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زبانهای اروپائی

JUNE 15, 2018

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16.06.2018

The US & Nicaragua: a Case Study in Historical Amnesia & Blindness



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I was stunned the other day to see [an opinion piece by Stephen Kinzer in *The Boston Globe*](#) in which he was portraying the violent anti-government protests in Nicaragua as some kind of revolutionary insurrection. What is surprising about Kinzer's position is that he is the individual who wrote the wonderful book, *All The Shah's Men*— one of the essential readings about the CIA-backed coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran in 1953.

What is happening in Nicaragua right now looks a lot like what happened in Iran during this coup, and yet, Kinzer somehow does not see this. In this way, Kinzer typifies the utter confusion of so many in this country — including those who should know better, such as many self-described leftists — about what is happening in Nicaragua and in Latin America generally.

First of all, let us look at what Kinzer correctly describes as the tactics used by the CIA in overthrowing Mosaddegh and installing the Shah of Iran in his place. The main tactic was to organize, pay and direct violent street protesters to create a chaotic situation which would then provoke a violent response from the government – a response which could be used to justify the military’s moving in against Mosaddegh under the pretext of restoring order and democratic rule.

In *All The Shah’s Men*, Kinzer describes the days leading up to the coup as follows:

The riots that shook Tehran on Monday intensified on Tuesday. Thousands of demonstrators, unwittingly under CIA control, surged through the streets, looting shops, destroying pictures of the Shah, and ransacking the offices of royalist groups. Exuberant nationalists and communists joined in the mayhem. The police were still under orders from Mosaddegh not to interfere. That allowed rioters to do their jobs, which was to give the impression that Iran was sliding towards anarchy. [CIA Bureau Chief Kermit] Roosevelt caught glimpses of them during his furtive trips around the city and said that they ‘scared the hell out of him.’

Kinzer explains that when this violence was not quite enough to provoke the desired crackdown by the government, Roosevelt sent the US Ambassador to Mosaddegh to trick him into using force against the rioters by claiming that this was necessary to protect Americans allegedly under attack in Tehran. Roosevelt knew that Mosaddegh, inevitably moved by the Iranians’ famous feelings of hospitality towards foreign guests, would have to act. And act he did, even going so far as to attack his own supporters in the interest of saving American lives, or so he was led to believe. The coup followed shortly thereafter.

But rather than restoring democracy to Iran, of course, the CIA, the Shah, and the dreaded SAVAK security and torture apparatus later set up by the CIA to keep the Shah in power destroyed Iranian democracy. Indeed, by the time of the insurrection against the Shah which ultimately toppled him in February of 1979, Amnesty International described the Shah’s regime as having the worst human rights record in the world – quite a distinction.

The type of game plan run by the CIA in Iran, the very first of its kind, would be carried out again to topple progressive and nationalist governments in the future, most notably in countries like Guatemala in 1954 and Chile in 1973.

However, as one of the foremost experts on such covert ops, F. William Engdahl, explains, in the 1980's, NGOs largely took over for the CIA in carrying out these operations. [As Engdahl relates:](#)

During the Reagan Presidency very damaging scandals were becoming public about CIA dirty operations around the world. Chile, Iran, Guatemala, the top secret MK-Ultra project, the student movement during the Vietnam War to name just a few. To take the spotlight away from them, CIA Director Bill Casey proposed to Reagan creating a "private" NGO, a kind of cut-out that would pose as private, but in reality, as one of its founders the late Allen Weinstein said in a later interview to the Washington Post, "doing what the CIA did, but privately." This was the creation of the NGO named National Endowment for Democracy [NED] in 1983. . . .

Hiding very black dirty anti-democratic CIA operations behind private political NGOs waving the banner of "Human Rights" has been very effective for Washington's global agenda of toppling un-cooperative regimes around the world. In effect the CIA has weaponized human rights.

It was the NED which was critical in supporting and helping to organize the coup in Venezuela against Hugo Chavez in 2002, a coup which thankfully was short-lived. It is important to remember that the precipitating event of this coup was the shooting of protesters by snipers who were originally accused of being Chavistas, but who later turned out to be right-wing provocateurs. This is well-documented in the film, *The Revolution Will Not be Televised*.

Meanwhile, on July 19, 1979, shortly after the Shah was ousted in Iran, tiny Nicaragua had its own revolution, led by the Sandinistas, which toppled a brutal US-backed dictator, Anastasio Somoza.

As we know, the US, through the CIA, quickly moved against the Nicaraguan revolution, arming Somoza's former National Guardsmen, organizing them into the Contras, and overseeing a brutal terrorist war against Nicaragua which destroyed the infrastructure and economy of Nicaragua, and which claimed the lives of 50,000 Nicaraguans. This is equivalent to 2.5 million deaths in the United States.

Finally, in 1990, the Nicaraguans, exhausted by the Contra war and economic strangulation, voted the Sandinistas out of power. In short, the US terror campaign succeeded according to plan.

The Sandinistas were in the wilderness until 2006 when Daniel Ortega was voted in as President once more. And while many on the left have criticized the older Ortega as having abandoned his revolutionary and socialist principles, a few points must be made about this.

First of all, while Ortega certainly has made concessions to the business community, the conservative political opposition and the Catholic Church, I would ask his detractors to explain just what choice he has had.

Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Hemisphere, was so before the Sandinistas took power in 1979, and was still so when they took power again in 2006. When the Sandinistas took power the first time, they inherited an economy wrecked and pillaged by Somoza, a country still left in shambles by the 1972 earthquake because Somoza siphoned off the aid money for himself instead of rebuilding, and a country further destroyed by Somoza who aeri ally bombed neighborhoods in Managua to cling to power. When the Sandinistas took power the second time, they inherited a country still struggling to recover from a decade of the brutal Contra war and by the accompanying economic embargo.

Meanwhile, the Sandinistas never even attempted to rid Nicaragua of the leading elements of the *ancien régime* (as Cuba did after its 1959 Revolution) with which they now must contend. This of course has made governing much more difficult and more radical reforms even more so. But if the Sandinistas had moved against these elements, such as the bourgeoisie and the Church, then they would be criticized even more than they are now for being repressive and anti-democratic.

And yet, there are some who argue that, somehow, the Sandinistas have failed by not building socialism in one country upon such a weak foundation, in a country with few natural resources and in the face of hostility from a much more powerful enemy in the United States. Never mind that such critics generally believe that socialism in one country is unachievable even in good conditions. In short, the Sandinistas are criticized for not achieving the impossible.

All of this recalls to mind the words of Michael Parenti in his wonderful article, "[Left Anticommunism: The Unkindest Cut](#)":

The pure socialists regularly blame the Left itself for every defeat it suffers. Their second-guessing is endless. So we hear that revolutionary struggles fail because their leaders wait

too long or act too soon, are too timid or too impulsive, too stubborn or too easily swayed. We hear that revolutionary leaders are compromising or adventuristic, bureaucratic or opportunistic, rigidly organized or insufficiently organized, undemocratic or failing to provide strong leadership. But always the leaders fail because they do not put their trust in the “direct actions” of the workers, who apparently would withstand and overcome every adversity if only given the kind of leadership available from the left critic’s own groupuscule. Unfortunately, the critics seem unable to apply their own leadership genius to producing a successful revolutionary movement in their own country. . . .

To be sure, the pure socialists are not entirely without specific agendas for building the revolution. After the Sandinistas overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua, an ultra-left group in that country called for direct worker ownership of the factories. The armed workers would take control of production without benefit of managers, state planners, bureaucrats, or a formal military. While undeniably appealing, this worker syndicalism denies the necessities of state power. Under such an arrangement, the Nicaraguan revolution would not have lasted two months against the U.S.-sponsored counterrevolution that savaged the country. It would have been unable to mobilize enough resources to field an army, take security measures, or build and coordinate economic programs and human services on a national scale.

Meanwhile, the Sandinistas, within the constraints of world capitalism as well as the immutable laws of physics, have done many positive things within the realm of the possible. Thus, they have done much to alleviate poverty in Nicaragua, to build homes for the poor, to successfully combat illiteracy and to bring a remarkable level of economic prosperity and stability to this once war-torn country. Even [the New York Times recently acknowledged](#) that “[m]any poor people who receive housing and other government benefits support” Sandinista President, Daniel Ortega.

Long-time Nicaragua solidarity activist, [Chuck Kaufman, recently summarized these achievements](#), explaining that Daniel Ortega’s first action after being re-elected as President in 2006

was to end school fees, allowing 100,000 children into the schools whose poverty had kept them uneducated. This was rapidly followed by his administration building the free public health system into a robust institution that treated people rather than just wrote prescriptions that the patients were too poor to fill. The peasant agriculture sector was revitalized bringing hundreds of thousands up out of abject poverty, especially women and children.

Impoverished Nicaragua became one of the first countries in the world to achieve the UN Millennial Challenge to cut poverty in half by 2015. Along the way, the Ortega government achieved sustained economic growth of 5% and achieved labor stability through the famous Tripartite Model in which unions and big business negotiated semi-annual increases in the minimum wage with the government intervening when the two other parties couldn't agree. The World Bank, IMF, and European countries all praised Nicaragua for its lack of corruption and effective use of grants and loans. Finally, Nicaraguan women's participation in public and private affairs raised Nicaragua to one of the top four countries in the world for gender equality.

As a result of the foregoing, Nicaragua has been the only Central American country touched by the brutal wars of the 1980s not to be contributing to the recent mass migration to the US. Indeed, a [May, 2016 DNC email released by Wikileaks](#) explains, "Our neighbors in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala are in a crisis of uncontrolled violence. Women and children from these countries are coming to our Southwest border in search of refuge. Essentially, no one is coming from Nicaragua"

In addition, Ortega has taken some very bold moves on the international stage, for example when he took in the deposed Honduran President, Manuel Zelaya, after the 2009 coup, and when he offered for Miguel D'Escoto to serve as Libya's Ambassador to the UN when Libya, in its death throes from the 2011 NATO bombing, had no UN representative. Ortega also stopped sending Nicaraguan troops to be trained at the School of the Americas (SOA) after meeting with SOA Watch founder, Father Roy Bourgeois.

And, up until the recent events in Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega enjoyed sky-high approval ratings. Indeed, just several months before the current events rocking Nicaragua, [Ortega had an astounding approval rating of nearly 80 percent!](#)

Now, we are told, by such folks as Stephen Kinzer, Amy Goodman and by a number of "pure socialists," that the people are suddenly rising up against President Ortega. And, some on the American left are arguing that we should welcome and support this uprising as a new stage of the Nicaraguan revolution which will finally bring true socialism to that poor, isolated country.

I believe that such commentators could not be farther from the truth. What is happening now in Nicaragua is not revolution, but in fact counterrevolution. And, this is no less true because there are some self-described leftists who are participating in and cheering on this

uprising, just as Steven Kinzer tells us that a number of communists and socialists unwittingly supported the protests which unseated Mosaddegh in Iran.

Indeed, in an interesting article entitled, "[My Contra Parents Are Marching For a New 'Old' Nicaragua: Are We, Too?](#)", Melissa Castillo expresses reasonable skepticism about the prevailing narrative surrounding the protests in Nicaragua:

Another suspicious aspect of this opposition is that it claims to include former Sandinistas who have now turned against Ortega because of his corruption. This is confusing because the opposition's social media platform does not seem to consist of any socialist groups. The Sandinistas were built on socialism and the leaders at the time of the revolution were largely Marxists. A group involved in the opposition, for instance, is the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS). The MRS are Social Democrats who have partnered with a right-wing coalition in recent years in order to expand their base. By now, the MRS seems to have grown more centrist and devotes much of its platform to anti-Ortega rhetoric.

Leftists and Sandinista supporters may have legitimate concerns about Ortega, but that does not mean these are the same people joining forces with right-wingers and the U.S. government or appealing to the American public to "share" images of unrest on social media. I believe true leftist concerns include the concessions Ortega has made to the private sector in his economic policy, the power he has ceded to the church, his softening towards capitalist policies, and the increasing influence of Western international entities in public sector decision-making. It would not rationally be in the interest of leftists to join a coalition led by a private sector interested in pulling Nicaragua further to the right.

The impetus for the current demonstrations was Ortega's April 16, 2018 announcement of very modest social security reforms designed to keep Nicaragua's near-bankrupt social security system solvent past 2019. Ortega actually rejected the more drastic reforms demanded by the IMF and the business community, and then demonstrations began which the business community supported. But, to Castillo's point, the business community wants more draconian cuts; it has obviously not supported the protests to advance progressive social change.

Moreover, it was college students who really moved the protests to a new level. But college students are not generally concerned about reforms to social security which will not affect them for decades.

As Barbara Moore, a long-time solidarity activist living in Nicaragua, explains in her, "[Letter From Nicaragua: A Catastrophic Well-Orchestrated Event Is Occurring,](#)"

On April 19 student-led protests began what the Mainstream media and international NGOs would describe as a pro-democracy uprising. Initially at issue were the social security reforms. For reasons no one has been able to explain, the students were highly agitated over the 1% rise in worker contributions, the 3.5% rise in employer contributions (over time) and a 5% cut in the benefit which was also a trade-off for expanded medical coverage. The alternate proposals rejected by the Ortega government and favored by the private sector COSEP and the IMF involved much greater cuts, raising the retirement age, cutting benefits completely (the little pensions) and the privatization of clinics.

Vietnam veteran and long-time peace activist, S. Brian Willson, who is currently in Nicaragua and who famously lost his legs on September 1, 1987 while sitting in on railroad tracks to block arms shipments bound for Central America, sent Barbara Moore's letter to *Popular Resistance* [with a note which reads](#), in pertinent part: "This is a very good assessment of the orchestrated coup in Nicaragua. The author is a Gringo [sic.] who lives in Managua working at the Ben Linder house who happens to be stuck in Granada because we are under siege by many thugs armed I am sure with help of the US." I note that I was in Nicaragua doing reforestation work and learning about the brutality of US foreign policy at the time Brian lost his legs in protest. His great sacrifice has had a huge impact on many of us, and I find it quite sad that the voices of people like Brian Willson are not being heard on the issue of Nicaragua at this critical time.

Meanwhile, what we do know is that one of the main student groups behind the current protests – [the Civil Youth Movement \(MCJ\) "was created by and received funding from the National Democratic Institute \(NDI\)"](#) — the NDI, in turn, being one of the three pillars of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) which took over a number of covert operations for the CIA in the 1980's. Indeed, [between 2014 and 2017, the NED has given \\$4.2 million](#) to opposition groups in Nicaragua for the purpose of "democracy promotion" (aka, "regime change").

At the same time, there is no doubt that the protests, which began peacefully on April 17, accelerated due to violence and the great loss of life which has taken place since the protests began, with certainly over 100 people killed. However, there has been much disinformation about this violence both within Nicaragua and in the Western press.

First and foremost, whenever you see a tally of the deaths, all of the responsibility for them is laid at the feet of the Nicaraguan security forces even though members of the security forces themselves are included in the tally, as are government supporters and bystanders. Indeed, one of the first people killed in the protests was a police officer, and

many have been killed since – some at their homes *and even in their barracks after Ortega ordered the police off the streets*. But you are never told this. You are also never told *of the fact* that, up until these very recent events, “Nicaragua’s community based policing, and their women’s police stations, specializing in domestic violence, were studied by police departments throughout the world and were famous for their record of positive community relations.”

My friends in Nicaragua tell me that what seems suspicious is that some of the student groups, armed as they immediately were with an arsenal of well-constructed weapons, were so obviously prepared in advance to start a violent uprising, and clearly used the opportunity of the protests against the social security reforms as a mere pretext to start and provoke violence. *As one commentator explains*, while “most of the media reports have portrayed the opposition groups and protestors as a ‘rag tag’ team of students, . . . examples of opposition violence, such as opposition use of ‘homemade mortars’ and ‘gas bombs’ as well as the burning of public buildings has received minimal coverage in the Western media.”

And, it was these well-armed protesters who became predominant two days after the protests began. As the independent media collective, *Tortilla Con Sol, reported*, “from April 19 onward, extremist opposition activists hijacked the student protests, attacking hospitals, government and municipal authority offices, public buildings of all kinds, university precincts and even the brand new national baseball stadium.”

Quite tellingly, the violent groups calling for Ortega to step down in the midst of his presidential term – despite the fact that he won re-election in 2016 with about 70% of the vote — have been attacking symbols of the Sandinista Revolution which overthrew the dictator Anastasio Somoza. Again, this reveals these groups to be more counter-revolutionaries than revolutionaries.

Another aspect of the violence which is largely being ignored is the strong evidence of snipers (remember the key role snipers played in the coup against Hugo Chavez in 2002) in carrying out precision killings which are then later blamed on the police.

Barbara Moore, citing the forensics described in a report by the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights, *explains*:

The opposition claimed and continues to claim the National Police had used lethal and deadly force, firing indiscriminately into crowds with live ammunition. Yet that seems impossible given the forensics, nearly every fatality occurred in a precise, specific, even clean shot to the head, neck or chest. Not exactly what one would expect given the street

battles filled with heightened levels of chaos or that when police do shoot to kill they are trained to aim for the mid-section.

The public, deceived by press reports, the international mainstream media and rightfully outraged over the killings continued over the following weeks to take to the streets. Almost always the same pattern repeated itself; more killed- always a male, despite the fact the early protests were well attended by females. The victims continued to be shot with incredible precision always in the head or neck, sometimes in the chest. These facts, incidentally corroborate government claims that snipers were responsible for the killings. As the death toll continues to rise this pattern has remained entirely constant.

This brings us full circle back to Stephen Kinzer's piece in *The Boston Globe*. Kinzer begins this piece by describing a key incident which has further inflamed the situation in Nicaragua:

As a mass of unarmed protesters filed past Dennis Martínez Stadium in Managua, Nicaragua, on May 30, *snipers inside the stadium began firing at them*. That day's casualties joined a list of about 100 dead and 1,000 wounded and missing in the last two months. Among those outraged was the person for whom the stadium is named. Dennis Martínez is the most celebrated of all Nicaraguan baseball players, immortalized by pitching a perfect game for the Montreal Expos in 1991.(emphasis added).

Kinzer then goes on to explain how Daniel Ortega is allegedly responsible for the violence that has been taking place in Nicaragua, and to criticize him for remaining "defiant" in his refusal not to step down from his elected office. Meanwhile, Kinzer neglects to mention how opposition groups ransacked the Dennis Martínez stadium.

What is remarkable about this piece — written by a man who literally wrote the book on the CIA's manipulation of violence in unseating Iran's Mohammad Mosaddegh — is that Kinzer does not even try to identify who these unnamed "snipers" were. And, while he makes a passing reference much later in his piece to alleged "paramilitary gangs" of Ortega, he does not attempt to connect them to this sniper firing at the stadium. In short, Kinzer glosses over the most important detail of the narrative, and that is because it is the most inconvenient one for him in his apparent crusade to urge Ortega's resignation.

If these snipers are, as the Nicaraguan government claims, part of the violent opposition's attempt to overthrow Ortega, then what is happening in Nicaragua must be seen in a very different light than what we are being told by the likes of Kinzer. And, this is the only logical conclusion. There simply is no incentive for the Nicaraguan government, over one month into the protests, to incite even more protest and opposition by firing into a crowd

of demonstrators. This could only serve the interests of those waging the coup operation, and it indeed has served these interests quite well. Indeed, Kinzer himself rightly points this out, explaining that “[f]uneral marches balloon into new protests, and when they are attacked [again, we are not told by whom], the spiral intensifies.”

Ortega, who currently has the reins of government, has all the incentive for the status quo of peace and calm to return to Nicaragua, for this means he remains in his position as president. It is the opposition who needs a game changer – one which could only be brought about by dramatic events such as those that took place at the baseball stadium on May 30. But these realities do not seem to be worth considering by those like Kinzer who, ironically parroting the coup plotters who overthrew Mosaddegh, are pontificating in the press about the need to promote democracy by unseating an elected leader.

What all parties can certainly agree on is that the current events in Nicaragua are indeed calamitous, and becoming more so with each passing day. The economy has already suffered about \$250 million in losses– a hefty sum for such a small country. And, this figure will surely climb as businesses, burned down by the violent opposition, do not re-open, and as tourism, a major source of national revenue, surely dries up. Indeed, just today, American Airlines announced that it is suspending flights to Managua as a result of the violence there.

No one in their right mind could wish any of this upon another nation – especially upon a nation which has suffered so much as Nicaragua. And I guarantee you that if Ortega is forced out of office by this violence, the result will not be, as some on the ostensible left would have us believe, a deepening of democracy and socialism. Rather, it will result in a return of the right- wing to power, an end to the social programs which have greatly benefitted the poor and the further destruction of the symbols and memorials of the very laudable Sandinista Revolution. The result, in other words, will be a counterrevolution. Anyone calling themselves a leftist, or even a humanitarian, must oppose such an end.