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CENTER FOR CONSTRUCTIVE ALTERNATIVES EXAMINES CENTRAL AMERICAN POLICY WITH HUMBERTO BELLI AND COLLEAGUES

by Humberto Belli

Editor's Preview: What went wrong in Nicaragua, where millions of ordinary people hoped for a bright future of freedom and plenty after the 1979 revolution against Somoza, only to find themselves trapped under a brutal new Soviet-style regime by 1984?

Humberto Belli, once active as a Marxist within the Sandinista movement, then a member of the loyal but doomed opposition, and now an exile in the U.S., thinks he knows.

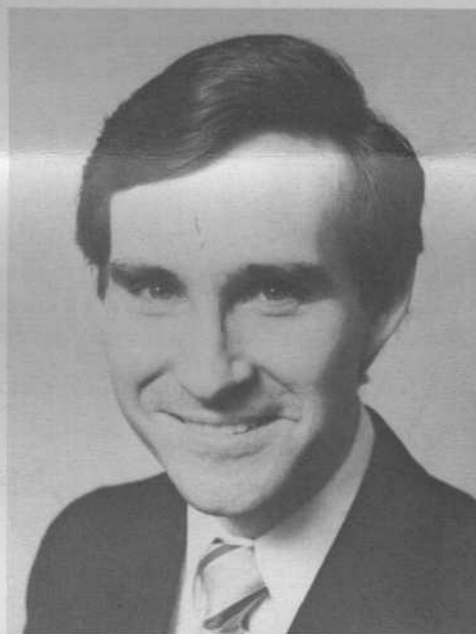
The Nicaraguan tragedy now spilling into neighboring countries began, Belli argues, with Marxism's messianic delusion that politics can build an earthly paradise whose only opponents, by definition, would be pawns of the devil.

This was no benign reform movement pushed leftward by misguided U.S. policies, the author shows. Its emergence into open totalitarianism obeyed the natural dynamic of all revolutions in which men play God, divinize the party, and satanize whoever stands in their way.

What of the future, for a people cruelly betrayed and a whole region likewise threatened? Belli has only this warning for U.S. voters and policymakers: **the self-deified gangsters now running his country will not relent from their dearest aim, total submission of all citizens to the new gods.**

My thoughts on revolutions inspired by Marxist-Leninist ideology are born out of my experiences as a Nicaraguan who participated in the making of the Sandinista revolution. I was a Marxist myself for some years, and a collaborator of the Sandinista movement. I later became the editorial-page editor of the newspaper *La Prensa*, Nicaragua's only independent newspaper, which is now under strict censorship.

I remember the day when the Sandinista revolution defeated the 42-year-old Somoza dictatorship in July



1979, and all my neighbors ran jubilantly to welcome the guerilla leaders marching triumphantly through the streets of Managua. The mood was one of optimism. An uninspiring, corrupt, and decadent dictatorship had been overthrown by a band of courageous young men and women who promised to construct a new Nicaragua. The poor would be first, democracy would shape the future, and human rights would be respected.

The fact that many of the guerrilla leaders were Marxist-Leninists was the cause of some concern, but it did not dampen the prevailing optimism. Many observers, not fully aware of the dynamics of Marxism, pointed to several factors that seemed to counter-balance the presence of ideological radicalism and which appeared to offer sound hopes.

One was the fact that many democratic domestic forces had supported the Sandinistas and were actively present in the overall effort to reshape Nicaragua's future. The

revolution had been fought with the intense participation of the Nicaraguan business community, which staged three crippling general strikes against the Somocista regime after January 1978.

A host of non-Marxist political parties, ranging from the Conservatives to the Christian and Social Democrats, and the most influential democratic labor organizations, such as the Confederación de Trabajadores de Nicaragua and the Central de Unificación Sindical, had formed a broad opposition alliance that challenged Somoza in the political realm, and they were now present in the newly formed revolutionary congress, or State Council.

Likewise, the influential Roman Catholic Church, led by Managua's charismatic Archbishop Miguel Obando, had issued pastoral letters denouncing the government's violations of human rights and, in a latter stage, had spoken about the people's right to rebel in the face of prolonged, unbearable tyranny. Furthermore, many Christians, including some priests, had participated in the struggle.

In the international field, likewise, the Sandinista revolution enjoyed the active support of democratic countries like Venezuela—one of the main sources of funds

and guns for the rebels—Costa Rica, Panama, and Mexico. Many other Western nations, including West Germany and the United States, extended their hand to the Sandinistas in spite of some reservations. During the first two years of Sandinista rule they became the greatest providers of financial support for the new Nicaraguan government.

Hopes for a Third Way

So, in its opening stage, the Nicaraguan revolution had the support of the overwhelming majority of the Nicaraguan middle class, of unionized labor, of the Catholic Church, of several other sectors, and of Western nations. Never before in Nicaraguan history had a regime launched out with such political capital. Never before, perhaps, in the history of Latin American revolutions had there been such near-ideal conditions for creating a new kind of society.

The Nicaraguan revolution, it was widely hoped, was to be neither Communist nor capitalist but a true third way between the inequalities and miseries of Third-World capitalism and the stagnation and repression of Communist regimes. The mingling of Marxist and non-Marxist tendencies in the government, the presence in the government of Christians, and its sponsorship by non-Marxist countries seemed to warrant a favorable outcome. At the very least, the experiment seemed to deserve a chance.

Personally, I was very skeptical. As a former Marxist myself, I knew who the Sandinistas were and what were their goals. Yet the fact that a Communist regime was not very suited to our region, where anti-Communist factors were strong, made me still hope that somehow the Sandinistas could be forced to take a different path, one perhaps halfway between the not-so-closed Yugoslavian socialism and the Mexican case, where one party prevails but allows a good measure of public dissent.

Almost from the very beginning, however, actual developments challenged all early expectations. Cubans arrived by the thousands as teachers and good-will advisors. Freedom of the press began to be curtailed, on a variety of pretexts, while inflammatory Marxist rhetoric of class struggle and anti-U.S. propaganda began to be broadcast from the powerful state media. The army, unlike the National Guard, which had been focused on personal loyalty to Somoza, was supposed to become a national army; but it became the Sandinista army and, as such, a branch of the Sandinista party. The Sandinistas began talking about the establishment of one single labor union. They said that since all workers had a single enemy—"the bourgeoisie"—they had to unite themselves into a single confederation: the government-sponsored Sandinista labor union. When many workers balked at such a demand, they were harassed and vilified.

In March 1980 the Council of State, equivalent to a national congress, where the Sandinistas had in the beginning roughly one-third of the seats, was changed by

About the Author

Humberto Belli, formerly editorial-page editor of *La Prensa* in Managua, Nicaragua, has lived since 1982 in Michigan, where he continues to write and speak out on issues in revolution-torn Central America.

Belli was one of nine experts from both that region and the United States who addressed a seminar of the Center for Constructive Alternatives at Hillsdale College late in 1983, on the topic, "Foreign Policy and the Citizen: Central America as a Case Study."

Humberto Belli holds a law degree from the University of Madrid and an M.A. in sociology from the University of Pennsylvania. Prior to joining *La Prensa*, he had been an attorney and university professor in Managua. His book, *Nicaragua: Christians under Fire*, was published this spring by the Puebla Institute.

Featured with Belli on the week-long program at Hillsdale were Colonel Harry Summers of the Army War College, whose address appeared in the March 1984 issue of *Imprimis*; Michael Skol of the U.S. Department of State; Richard Pipes of Harvard; Mexican economist Agustin Navarro; Enrique Baloyra of the University of North Carolina; Manuel Ayau, president of Guatemala's Universidad Francisco Marroquin; Kendall Brown, Latin American specialist at Hillsdale College; and Christopher Manion, staff director of the Senate Committee on Western Hemisphere Affairs.



government decree to give the Sandinistas two-thirds of the seats. The Sandinistas also forgot their promises of early elections and, when pressured, they declared that their elections would be to select the best among the "vanguard of the people"—a clear reference to themselves.

Now, some five years after the revolution's victory, these kinds of developments have produced a deeply divided society on the brink of civil war—a far cry from the broad alliance that cheerfully celebrated the ousting of Somoza in 1979. A system increasingly similar to Castro's Soviet type of regime has come into being, instead of an original, new model of society.

The Worn-Out Path

What went wrong? Why did the Nicaraguan revolution, against all political prudence, travel the worn-out path of Communist revolutions instead of creating a new model for developing nations?

A common answer that I have found in many circles in the United States is that the Sandinista regime was driven to extreme policies in good measure by the hostile policies of the U.S. government. In support of this view, North Americans often argue that the Sandinistas have suppressed dissent and enforced censorship out of the need to defend their revolution. A statement one frequently finds is that "the U.S. is pushing Nicaragua into the Soviet orbit." This implies that, given more friendly treatment by the U.S., the Nicaraguan revolution would likely have evolved toward a more democratic outcome.

But these propositions are hardly new. Similar views were expressed regarding the Cuban revolution. The contention in the early 1960s was that Castro was pushed to the left by retaliatory U.S. policies.

Moreover, this view is based on ignorance of recent history. The most decisive strides of the Sandinistas toward the Soviets and toward the suppression of dissent took place when the Carter administration was the main international provider of funds to the Sandinistas and when most domestic Nicaraguan sectors and most Western democratic nations were on good terms with them. It was less than a year after the revolution, for instance, in May 1980, that the Sandinistas signed in Moscow an agreement of mutual support with the Communist party of the Soviet Union, an agreement in which Nicaragua gave complete backing to the Soviets' foreign policy, including the invasion of Afghanistan. No hostile policies were then being launched against the Sandinistas from without, nor were significant "contra" forces operating anywhere in Nicaragua.

Fundamentally, theories of the "push" leftward betray a lack of understanding of the dynamics of Marxist revolutions. Such theories harbor hopes of the feasibility of taming these revolutions' tendency toward totalitarianism. I myself partook at one point in the same delusion, but I have since come to understand that Marxist revolutions have a psychology or spirit that impels them to become what, in essence, they already are.

A crucial dimension of Marxist-Leninist movements is their messianic and millennial view of the world. They are convinced that the most basic evils in the world—injustice, oppression, wars, social and individual unhappiness—can be ended and that they shall, in effect, end. The point of departure for this analysis is a conception of the world in which all evils are ultimately rooted in the socio-economic structures of society; more concretely, in the private ownership of the means of production. From this "objective reality," the Marxists claim, all social classes originate—and with them all oppression,

truggles, selfishness, and the rest. As a consequence, if revolutionaries can defeat that world which is structured around private ownership of production, that is, if they can defeat the forces which sustain that world—the bourgeoisie and U.S. imperialism—then they will be defeating oppression at its very root and opening the way for utopia.

Marxist Messiah vs. Yankee Satan

In the anthem of the Sandinista party there is one line that says, "Let us fight against the Yankee, the enemy of humankind." This line, which existed prior to the triumph of the revolution, is not born so much out of resentment against past U.S. interventions in Nicaragua as from a philosophy according to which the United States is the source of all evil in the world. In the Marxists' view the U.S. defends the very system that keeps all people oppressed, the system that makes injustice continue in the world. For the Marxists, the United States plays a role similar to that which Christians believe Satan plays.

Marxism thus offers an optimistic view of the world. Evil can be defeated through socio-political means—and only through them. Marxist-Leninist revolutionary practice attempts to provide the recipe for achieving the millennium, in which exploitation will end and peace and harmony will replace the nastiness of the premillennial present. Needless to say, this messianic view of Marxism can be very appealing and powerful, especially in regions such as Latin America where there is a yearning for anything which may deliver people, once and for all, from the everyday realities of suffering, injustice, and frustration.

However, if we follow this way of thinking to its logical consequences, we see that it has very dangerous implications. Marxist thinking leads to a sacralization of revolution and, when victorious, to a sacralization of power. The revolution, and its concrete expression, the revolutionary party or vanguard, are worshipped as gods—for as gods they are the ones, the only ones, that can bring salvation. The call to absolute commitment to the party follows as the unavoidable next step. If it is only by means of a social revolution embodied in the party, and in the state's power, that utopia can be achieved, then whoever opposes revolution, whoever refrains from fully supporting it, is not merely differing on some issues but is opposing the full deliverance of humankind from bondage. The dissenter is not merely favoring a different set of policies but is preventing the definitive solution of all the evils in the world. He must then be an evil person or insane—deserving either the concentration camp or the psychiatric clinic.

I remember one day in Nicaragua watching the revolutionary leader Tomas Borge giving a speech on television. He was talking about the bright future that the Sandinista revolution was going to deliver for the Nicaraguan people. Children would grow up in a society where people

would no longer be afraid of each other, where true love and freedom would flourish, where a new man would be born. We were just now going through the birth pains of a new world of unsuspected possibilities.

When Men Usurp God's Role

It was a beautiful, even poetic, speech. But then I realized its hidden horror. Anyone convinced that he has the power—and the duty—to achieve a socio-political utopia, will do whatever is possible, whatever is in his hands, to prevent a different outcome. Since he has placed his plan as an absolute, he will not be bound by a higher order or restrained by ethical considerations in pursuit of it. He will smash all those who dare to be an obstacle on the way to utopia, and this he will even do with gusto, for in his view he will merely be destroying those who prevent the kingdom of justice, love, and happiness from coming into existence.

I can tell you that if someday you find yourself listening to a newly inaugurated President saying that for the first time the United States is going to break all the chains of alienation, frustration, and sorrow and that a world of happiness is ahead—you should be afraid! No one but God can deliver full salvation, and when men usurp God's role, we are on the threshold of a living hell.

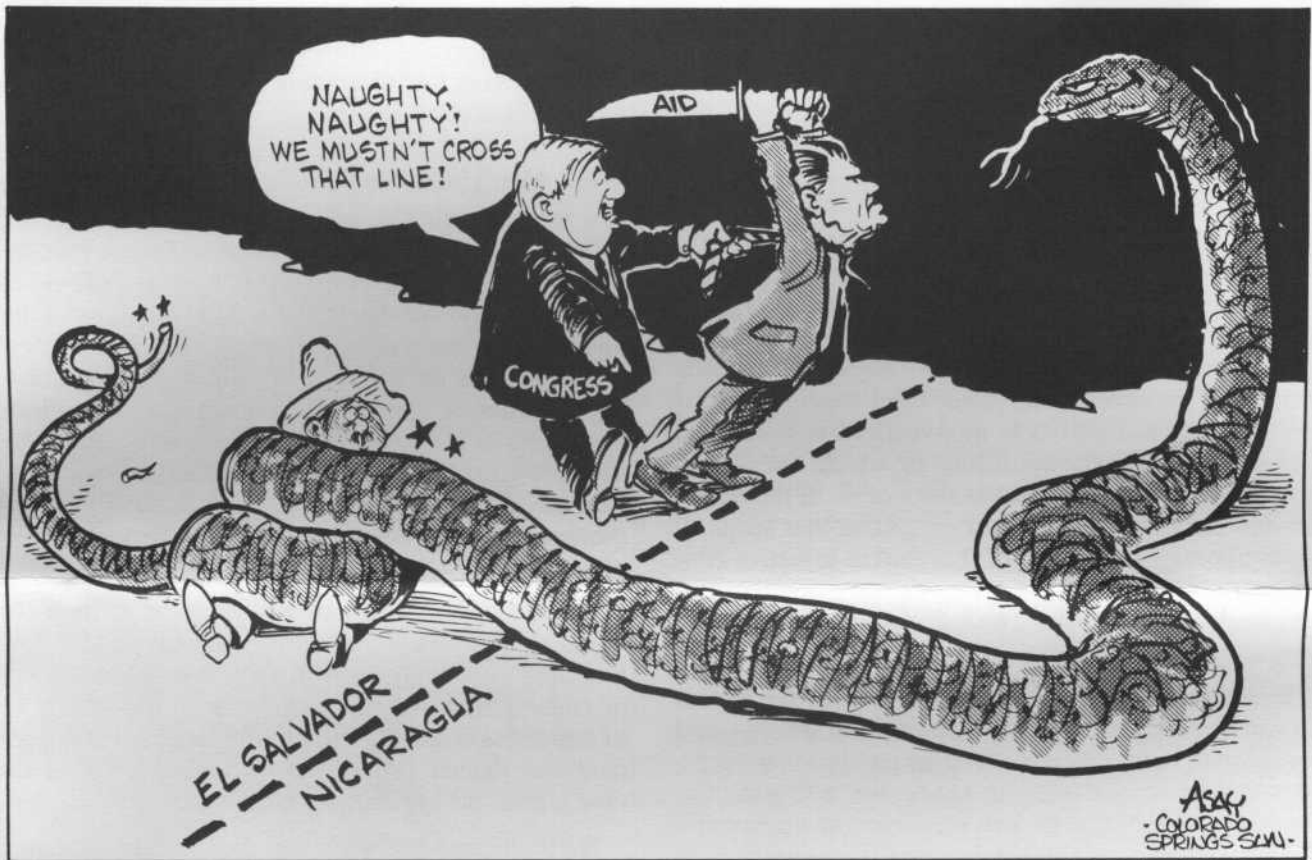
Naturally enough, when you find yourself face to face with a god, you cannot remain neutral. You have got to be for him or against him—for the revolution or against the revolution. No middle ground is allowed. A declaration that Fidel Castro once made, and which became one of the leading slogans of the Cuban revolution, summarizes this attitude: "Anything inside the revolution, nothing outside the revolution."

Neither the individual's private realm, nor religion, nor anything independent can escape such a law. In Nicaragua the Sandinistas have repeatedly said that they consider the religion worthy of respect to be that which pays homage to the revolution. A religious mass should be a revolutionary mass: it should honor the revolution, its martyrs, and its goals in its prayers and homilies. No wonder the Pope was so openly disrespected when he celebrated mass in Managua: he committed a sin of omission—he did not pray for the martyrs of the revolution.

Political Christmas

In December 1979, when I was working at *La Prensa* we discovered a secret memo prepared by the head of political propaganda of the Sandinista Front to all its regional leaders. The memo instructed them in how to approach the upcoming Christmas celebration. It said that the Sandinista leadership wanted to turn this into a special day for the children, one "with a different content, *fundamentally political*."

Turning every religious feast, every religious concept, into something new, fundamentally political, is one of the



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Sandinistas' main ideological thrusts. Everything inside the revolution, nothing outside of it.

Jesus himself has been revolutionized. A Sandinista poster on the cover of a book entitled *Christian Faith and Sandinista Revolution*, published by a Christian organization that is aligned with the government, shows a picture of a guerrilla fighter, rifle in hand, emerging from a drawing of the crucified Christ. The guerrilla fighter becomes, for the Sandinista, the embodiment of Christ in twentieth-century Latin America. Thus Christ is not openly denied, but changed.

Sin, likewise, undergoes a metamorphosis at the hands of the revolutionary movement and its allies. Sin becomes identified with a particular social system—capitalism; the struggle against sin then becomes a struggle against capitalism. The basic work of Christ, to overcome sin and reconcile mankind with the all-good Father, is translated into a purely human struggle to be waged by socio-political means. This viewpoint, preached by the advocates of a Marxist liberation theology and sponsored by the Sandinistas, envisions the true messiah, the true liberator of humankind, to be the revolutionary party.

Individuals who share the political messianism inherent in Marxism tend to see a world divided between those who are entirely good and others who are entirely evil. The good ones are those who sponsor Marxist revolution; the evil ones are all the others. When, at times, the

revolutionaries recognize a defect such as vice or selfishness in their own ranks—as they sometimes talk about Stalin's "excesses"—they attribute such misbehavior either to actions of their enemies which forced them to overreact or to the fact that the revolutionaries are still carrying some of the seed of corruption inherited from the bourgeois past. But Marxism and the revolution are, in themselves, clean. It is their adversaries who are on the dark, dark side.

I was impressed, when I was working on *La Prensa*, with how, for the Sandinistas, we were all the embodiment of evil, the artful defenders of the bourgeoisie bent on manufacturing all kind of stories in order to discredit the revolution.

With all honesty I can tell you that we tried, particularly at the beginning, to avoid criticizing the Sandinistas in ways which might lead to confrontation or which would sound harsh. We had meeting after meeting of the editorial staff of the newspaper, trying to moderate our criticism, devising ways not to provoke the government's anger, and figuring out how we could offer positive alternatives. Nothing worked, whatsoever.

The Sandinistas would interpret our behavior as hypocrisy, and soon they were referring to us as "the counter-revolutionary plotters," "the hidden hand of the CIA," "those who were selling out the fatherland." We could not be a dissenting voice in a pluralistic society; we

were the enemies. And if the Sandinistas refrained from destroying *La Prensa* completely, it is only due to their awareness of the international political cost that such a move would entail.

Slow Death of Pluralism and Dissent

This typecasting as enemies befell all the other sectors of Nicaraguan society unwilling to grant their full support to the Sandinistas' policies. The Catholic archbishop of Managua and leader of the Nicaraguan Catholic Church was labeled by Interior Minister Tomas Borge the "leading counter-revolutionary" in Nicaragua. Political dissidents who had once been members of the government junta, such as Alfonso Robelo, were called "lackeys of imperialism" and "traitors." One after the other, labor unions and political parties that had struggled against the Somoza dictatorship in search of a democratic Nicaragua came to be vilified, mobbed, and terrorized in one way or another.

As a conclusion, I want to offer for reflection the pro-

position that a revolution or regime inspired by a messianic and therefore totalitarian creed—be it Communism, Nazism, or any other ism—has a powerful, unavoidable tendency toward the forcible establishment of a system which leaves no place for those unwilling to worship the new idols.

What is taking place in Nicaragua is not the outcome of misguided U.S. policies, regardless of how wise or unwise these policies might actually be. It is the outcome of a philosophy, of a world-view, which divinizes power.

Strategic considerations might force this kind of regime to offer some concessions, in keeping with Lenin's famous "one step back before going two steps forward." They might even tolerate, for a time, some liberties, some remnants of pluralism—which they abhor.

But in the long run, there is no hope that the totalitarian spirit will relinquish its dearest aim—the total submission of all the citizens to the new gods.



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