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Covering Latin American News: The Nicaraguan Case (Dialogue #58)

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PREFACE

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Nicaragua is virtually a case study of everything that is right and everything that is wrong with American news coverage of Latin America today. Now that I have your attention....

Some terrific stories have been written out of Nicaragua. Somewhere in my files I still have one of the best newspaper stories ever written---a piece by Washington Post correspondent Karen de Young. The story reconstructed, in gut-wrenching detail, how a Somoza National Guard patrol swept down and methodically assassinated every young man it found, as well as several women and children.

But there are also terrible stories. Two American free-lance reporters sympathetic to the Sandinistas went to the government press office last year to argue that a fellow American journalist held anti-Sandinista views---and that she should be denied the interviews with government officials that she was seeking.

A high Reagan Administration official went to a major newspaper earlier this year to complain that its correspondent in Managua was passing sensitive information to the Sandinistas. It is not unusual for an American journalist to be reviled one day by the Sandinistas as a CIA agent, and the next by the Reagan-financed contra guerrillas as a crypto-communist.

What is it that makes Nicaragua such a focus of journalistic unrest? Are the Sandinistas right when they complain that the American press is following President Reagan's lead in portraying Nicaragua as an East-West confrontation? Or are Reagan's minions correct when they charge that the liberal American press tends to cover up the Sandinistas' blemishes?

Let me venture some guesses.

One of the obvious reasons for this unrest is that Nicaragua had a revolution in 1979. The word revolution means a complete, often violent break with the past and the start of a radically different system.

What happened in Nicaragua wasn't simply a civil war in which Sandinistas toppled the Somoza government and seized power. Nicaragua has had a full-scale revolution, the first that Latin America has seen since Cuba and Fidel Castro. A revolution inevitably polarizes people. There are losers---those whose lives or livelihoods depended on the old system---and winners, who have only theories about how to build a new nation.

Changes of this magnitude can be very disconcerting to American journalists, more accustomed to the kind of slow-paced, progressive change that revolutionaries dismiss as reformism. The American journalists who covered Nicaragua regularly before and during the revolution had few problems following these radical changes.

But the squadrons of reporters who rush into this newly important country must quickly grasp a lot of facts if they are to chronicle properly this highly complex series of events. They must learn the history of American intervention in Nicaragua, the history of the Somozas, of the Sandinistas and the others who fought against Somoza. They must learn the personalities and their political bent, the events, the society's values---in sum, the country.

Revolutionary governments are not very good at helping journalists in these kinds of situations. The Sandinista government press office is full of posters of Che Guevara and staffers who literally gush with enthusiasm---but offer almost no useful information. Guerrilla leaders just emerging from 20 years of clandestine fighting recoil at the thought of talking openly with journalists.

The Nicaraguan press has always been biased, either for or against Somoza. Therefore government officials expect the foreign correspondents to be friends or foes. Their belief is all too often reinforced by the foreign sympathizers who declare themselves to be free-lance journalists in order to get a close-up look at the revolution.

Even daily life can be a grind. The rum-and-cokes are large and cheap, but the food is only so-so and the water is undrinkable. And if one's tummy is growling, it's hard to concentrate on the meaning of Sandinismo.

Somoza's supporters refuse to believe that Nicaraguans hated the dictator, so they blame his ouster on President Carter and the American press. The Sandinistas refuse to believe that a large number of Nicaraguans don't like their new Marxist system, so they blame all their problems on President Reagan and the American press. In sum, revolutions are conflictive events that by their very nature unleash national, political and religious passions.

Remember Herb Mathews and the fame---or notoriety---that he gained during and after the Cuban revolution. Back in 1979 and 1980, the American press coverage of Nicaragua generally reflected well on the Sandinistas---and with good reason. The coverage reflected the fact that Anastasio Somoza was a cruel tyrant whose troops murdered, tortured and bombed civilians indiscriminately. And it reflected the fact that the overwhelming majority of Nicaraguans did indeed support the Sandinistas' war to topple the dictator and their actions during the two years following their victory.

Critics who charge that the communist Sandinistas "duped" the liberal American press into believing they were simply nice, moderate guerrillas fighting for democracy are simply wrong. Early last year I reviewed many of the stories written by American correspondents in Nicaragua during the first half of 1979. There were several stories pointing out that the Sandinistas held the guns and therefore were likely to dominate the broad coalition of anti-Somoza forces then backing the revolution. They also pointed out that the Sandinista leaders were Marxists to varying degrees.

This does not mean that each and every story made this point. There is a difference between making a point and harping on it. But the point was made, often and strongly.

This early good press has now faded away, however. The bulk of today's coverage reflects badly on the Sandinistas. There have been many reports on their efforts to restrain their domestic political opponents and freedom of expression:

-on their ban on the rights of workers to strike;

-on their economic boondoggles and their highly unpopular military draft;

-on their biased educational system;

-on the neighborhood improvement and spy organizations known as Sandinista defense committees;

-on their assistance to Salvadoran and Honduran guerrillas and on their links to foreign groups engaged in terrorist actions.

Most newspapers now regularly characterize the Sandinistas as Marxist-Leninists. Let me stress that I do not consider the term Marxist-Leninist to be a pejorative. It describes a particular set of political and economic beliefs, and is not meant to express a judgment.

Coverage of the contras now reflects the fact that although their military chiefs are Somocista National Guard officers, their foot soldiers are generally poor peasants who reject the Sandinistas' brand of Marxism.

Both the Sandinistas and the Reagan Administration have chosen to believe that the American press somehow changed its views on the revolution between 1979 and 1985. Neither is willing to admit that the facts have simply changed during that period---and that the reporting has changed accordingly.

Let me repeat the gist of what I have just said. I do not believe that the bulk of the American press coverage of Nicaragua has been biased, either for or against the Sandinistas. The front-line press---<u>The Herald, The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times</u>, and the television networks---has done a highly creditable job of chronicling the Nicaraguan reality.

Now that I have given my profession a collective pat on the back, let me touch on its shortcomings. These criticisms must not be exaggerated. But at the same time they must not be hidden. The editor who once said that journalists have the right to be wrong---was completely wrong.

First off, let me say that most of the bad stories about Nicaragua---the real clinkers---were not written by first-rank correspondents who cover the country on a regular basis. They generally were the work of visitors.

There is the television news star who parachutes into the country for a particularly big story, or the city hall reporter for a small town daily who takes a tax-deductible vacation in Managua. Then, of course, there's the free-lance writer.

Some of the free-lancers are good, young journalists trying to make a name for themselves by covering a big story. All too many are revolutionary groupies who can live extremely well in Managua by selling occasional stories to small newspapers back home that lack the expertise to decide whether their stories are biased or unbiased.

Nicaragua is a highly complex story. There can be no substitute for a thorough knowledge of the country, its history, its politics, its personalities. There can be no compromising of professional ethics. A story as important as Nicaragua is today should never be left in the hands of neophytes, at least not without some supervision from an experienced editor back home.

These are problems with the people in journalism. There are other problems, perhaps more important, with the system itself. First, there is the hyper-factual reporter. He writes on the one hand this and on the other hand that. Like Sergeant Joe Friday of Dragnet, he gives you "just the facts, ma'am."

This type of journalist prides himself in being evenhanded.

But reality is seldom evenhanded. It can be complex, evasive or muddled, but it is seldom in balance. This type of journalist is only reporting reality if in fact reality is in balance. An artificial equilibrium of the facts does not equal reality.

Too much of this type of reporting has come out of Nicaragua, but this is not the only place where it happens. Salvadoran President Jose Napoleon Duarte once asked an American journalist why he always quoted leftist guerrillas as charging that army soldiers were responsible for killing tens of thousands of innocent civilians. Duarte suggested that, to be fair, the journalist should imitate other correspondents and also report the government's claim that the victims were in fact guerrillas killed in combat. The journalist answered that he did not report the government's claim because it was a blatant lie.

The evenhanded reporter, I think, misunderstands our professional injunction against biased reporting. We are not unbiased observers. Journalists, like everyone else, carry around the baggage of their background---their families, their upbringing, their environment---and any journalist who says he is unbiased has never seen the outside of a university journalism school.

But we do have a duty to leave those biases behind when we sit down before a typewriter---and write the unvarnished truth, even if it favors one side over the other. In fact, a good foreign correspondent is much more than a simple gatherer and transmitter of data. He has a responsibility to analyze the facts, to make some sense of the situation, to point out the pluses and minuses.

We should not recoil from reporting, in a positive light, that the Sandinistas have redistributed the country's wealth for the benefit of the overwelmingly poor majority...or reporting, in a negative light, that they have imposed on Nicaragua a system that, if not strictly totalitarian, at least seeks to control the totality of the country's activities.

But on this analytical road, the pitfalls are many.

First off, the road has a limit. We cannot report what is better for Nicaraguans, to be well-fed and repressed, or hungry and free. It is all too easy for an American reporter who has never known hunger to allow his copy to indicate that it's okay for Nicaraguans to have freedom rather than a square meal. It is just as easy for an American reporter who takes his freedoms for granted to allow his copy to hint that it's all right for Nicaragua to have food and not freedom.

The obvious answer to this dilemma is to ask Nicaraguans themselves what they prefer. But here we run into a second problem---the need for American journalists to speak Spanish as well as humanly possible.

In Latin America this language problem can be comical at times. I remember one American journalist asking a Managua taxi driver in halting Spanish what he thought of the Yankees---meaning the Americans. The driver said he loved the Yankees, especially Yogi Berra. The reporter thought the driver was referring to the U.S. ambassador in Managua, Harry Bergold.

But more often, language is a serious problem. The poor and the downtrodden throughout the world have long known that voicing complaints against the government can be bad for their health---and Nicaragua is no exception, even though the Nicas have a reputation for being more outspoken than most Central Americans.

Not everyone is willing to pour out his heart to the first journalist who comes knocking on his door---just because he has blond hair, blue eyes and calls himself a neutral observer. So the average Nica will generally speak the words that will guard his safety. It takes a fluent Spanish speaker to spot the holes in this verbal armor: the ambiguous words, the unnecessary "maybes", the conditional tenses of verbs.

The next pitfall is extremely important. Most leading Sandinistas now make very few bones about the fact that their system of government is based on Marxist-Leninism, and that they advocate internationalism, non-alignment, and a form of direct rather than bourgeois democracy.

Yet not many reporters really know the meaning of Marxism or Leninism---not the lectures on the Soviet and Cuban devils that Americans get in civic classes, but the real stuff, Marxism as Marxists teach it, Leninism as Lenin wrote it. There is a book by Lenin, titled <u>What is To Be Done</u>, that outlines his vision of how revolutionaries should go about seizing and retaining power. It is almost the Sandinistas' bible. It is on sale in every bookstore in Nicaragua, and it is required reading at the schools for Sandinista party cadre. Yet it seems that all too few American journalists have taken the time to read through this admittedly boring political tract.

Fewer still have ever bothered to interview officials of the communist or socialist parties of Nicaragua---both orthodox, pro-

Moscow parties---for guidance on how to analyze the Sandinistas' brand of Marxist-Leninism. Without this kind of specialized knowledge it is almost impossible to understand the Sandinistas because their dictionary---their use of specific words---is quite different from ours.

When the Sandinistas say they are anti-imperialists, some American correspondents understand that to mean that the Sandinistas oppose Washington's efforts to retain its influence over Latin America, and particularly its Caribbean backyard. In fact, imperialism is a Leninist term, which equates any advanced capitalist system with imperialism and makes it the natural enemy of socialist, so-called progressive systems.

When the Sandinistas say they are non-aligned, some journalists believe that means that they want to abstain from the East-West confrontation. They have never heard of the fact that some nations in the non-aligned movement---foremost among them, Cuba---regard imperialism as their natural enemy and the socialist camp as the natural ally.

The next pitfall is a legacy of the 1970's, Watergate and Vietnam. There are journalists who argue that we are supposed to be the adversaries of government, and place much importance on catching Washington in a lie.

There is no doubt that the American public must be told when Washington lies. It is right and proper to report that Reagan stretched the truth when he called the Nicaraguan elections last November a "Soviet-styled sham." There were, after all, seven parties in the contest. It is right and proper to report that

Reagan misrepresented the truth, to say the least, when he equated the anti- Sandinista guerrillas with our founding fathers. They have, in fact, tortured, murdered and raped a large number of people.

But there is a risk that in focusing on the lies, we spend too little effort on the truth. We have a duty to report what the Sandinistas are not. But we have an equal duty to report on exactly what the Sandinistas are.

I am not sure we have done enough of this.

The next problem comes when a journalist sits down at a typewriter to forge all those facts he has gathered into a truthful account that will interest and perhaps even inform the average American reader. This is the toughest part. A highly complex situation with many shadings must be translated into 1,000 or so words to fit into an ever-shrinking part of a newspaper page reserved for news---not advertisements.

A crisis occurring in a foreign country, in a foreign culture, must be translated into words easily digestible to the average American reader. Subtlety and ambiguity are taboo. Clarity and directness are a must. All too often, the end result is oversimplification.

To hook you into actually reading through these complicated stories, journalists often resort to something called the human touch. We tell the story in terms of people. Thus a story about human rights violations in Nicaragua almost always begins with some Juan Garcia languishing away in a dark jail for the mere suspicion that he may sympathize with anti-Sandinista guerrillas.

This is undoubtedly an effective tool. It introduces you to a person rather than a convoluted issue, and maybe entices you into reading past the first paragraph. But sometimes we overdo this. It is just too easy for a good writer to hammer out a story on a slice of Nicaraguan life, highly readable and interesting, yet ultimately meaningless to the readers' understanding of the reality that is Nicaragua.

The next pitfall in this process of translating Nicaraguan reality into American reality is you, the reader.

There is nothing more disheartening than to have someone tell me that he read one of my stories---and then criticize it or praise it in terms that make it clear he completely missed my point. I sit there and wonder whether I actually said what I was trying to say. Did I fail to make my points clearly? After this kind of run-in I have often gone back and re-read my stories carefully to find out if I had been inexact. I found some cases where my wording could have been a little clearer, where the point could have been made a little stronger.
But in most cases I felt I had made the point properly.

What does this mean? It means that the average American really needs to improve his reading skills. He especially should learn how to read a newspaper.

Journalists do sometimes write in a kind of code. We say allegedly when we mean the accusation is not proven. We say a man claimed something when we mean he has lied before and should not be trusted this time. We say the president of a country is a champion card player when we mean the man is a sleazeball who would sell his mother for another term in office.

Maybe universities should start a course called "Reporters' code-words ---and the libel suits they are trying to avoid."

Journalists tend to view almost every development as significant. We are, after all, chroniclers of daily events. During our efforts to persuade our editors that we have a story that should be published, preferably in the front page, we sometimes attach too much importance to certain events.

Somewhere in the third or fourth paragraph of a story you will usually find what we call the "nut graf"---the paragraph telling you that this story is important because it's the first event of its kind since last year, the strongest in eight months, the bloodiest of the war, etc. In fact, these events are often meaningless in the long-range scheme of things.

A case in point was an attack by anti-Sandinista guerrillas last August on the northern town of La Trinidad, astride the Pan American highway that links Managua to Honduras. With few exceptions, the stories written about this attack highlighted the fact that it was the first time the contras had seized a town that large and moved so close to what was consistently described as the strategic Pan American highway.

None of the stories were wrong. But I think the average reader was left with the impression that the attack marked some sort of watershed, that it was somehow proof of military progress by the contras who up until then had been written off as little more than puppies yapping at the Sandinistas' heels. In fact, the attack was nothing of the kind. The contras have carried out no major actions since then. La Trinidad has now faded into memory, no doubt to be resurrected after the next contra attack, certain to be described as the strongest since La Trinidad.

American journalists need to learn patience. Nothing ever happens fast in Latin America. The Sandinistas themselves fought the Somozas for almost 20 years before the family dynasty fell.