

**Nicaragua—Solidarity or Treason?**

In 1927 the United States invaded Nicaragua to put down a rebellion led by nationalist Augusto Sandino who opposed foreign troops on Nicaraguan soil. Fifty years later the Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN), which had taken its name from Sandino, waged a guerilla war against the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza, the man whose father had murdered Sandino to end the original rebellion. The Sandinistas promised to institute land reform and to provide healthcare and education for the poor of their country. In 1979 the Sandinistas overthrew Somoza and celebrated “el triunfo,” the end to the 43-year-long dictatorship.

President Reagan warned that the Sandinistas were a Marxist threat to U.S. national security. He advocated arming a counter-revolutionary army, the contras, who sought to overthrow the new government of Nicaragua. Following the Sandinistas’ victory in the first national elections in 1984, the U.S. Senate passed the Boland Amendment that banned continued funding for the contras. In what later became known as the Iran Contra scandal, money was raised to arm the contras by way of secret weapons sales to Iran in exchange for a release of U.S. held hostages in Lebanon.

A Nicaraguan textbook from 1995 summarized the impact of the contra war: “The war lasted several years causing great damage to the country. Thousands of youth were killed or left disabled; the majority of



**What are the messages about U.S. occupation in this 1927 cartoon entitled “The Pacification of Nicaragua”?**

them were of humble origins. Thus it was the poorest population that paid the highest price for the war” (Lindaman 330).

During the Reagan administration many peace activists organized to challenge what they saw as an unjust and immoral campaign against the Sandinista government. In response they mounted an unprecedented “solidarity movement” in which thousands of U.S. citizens traveled to Nicaragua to work in the cotton harvest, to paint murals and to help with dam projects. These solidarity activists returned to the U.S., sometimes accompanied by Nicaraguan friends, to report first hand about the accomplishments of the Sandinista revolution in reducing illiteracy and improving health care.

Some activists traveled to the war zones, where the contras were mounting what President Reagan called a “freedom-fighter’s struggle,” and antiwar activists called “terrorism.” One of the groups organizing such visits was interfaith group Witness For Peace, which subsequently organized a “Pledge of Resistance” in which antiwar activists would pledge to commit nonviolent civil disobedience in the event of escalated U.S. government efforts to overturn the Sandinista government. The Pledge was put into effect on June 12, 1985 when Congress took a vote to legalize aid to the contras. On that day there were demonstrations in 180 cities and 2,000 people were arrested for committing civil disobedience. The efforts to overthrow the Sandinistas ended with the end of the Reagan presidency and with the Sandinistas’ loss in the 1990 elections.

The peace movements that arose in response to the wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador saw thousands of U.S. citizens declaring common cause with groups their government considered to be the enemy. For many in the U.S. the question became: were they traitors or were they patriots?