article *Christianity Today* had printed, and said it "typifies a too-common trait of assuming a single Christian perspective on current issues." Seaton said that, "The next article by Steve Wykstra on Gustavo Parajon is an example of better journalism".

Wykstra, on a trip to Washington, actually met the staff of *Christianity Today*, including Beth Spring. Their fairness and objectivity impressed him, as well as their commitment to the truth. Wykstra noted that *Christianity Today* was often caught in the middle between very pro-Sandinista groups like *Sojourners*, and anti-Sandinista groups like the IRD.

Year by Year

For the research involved in this paper, I have gone through and examined every article concerning Nicaragua in both *Christianity Today* and *Christian Century* from 1978 to 1990, with the intent of discovering what kind of coverage each magazine gave to events in Nicaragua, and how this changed over time. My findings are summarized below.

Before I began my reading the periodicals, I had certain expectations. I expected *Christian Century* to follow the trend of liberal Protestantism at the time and to be in

support of the Sandinistas. Conversely, I expected *Christianity Today* to attack the Sandinistas.

In my readings I discovered that many of the articles in *Christian Century* and all of the articles in *Christianity Today* are written in the objective style of journalism. This means that the author will quote from both sides of the issue, and not let the reader know how he or she feels himself or herself. If objective journalism is done right, the reader will not know what the biases of the author are. However, there are methods that I employed to try and find the bias of a certain author. The events that the author chooses to focus on or not focus on are key. Also of note is how much proportional space each side received. If one side received much more space than the other, that is a sign that the author was biased towards that side. Finally, which side received the last word is also of interest. (Obviously, someone has to have the last word, so one can not read too much into this. However, taken into account with other factors this can sometimes be illuminating.)

One of the interesting things is the complete lack of coverage of Nicaragua in these periodicals before the Sandinistas. Take for example four different religious periodical indexes. There is the Index of Religious periodicals, which covers the period from 1948-1958 and indexes 15 different Christian journals. Also there is the Religion Index, which goes from 1949 to the present, and indexes 100 Christian journals. Next is the Christian Periodical Index, which contains 20 Christian journals, and covers the period from 1956 to the present. Finally, Guide to Religious and Semi-Religious Periodicals, which indexes 75 Christian Journals, and goes from 1965 to the present.

These indexes indicate that there were only 13 articles published about Nicaragua in any religious magazine before 1979. Of these, six were about the Earthquake that occurred in Managua on December 23, 1972. However, the earliest article of these six was not until March of 1973. The rest of the articles deal with the church and mission efforts in Nicaragua.

The Sandinistas were formed on July 23, 1960. They did not obtain much press coverage in the United States at first. Joshua Muravchik asserted that the heavy media coverage of the Nicaraguan civil war and the Sandinista movement became overwhelming in July of 1978.²² In the September 8, 1979 issue of *Human Events*, Evan Stanton wrote “Scarcely a day goes by, so it seems, without some breathless news dispatch from Nicaragua extolling the virtues of the Sandinista revolution”.²³ However *Christianity Today* would not have an article on the Nicaraguan revolution until August 17, 1979. *Christian Century’s* first reference to the revolution occurred in September of 1978.

Christianity Today published two articles on Nicaragua prior to the outbreak of United States media attention, one was in the December 21, 1973, and reported on the Managua earthquake, the other was on December 19, 1975, and reported on a religious revival in Managua following the earthquake. Nevertheless, *Christianity Today* was slower in responding to the crisis. Coverage started in July 1978, but their first article did not appear until August 17, 1979. This is consistent with Richard Ostling’s above view

²² Joshua Muravchik in Allan Brownfeld, “How the Media Misled us on the Sandinistas,” *Human Events*, 11 February 1989, 6-7

²³ Stanton Evans, “AP, ‘Post’ cover up for Sandinistas,” *Human Events*, 8 September 1979, 17.

that religious periodicals are slow in responding to current issues.

1978

In September of 1978, *Christian Century* featured an article that referred to the events in Nicaragua, while the focus of the article was actually on the Catholic Church in Central America. The article was not sympathetic to Somoza and mentions that his forces brutally beat a group of Catholic priests and then used them as shields. However, the article identified the teenage guerrillas as communists (the name Sandinista was not even used), and quoted a Catholic nun who said, “Communism is not what I want. I tell the young people that the communists do not respect individual liberty in any country they control”.

One month later, in November, an article was published on seventeen hunger strikers in Paraguay. The article asserted that events in Nicaragua had monopolized the headlines, so that “the silent protest of 17 Paraguayan political prisoners hadn’t a chance of being heard”. The article only had one sentence in describing Nicaragua, but it was a vivid one. “Teen-agers were standing off soldiers in hand-to-hand combat, refugees were streaming out of cities, a Red Cross ambulance and its occupants were riddled by machine-gun fire.” An article in December of 1978 made a passing reference to Ernesto Cardenal, “a poet of stature in his native Nicaragua as well as one of the country’s most vociferous social critics”.

An article on December 27, 1978, was the first full article by either magazine on the situation in Nicaragua. The article was very anti-Somoza, and quoted Daniel Aguirre of *La Prensa*, who said, “You must understand, everyone here is in the opposition”.

Although this was the first article by *Christian Century* to mention the Sandinistas by name, it said surprisingly little about them, preferring to focus on the conditions of Nicaragua instead.

1979

Most media coverage of the Sandinistas was favorable at first. *Christianity Today* was no exception. Despite the conservative leanings of the magazine, the first article published about the Sandinistas, in August of 1979 by Stephen Sywulka, did not come down as hard on the Sandinistas as it could have done. Although the article did mention that many were ambivalent because of "the communist influence in the Sandinista camp" it also mentioned that many evangelicals sympathized with the rebels.

The ambivalence continued two issues later as Sywulka described the new Sandinista government. Sywulka mentioned that "Somoza and his allies looted the treasury before they left", but for the most part he laid the blame for damage caused by the civil war on both sides. "Much of the industry around Managua is in ruins, having been bombed, looted, or burned by forces from both sides." Here Sywulka's wording was misleading, for it implied the Sandinistas had participated in the bombing. However, the Sandinistas did not have the capability to bomb at that point, although aerial bombardment had clearly been one of Somoza's favorite techniques.²⁴

Sywulka mentioned that some pastors supported Somoza on the basis of Romans 13, but that many young Christians joined the Sandinistas. Sywulka included a quote by one church leader who said that believers should get ready to testify to a communist

²⁴ Thomas, 37.

government, but also said that the Roman Catholic Church supported the Sandinistas, although "in recent weeks the Catholic church has disengaged itself, at least partially, from Sandinista politics".

It had been almost a year since reference was made to Nicaragua in *Christian Century*. The next reference was only in passing. In his article on El Salvador, Patrick Lacefield mentioned the Nicaraguan revolution, and how it had inspired hope in the people of El Salvador that El Salvador would be next. This implied that the revolution in Nicaragua was a positive thing. There was an article by Barbara Brown on hunger, which referred to the poverty in Nicaragua on October 10, 1979. In November, Robert Longman used Somoza as one of the few examples of a case where a government was so corrupt that it had been obvious to everyone. In December, the Nicaraguan revolution was mentioned as one of the top stories of 1979. Interestingly, the only facts given about the revolution were that it had overthrown Dictator Anastasio Somoza and several Catholic priests had been given prominent government positions.

1980

It was two days short of a year before *Christianity Today* published their next article on Nicaragua, on September 19, 1980. The author had changed, Paul Pretiz wrote instead of Sywulka. Paul Pretiz was much more optimistic concerning the Sandinistas, and he included several pro-Christianity quotes by Sandinista co-founder Tomas Borge. "As long as Sandinismo exist in Nicaragua, Christianity will continue to exist" and "You have heard us say, 'Sandinismo today, Sandinismo yesterday, Sandinismo forever' let me add, 'Jesus Christ today, Jesus Christ yesterday, Jesus Christ forever!'" The story is also

told how Borge had forgiven the National Guard soldiers of Somoza who had castrated him, had killed his wife, and had forced him to watch while seventeen men gang raped and then killed his daughter. The article mentioned the Sandinistas literacy campaign, and how Christians were taking part of it. It also said "Despite recent fears that the Nicaraguan revolution would be taking a Cuban-style Communistic direction, the governing Junta appears to be demonstrating a desire to gain broad popular support among both Roman Catholics and Protestants". This article could hardly have been more pro-Sandinista.

The only reference to Nicaragua in *Christian Century* in 1980 was in the "News and Events" section, and was about how the pope had ordered six priests in the Sandinista government to step down so that they could meet the spiritual needs of people. The pope said lay Christians could take over their posts just as effectively.

1981

The March 27 issue of *Christianity Today* contained an article by Ronald Frase, a former missionary to Latin America who had recently visited Nicaragua. Frase's article was strongly in favor of the Sandinistas. It contained quotes from two Americans living in Nicaragua who were upset because they thought things under the new Sandinista government were much more positive than the United States media had portrayed them. The article also interviewed Carlos Chamorro Coronel, part of the new government who, while he was not a Sandinista, supported their cause. Chamorro asserted that the revolution had not been a Marxist one, but a Christian one. The article also interviewed CEPAD director Gilberto Aguirre, who supported the Sandinistas as well. The article

made no negative comments about the Sandinistas, nor included any quotations by anyone who opposed the Sandinistas. It is interesting, however, that the Editor of *Christianity Today* (Kenneth Kantzer) found it necessary to insert into Frase's article that "Nicaragua's Sandinista leadership has been closely linked to the flow of arms to Salvadoran guerillas". This seems to imply Kantzer was not quite as optimistic about the Sandinistas as Frase was.

The next article was in May, and was also extremely positive. Written by John Maust, this article mentioned that Tomas Borge (co-founder of the Sandinistas) had requested the Bibles. Much was made of the fact that Borge was a Christian, and the article also mentioned that Borge denounced and apologized for the murder of Somocistas by Sandinistas. Borge was quoted as saying revenge and murder were not Sandinista policy. The article said the Sandinistas have given full religious freedom to the church, and they had built a pool in prison for prisoners to be baptized. The article did mention, however, that in addition to many Christian literacy workers, there were many Marxist ones. The church leaders wanted to pump religious literature in to keep pace with the Marxist literature.

Christian Century in March detailed the conflict between the Sandinistas and the ethnic Indians of Nicaragua. An article by Joseph Cassidy on October 21 talked about the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Sandinistas. Cassidy asserted that the Sandinistas wanted to form a close relationship with the Catholic Church, even though the Church was ambivalent about the Sandinista movement. Cassidy mentioned the same fact found in an earlier news and events section of *Christian Century* where six priests

had been ordered to stand down from the government by the Pope. Cassidy said that this had been later revealed by Managuan newspapers to be a rumor, and that the truth had actually been that the Priests were allowed to keep their positions in the government, but could no longer exercise their priestly roles in public. Cassidy's article was critical of the Sandinistas, however, and suggested that the Sandinistas wanted to twist Christianity to meet their ideal of revolutionary socialism. It was for this view that Paul Jeffrey harshly criticized him in a letter on December 16. Jeffrey said that the Catholic Church had long been out of touch with the Nicaraguan people. Furthermore, Jeffrey accused Cassidy of only using biased sources in his article, like "the reactionary *La Prensa*".

1982

In 1982 *Christianity Today* published two articles on Nicaragua. Edward Plowman published the first of these on February 5. It consisted of an interview with Archbishop Obando Y Bravo, who was an outspoken critic of the Sandinista regime. The Institute for Religion and Democracy (IRD) was responsible for publicizing the interview. Obando claimed in the interview that it was at that time a crime to criticize the government. Obando also said that the activities of the church have currently been regulated to the religious realm only. Furthermore the opposition paper, *La Prensa* had been shut down by the government.

The second article appeared on October 8. It contained a report by the Whitmer missionaries. In this report the Sandinistas had herded the Miskito Indians into a concentration camp. Many of them had been forced to dig their own graves before being riddled by bullets. This article did obviously not reflect well on the Sandinistas. However,

the introduction to the article blamed the United States foreign policy on causing the tensions between the Sandinistas and the Miskitos, by supplying military aid to counter revolutionaries who lived near the Miskito land. The article pointed out that the United States neutrality laws were being applied in Haiti, where the people were struggling against a right wing government, but not in Nicaragua.

Christian Century had eleven articles, letters, and news briefs on Nicaragua. On January 6-13, Margaret Wilde had an article on the Sandinistas, in which she claimed there are all sorts of false rumors circulating about the Sandinistas relationship to the church and to the Miskitos. The way Wilde described the Miskito conflict is an interesting understatement. “There have been serious misunderstandings – some of them fatal – between the government and native ethnic groups on the East Coast”. However, Wilde alleged, the Sandinistas have been working to improve their relationships with both the church and the Miskitos, and were becoming better all the time.

On February 24, Jan Black wrote a very pro-Sandinista article, which detailed all the good things that the Sandinistas have done since they came into power. Kenneth Garcia had a letter published on March 31, which thanked Black for the article. A news brief on April 7 contained one of the few negative things said about the Sandinistas. It said they had expelled eighteen Jehovah’s witnesses for counter-revolutionary activity. (That left only two Jehovah’s witnesses in Nicaragua).

On April 28, Wilde had another article on the Sandinista conflict with the Miskitos. Wilde blamed the disaster once again on United States policy. Wilde said the Sandinista atrocities were often exaggerated or made up. She acknowledged they did

happen, but claimed that for the most part the Sandinistas treated the Miskitos humanely. In contrast to the Whitmer's article in *Christianity Today*, Wilde emphasized that the Miskitos had not been kept in a concentration camp.

On December 1, an article on Church and State relations in Nicaragua by James Wall appeared. Wall took a very critical view of both Obando and the IRD. Wall argued that there was indeed religious freedom in Nicaragua. "This country is not yet a Marxist state. Marxist governments generally do not permit Roman Catholic prelates to talk to foreign visitors or to write a weekly column in an opposition newspaper, as Obando does." Wall also expressed a concern that the United States government had plans to overthrow the Sandinistas. On December 8, Wall continued his article. He claimed that Obando's complaints represented conflict between Church and State, not oppression of the Church by the State. Wall contended that there was no religious oppression in Nicaragua.

A news brief on December 8 contained a call from the National Council of Churches for the "United States government to reverse its policy of seeking military solutions to problems in Nicaragua."

1983

Christianity Today only had one article about Nicaragua in 1983, but it was very positive about the Sandinista government. Written by news editor Tom Minnery, the title, "Why the Gospel Grows in Socialist Nicaragua: the Revolution turned against Capitalism but not Christianity", pretty much says it all. It had very little negative to say about the Sandinistas. It mentioned the conflict the Sandinista government had with the ethnic

Indians, and with Protestants, but even here showed the Sandinistas in a sympathetic light.

Christian Century had much more to say about Nicaragua. In 39 issues, *Christian Century* had 22 articles or news briefs on Nicaragua, not counting other articles that made mention of Nicaragua. The editor, James Wall, began the year with a number of predictions, one of which was that Nicaragua would “slip further into Marxist orbit” and join Cuba and the Soviet Union. However, Wall was not attacking the Sandinistas so much as he was attacking Reagan’s policy, which he credited as forcing the Sandinistas into the arms of the Soviet Block. This theme would pop up through out the year in *Christian Century* articles about Nicaragua.

A reader, T.D. Reeves wrote in to attack Wall’s two articles the previous year. Reeves said Wall had been twisting the facts in order to present the Sandinistas in a favorable light. “More than anything else I have read in recent months, it represents biased, politically motivated, distorted and dishonest reporting” Reeves wrote. However, one month later Margaret Wilde wrote in a letter defending Wall’s articles. Reeves letter, she claimed, had been based on misinformation from the United States’ State Department.

Christian Century included a favorable report about the Sandinistas from a delegation that visited there. There was an article about a Reaganite who had visited Nicaragua, and had left it disillusioned with Reagan. There was an Article by James Wall on April 20, which compared the United States intervention in Nicaragua to the United States exploitation of Cuba before the communist revolution. There was a news brief that

educators from seven different Universities had been coming out publicly in favor of the Sandinistas, and condemning the United States foreign policy in Nicaragua. Another news brief claimed eight members of the world Council of Churches were convinced that Nicaragua had complete religious freedom under the Sandinistas. There was an editorial by James Wall, which condemned the Central Intelligence Agency's destruction of Nicaraguan oil. (A reader wrote in on December 14, and praised Wall for this editorial). In news briefs it was mentioned that churches had opposed aid to Contras. It was also mentioned in passing in another news brief that there has been tension between the Sandinista government and the church. Wall criticized the United States' government ban of Tomas Borge from the United States.

Both magazines were pro-Sandinista in 1983. *Christianity Today* is hard to judge, because it only has one article in April, and the attitude of the magazine may have changed by October. However, that article was written by the News Editor, and was very clearly in favor of the Sandinistas. *Christian Century* had only two negative things to say about the Sandinistas over the course of a whole year, and one of them was a letter by a reader. James Wall, the editor of the magazine, dedicated six of his 39 editorials that year to defend the Sandinistas. The other big writer was Margaret Wilde, who wrote five articles.

1984

In 1984, *Christianity Today* only had two articles on Nicaragua. One of them was written in January about Witness for Peace, a Christian group involved in Nicaragua that had protested Reagan's policies, the United States involvement, and the activity of the

Contras. However, Witness for Peace was quoted as saying they did not want to look like they supported the Sandinistas either. The second article was written in September by Beth Spring, the Washington correspondent for the newspaper. The article took the Institute for Religion and Democracy (IRD) and *Sojourners*, and compared their attitudes towards Nicaragua. The IRD was very critical of the Sandinistas, the *Sojourners* were very supportive, but both sides were quoted equally.

Christian Century had seventeen segments about Nicaragua, counting News briefs, articles, and letters from readers. An article by Pope Liston in January condemned Reagan's involvement in Nicaragua. Liston gave several quotes by Tomas Borge, in which Borge had indicated plans of the CIA to assassinate prominent religious opposition in Nicaragua and blame it on the Sandinistas. Richard Deats gave a Witness for Peace report, in which he mistakenly credited the Sandinistas for having abolished the death penalty. A news brief talked about Ernesto Cardenal, who had been a Marxist priest in the Sandinista government. Ernesto Cardenal explained why he did not see a contradiction between Marxism and Christianity. Another news brief mentioned the World Court ruling in favor of Nicaragua and against the U.S. Further news briefs include reports from Baptist convention of Nicaragua, which criticized U.S. policy. Also a challenge made to Jeane Kirkpatrick argued that there was no religious oppression in Nicaragua, and then on the same page a different brief mentioned that ten foreign priests had been expelled from Nicaragua. The priests had been supporters of Archbishop Obando y Bravo, a critic of the Sandinista government. In September an article by Gregory Bergman included a quote by an Archbishop, who said that Nicaragua was influencing Cuba in terms of having

increased religious freedom in Cuba more than Cuba was influencing Nicaragua. An article by Balfour Brickner condemned United States intervention in Nicaragua, which was supported by a letter from a reader on November 21. James Wall attacked the IRD, and essentially said that they were a tool for Reagan's propaganda. An article came out supporting the validity of Nicaragua's elections, and another news brief articulated that several church leaders have planned massive civil disobedience if the United States invaded Nicaragua.

In *Christianity Today*, there was much more of a move to the middle ground. Of the two articles published, one quoted from both sides of the debate. The other, while criticizing United States policy, clearly did not side with the Sandinistas either. *Christian Century* maintained a positive view of the Sandinistas, however.

1985

In 1985, *Christianity Today* had six articles on Nicaragua. The first of these appeared on April 5, by Beth Spring. It told of Evangelical leaders who were planning to visit pastors in Nicaragua. The trip was apolitical, and the participants acknowledged their were widely discrepant views of what had been going on down in Nicaragua. On April 19, Beth Spring had another article. The article dealt with Reagan's policy on Nicaragua. Spring said that his position "has pitted Reagan against Christian groups that are sympathetic to the Sandinistas". IRD and the Evangelicals for Social Action (ESA) planned a joint trip in the article, one group that favored the Sandinistas, and one group that did not. A follow up article to this one appeared on September 6. This article told about how IRD had cancelled the trip, for fear it would have intimidated the Nicaraguan

evangelicals, and called increased government attention to their activities. ESA rejected IRD's reason, and gave a quote implying that IRD had backed out because they were afraid the trip would be more politically advantageous to ESA than it would have been to them.

Also on September 6 was another article by Beth Spring. This is a follow up to her April 5 article. It mentions that the Sandinistas were losing popularity. The article was also very critical of the People's Church, a church that had been started by the Sandinistas, which Spring described as "a mix of Marxism and Christianity". The article is critical of the Sandinistas, and praised their opponents, with such phrases as: "The traditional Catholic Church, led by Obando Y Bravo, has stood firm against Sandinista attempts to dictate to the Church." Also, the article opened up with a passage that indicated that Spring was very critical of the Sandinistas. "Evangelicals have found themselves caught in the middle. They have tried to reconcile reports of thriving churches, increased literacy and other improvements, with equally compelling accounts of repression, censorship, and manipulation of Christians by the Nicaraguan Government."

On November 8, Assistant News Editor Randall Frame had an article on Pat Robertson raising money for the Contras through his Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). In having done this, Frame was simply repeating allegations first made by another Christian magazine, *Sojourners*. A quote was included by Tom Hawk, former World Relief Coordinator in Honduras, that Hawk had been "very disappointed in CBN's reporting on Central America.... It's very, very one sided. The situation is so complex that you can go down and prove just about any story you want."

Beth Spring had an article on December 13. This article was reporting on the disruption of Civil Liberties in Nicaragua. The article said that the government had been cracking down of Christian activity from both Protestants and Catholics. The article quoted both IRD and ESA, but much more of the quotes came from IRD. The last words in the article were: "The Reagan administration views the Sandinistas as a Marxist government. Christian leaders are unwilling to endorse a ruler who systematically disrupts civil liberties." However, the article never said why civil liberties had been suspended.

Christian Century had 27 articles, letters, and news briefs on Nicaragua in 1985. In January, James Wall mentioned Daniel Ortega's election in 1984 as one of the signs of hope for the new year. His reason for this was that Ortega had been willing to meet with the Catholic church.

On January 2-9, IRD responded to criticism that they have received in *Christian Century* by James Wall. They claimed that CEPAD was a Sandinista propaganda machine, and yet Wall supported CEPAD. They refuted Wall's claim that IRD is just Reagan propaganda, and said that one did not need to be part of the Reagan administration to have been concerned about what was going on in Nicaragua. Finally they said that the evidence Wall used to link IRD to the Reagan administration was faulty.

On February 20, there was an article by Kinsler and Evans that defended the 1984 elections in Nicaragua. Also on February 20, Wall in an editorial lamented the fact that he had been often categorized as pro-Sandinista simply because he had been anti-Reagan. In the same issue, an excerpt was included from a CIA manufactured Contra pamphlet. In

the pamphlet, the CIA told the Contras to call themselves a Christian movement, and to open and close each meeting with prayer, in hopes that they would gain support from the populace.

The rest of the year has reoccurring themes. The Contra atrocities are documented. The magazine in general, but especially Wall's editorials, condemn Contra funding by the United States. Several articles alluded to the fact that the Sandinista Government was not as bad as it looked. Pat Robertson was also condemned. In fact, in May 8, an editorial by Dean Peerman described Robertson's charity as, "Tithing for terrorism".

1986

By 1986, it was apparent that both magazines had different views of what was going on. *Christianity Today* had two articles on Nicaragua, one in February, one in April. Both articles were written by Beth Spring, the Washington Correspondent. The article in February concerned the harsh treatment of evangelicals in Nicaragua. Jimmy Haasan described his experience. The tone had obviously moved to a tone harshly critical of the Sandinistas. "Incidents of harassment against Catholics and groups such as the Miskito Indians have cast serious doubt on the Sandinistas' tolerance for anyone who answers to a higher authority than the ruling junta".

On his visit to Nicaragua, Dr. Steven Wykstra had an opportunity to visit the evangelicals who were harassed. He found that the United States media had largely exaggerated the whole story. Another interesting thing Dr. Wykstra brought to light was the issue of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) funding. Hassan, in the article, reported

that the Sandinistas had asked him how much the CIA paid him. It was presented in Beth Spring's article as a ridiculous question. However, Wykstra revealed that the CIA did in fact pay money to Humberto Belli for his anti-Sandinista book "Breaking Faith".

In her second article for the year, Beth Spring increased her anti-Sandinista bias. She took for granted that the Sandinistas were totalitarian, and included a quote from the *Washington Post* to reinforce it. "Virtually all observers say the Sandinistas are running a totalitarian state". Spring mentioned that there was a Christian Left who believed in the goodness of the Sandinistas. Spring described an encounter Republican Paul Henry had with these individuals. Henry concluded that they were either political naïve or held strongly to their leftist viewpoints. He said that the Sandinistas had informed them and that the Sandinista government had only told them what it had wanted them to hear. Beth Spring concluded by saying that it was these kinds of people who were responsible for shaping the views of the Christian Left. No letters were published in response.

Christian Century had eighteen articles, letters, and news briefs on Nicaragua. Robert Brown, one of *Christian Century's* editors at large, wrote an article reflecting on his trip to Nicaragua. It was strongly pro-Sandinista. The sickening details of the contra atrocities on a local village were given. "11 year-old Helena, whose hands are horribly mutilated because the contras used them for target practice; her older sister, who was gang-raped on the floor of their tiny house; Carmen Alvira, whose three teen-age sons were kidnapped while cultivating their little plot of land, and have not been heard of since". Steven Wykstra said he was amazed by how little coverage the Contra atrocities had received in the United States media, compared with how much coverage Sandinista

atrocities had received. Brown maintained that “embassy officials in Managua tell Washington what Washington wants to hear, so that Washington can act on the basis of what it has heard from Managua”. In this way, Brown said it was the Christian right, not the Christian left that was misinformed about what was going on. Brown even went on say that Obando y Bravo, a bishop critic of the Sandinistas, has acted as he did because he was on the side of the rich. *Christian Century* got two letters back because of Brown’s article. One was strongly in favor of it, one was furious, but the author was upset at Brown’s attack on Catholicism, not his support of the Sandinistas. A couple of news briefs alluded to religious oppression in Nicaragua, everything else was in support of the Sandinistas, right up until December when Jerome Nilssen described how he has become increasingly disillusioned with the Sandinistas. Originally in support of them, each time he made a trip to Nicaragua he had become more and more upset with what was going on. He finally admitted in this article that he would have liked to see the Sandinistas just leave Nicaragua.

1987

Christianity Today had three articles on Nicaragua in 1987. The first of these was by Beth Spring, and was about an interview with Sergio Ramirez, Vice President of Nicaragua. Spring included only a couple statements by Ramirez, and then the rest of the article was about his critics. Although written in the objective style, more space by far was given to the critics (this included the coveted end of the article). Jimmy Carter was among the critics. In the article it was stated: “Jimmy Carter said human-rights abuses under the Sandinistas have equaled or exceeded Somoza’s”. The other two articles were

more favorable to the Sandinistas.

Christian Century had 19 articles, news briefs, and letters concerning Nicaragua. There were two letters in response to Jerome Nilssen's ambivalent article the year before. One of the letters was a fierce defense of the Sandinistas, saying that Nilssen had an unrealistic ideal, possible only in heaven. Compared to most other countries, the letter asserted, (which included the United States), Nicaragua was not doing badly at all. The other article was from someone else who had also visited Nicaragua, and shared Nilssen's ambivalence. In April 29, Joseph Mulligan defended the Sandinistas human rights record. A reader later challenged him, and mentioned Humberto Belli's book: "Breaking Faith".

In 1987, *Christian Century* had become more and more aware of the conflict between the Sandinistas and the church, and included more news briefs about this. Most of the editorials were still anti-Contra, but the tone of support for the Sandinistas, while still present, had decreased.

1988

Christianity Today had two articles on the Sandinistas. Both were by Randell Frame, and both were optimistic about chances for peace in Nicaragua. Both articles were written in the objective style, and had plenty of quotes from both sides.

By 1988, the *Century's* support for the Sandinistas was waning, but they were vehemently anti-contra. On January 20, Penny Lennoux asserted in her article that the Ethnic Indians in Nicaragua had not joined the Contras willingly, but were forced into their camp. Lennoux said the Indians hated the Contras as much as they hated the

Sandinistas. On January 27, editor at large Dean Peerman claimed that the other Latin American countries looked on the Contras as agents of destruction, and did not believe the Contras were helping anything. Robert Brown wrote an article on February 24, and said that the United States had destroyed Nicaragua through its funding of the Contras. Brown argued that: “The concept is simple: since the United States, through its aid to the contras, has spent seven years and millions of dollars contributing to Nicaragua’s destruction, the U.S. is now obligated to allocate equal time and money for its rebuilding”.

1989

Christianity Today had two articles published on Nicaragua in 1989. The first of these articles was an interview with Gustavo Parajon, the founder of CEPAD, which appeared in March. Parajon had been a defender of the Sandinistas over the years, and he supported them in this article as well. The questions asked to him were often pointed questions, directed against the Sandinistas. (For example: “Critics charge that freedom has not increased with the lessening of conflict. Do you share these concerns?”). However, Parajon was always able to give an answer that defended his position. When asked about civil liberties, he responded he did not know, however, “What I do know for sure is that the limbs of more than 2,500 Nicaraguans have been blown off by mines... eight of my co-workers have been murdered by the contras”.

The second article was by Randall Frame. It essentially interviewed Alberto Mottesi, an Argentinean Evangelist who had recently prayed with Daniel Ortega. Mottesi emphasized in the interview the tensions between Marxism and the gospel, however the

article was written in an objective style.

Christian Century had nine articles, news briefs, and letters about Nicaragua in 1989. In March a news brief reported that the Church of the Brethren had called on the United States to end the embargo on Nicaragua, and to end aid to the Contras. In May, a news brief reported that a delegation of pastors asked for an end to Contra aid. An article about Fred Morris made predictions about what George Bush would do in Central America. In the article, Morris implied the Nicaraguans wanted to be left alone by the United States, and were happy under the Sandinistas. Morris included data to back up his argument. In July, Alan Wisdom, from the IRD, wrote a letter challenging Morris' statistics, and made an argument that Nicaraguans would be much happier without the Sandinistas.

Also in May, a news brief was given about Pat Robertson's visit to Nicaragua. Robertson, the brief said, had been contributing millions of dollars to the Contras. In July, Michael Rivage-Seul wrote an article in which he alleged that the United States had purposely undermined the Sandinista regime. The Sandinista had to spend 40 % of their Gross National Product on defense against the U.S. armed contras, which left little for the social programs on which the success of the revolution had been based. Rivage-Seul predicted (falsely) that the Sandinistas' would win the battle, but it would be a hard fought battle. In August, Margaret Wilde did an article on the Miskito Indian refugees. A news brief reported that it had been revealed that the United States Embassy had been giving out free aid to conservative pastors in Nicaragua. Poorer, more liberal pastors received none. There was a news briefs about the sufferings of the Miskito Indians.

Christianity Today, of its two articles, contained one more sympathetic to the Sandinistas, and one more skeptical. Both were written objectively. *Christian Century* was, once again, very sympathetic to the Sandinistas. It was increasingly aware of the Miskito plight, and had a couple of articles about them, but even in these articles they did not come down hard on the Sandinistas.

1990

Christianity Today did not have any article on Nicaragua in 1990, where as *Christian Century* had fourteen articles, letters, and news briefs. In general, *Christian Century* was optimistic about Violeta Chamorro, although many of the articles did lament the passing of the Sandinistas. One such article in support of the Sandinistas appeared on March 14, by William Fore. It was harshly criticized in a later letter by Michael Novak (from the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research). Novak ended his letter by saying, “Yet I am glad that Fore has presented us with such important documentary evidence of the self-delusions of the Sandinistas international supporters, as well as of the Sandinista government itself.” *Christian Century* also documented continued Contra atrocities in the year 1990.

Post 1990

In 1991 neither magazine would feature an article about Nicaragua. In fact, using the indexes listed above no Christian periodicals had any articles on Nicaragua. Once the Sandinistas were out of power, American interest in Nicaragua vanished as well.

Conclusions

It is worth noting the coverage of the media in general about the Sandinista government before drawing conclusions about *Christianity Today* and *Christian Century*. During the actual revolution itself, and the first few years afterwards, Media coverage of the Sandinistas was very favorable.²⁵ There were a few voices on the right wing, such as the periodical *Human Events* that advocated Somoza's dictatorship was better than a Marxist government (which they condemned the Sandinistas as being).²⁶ Opinion gradually changed as the Sandinistas atrocities with the Miskito Indians came to light, as well as the conflict with the Catholic Church.

As is evidenced by the above pages, it is hard to track down what bias or viewpoint either periodical takes. One reason for this of course is that many of the articles (especially those written for *Christianity Today*) were in the style of objective journalism, and objective journalism, if done right, makes it impossible for the reader to determine the bias of the author. (Fortunately, the bias does often show through anyway however).

Secondly, and more importantly, each magazine was composed of many different writers that worked for it, and each writer had his or her own viewpoint. For instance, although both Beth Spring and Randell Frame wrote for *Christianity Today*, they might not have seen eye to eye on things, and an article by Beth Spring might have taken a different view of the Sandinistas than an article by Randell Frame would take.

There are a few ways of getting around this. One is to take notice of what position the writer has on the staff of the Magazine. For instance, *Christianity Today* frequently had articles on Nicaragua written by people who were not affiliated with the magazine

²⁵ This is the whole thesis behind Joshua Muravchik, *New Coverage of the Sandinista Revolution* (Washington: American Institute for Public Policy, 1988).

²⁶ Stanton Evan, 6-7.

itself. These articles, although not discounted entirely, are of less important than articles written by Beth Spring, the magazine's Washington Correspondent, or articles written by Randell Frame, the magazine's Associate News Editor. *Christian Century* had almost all of its articles on Nicaragua written by staff writers. The Editor himself, James Wall, wrote many of the editorials concerning Nicaragua in the 1980s.

Another point that should be made is that caution should be taken before comparing these magazines to each other. Because of the sheer number of articles on Nicaragua *Christian Century* had in most years, compared to the relatively few number of articles *Christianity Today* had, *Christian Century* touches on all sorts of events *Christianity Today* never even mentions.

With the above criteria in mind, and speaking in broad, general terms based on the above evidence, it can safely be said that *Christianity Today* began in 1979 with a cautious ambivalence regarding the Sandinistas (with articles written by staff writer Stephen Sywulka). After the Sandinista revolution succeeded, the articles in 1980 and 1981 were full of optimism. A number of different writers are represented in this period. A gradual shift was made to a more critical view of the Sandinistas. Beth Spring, who wrote eight articles about the Sandinistas between November of 1984, and January of 1987, dominated the magazine's view of the Sandinistas for these two and some years. Although Spring's articles were always written in the objective style of journalism, she quoted heavily from those critical of the Sandinistas, and sparingly from their supporters. Critics were often given the last word, and a few times Spring interjected her own view of the Sandinistas into the article as a critic of the Sandinistas. Randall Frame, the other

big writer on Nicaragua for this magazine during the 1980s, had four articles between 1985 and 1989. Frame's articles were more critical of United States policy towards Nicaragua, although they never endorsed the Sandinistas.

Christian Century had, as mentioned above, much more articles on Nicaragua. From this we can deduce that the staff of *Christian Century* was more concerned about events in Nicaragua than the staff of *Christianity Today*. This is in keeping with the increased attention *Century* focused on the third world in the 1980s. Like *Christianity Today*, the *Century* started out ambivalent about the Sandinistas in the revolutionary war, then moved to an endorsement of them. Aside from a couple writers and news briefs, the *Century* never really became critical about the Sandinistas. A good way to say it would be they simply became less enthusiastic about the Sandinistas, and there was a quiet moving away from their earlier position of outright support, but very few articles appeared that were critical. Instead, the *Century* shifted its focus in the mid 1980s from extolling the virtues of the Sandinistas, to being critical of United States policy in the 1980s. Interestingly enough though, in 1990 once it was clear that the Sandinistas had lost, the *Century* almost seemed to return to their earlier position of endorsement for the Sandinistas, and there were a couple articles that lamented their passing.

James Wall, the editor of the magazine, was very concerned about Nicaragua, and wrote 24 editorials on, or that refer to, Nicaragua between 1978 and 1990. Wall's editorials followed rather neatly the pattern of the magazine, which was fitting given his position. Margaret Wilde, an editor at large for the magazine, wrote most of the articles featured during the 1980s. Wilde's articles followed the same line as Wall's, although

Wilde took longer to move away from praising the Sandinistas, and returned to praising them quicker. The most fervent supporter of the Sandinistas in the magazine was Robert Brown, another editor at large, who had six articles on Nicaragua. In Brown's articles, the Sandinistas could do no wrong, and all problems Nicaragua was facing were laid at the feet of the Contras or of the Nicaraguan Bourgeois. Paul Jeffrey, while not as radical as Brown, also remained in support of the Sandinistas throughout the 1980s.

Since both magazines focused on different things, it is hard to do a direct comparison. However, we can look at various events. The first of these is the Christianity of Tomas Borge. Borge, the only surviving founding member of the Sandinistas, was overtly Christian as both magazines picked up. Both magazines quoted Borge as he talked about his commitment to Christianity, both magazines picked up on Borge's request for more Bibles, and both told the rather amazing story about how Borge saw his former torturer in jail, forgave him, and freed the man.

Another thing that both magazines picked up on in the early days of optimism was how the Sandinistas abolished the death penalty. This was actually a common misconception that deceived secular media as well. In fact, the death penalty had never been legal in Nicaragua.²⁷

Another interesting key point is the World Court decision. In 1984, the CIA mined Nicaragua's harbors. Nicaragua brought the United States before the World Court, and the World Court in November of 1987 decided that the United States had indeed violated International law. This is an interesting test case in media analysis because this case was

²⁷ Belli, 119.

not mentioned in any of the dominant newspapers or three television networks. However, the previous day most of these media had alerted the United States public about the World Court's decision that the Soviet Union should remove itself from Afghanistan.²⁸ *Christianity Today* followed the line of mainstream media and did not mention that story. *Christian Century* mentioned it repeatedly. (It is, of course, worth remembering at this point that the *Century* had many more articles per year on Nicaragua than *Today*).

Another interesting point in the 1984 election. *Christian Century* took a rather predictable stance on this. *The Century* repeatedly condemned the Reagan administration for having not recognized the election, and repeatedly brought up the fact that all other international observers had recognized the validity of the elections. The *Century* repeatedly mentioned how high the voting turn out was, and how much of the vote Daniel Ortega received, to emphasize that Nicaragua had in fact been a democracy, and some authors went as far as to say that this data meant Nicaragua was more democratic than the United States. The *Century* did not mention that all criticisms of the election in Nicaragua were censored.²⁹ *Christianity Today* is interesting because of their absence of comment on the 1984 election. It was not even mentioned in their articles.

Again the same pattern is seen in the 1990 election. The *Century* was fond of quoting Daniel Ortega that Nicaragua voted with a gun to its head. The *Century* maintained that even though the Sandinistas had lost the election, it was because of United States pressure, not loss of popularity. *Christianity Today* was strangely silent, and

²⁸ Martin Lee and Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in News Media* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1990), 257.

²⁹ Belli, 261.

did not even have any articles on Nicaragua at all in 1990.

Also amazing is the lack of coverage about the Iran-Contra affair, considering the intense media coverage it received at the time. *Christian Century* made references to it, but did not report on it or dedicate any articles to it. *Christianity Today* never even referred to it. It is difficult to say with certainty why neither magazine reported on Iran-Contra, but I hypothesize that due to the intense media coverage it received at the time both magazines assumed their readers were well enough informed on the issue.

In closing, it is important to see both of these magazines in the context of the 1980s. The 1980s were a time of polarizing politics, where distinctions between left and right became quite clear. The readers of both magazines were Americans, and were more concerned with American politics than with politics in Nicaragua. Therefore, the debate over United States foreign policy in Nicaragua should be seen in the larger context of the right versus left debate of the 1980s. The respective position that each magazine took could possibly be seen as an example of where the magazine stood in the broader debate.

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