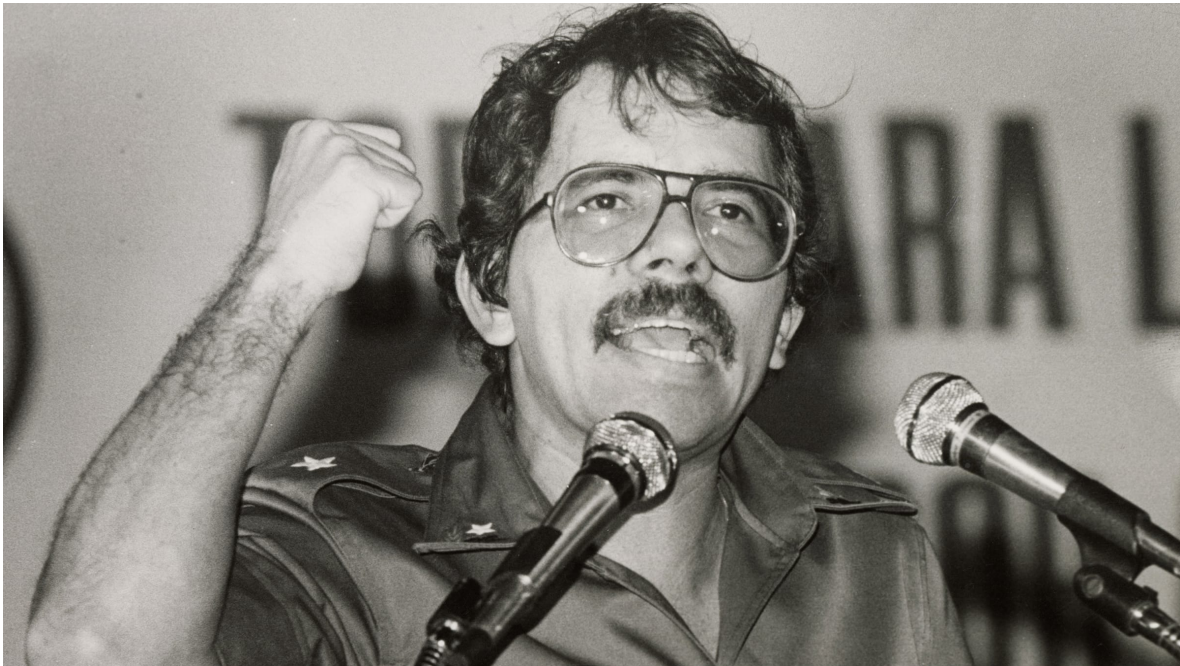


LOS HIJOS DE SANDINO

Bill Gentile

Daily Beast, 07.19.19

How Nicaragua's Sandinista Revolution Was Resurrected—and Betrayed



Courtesy Bill Gentile

Forty years ago Friday—July 19, 1979—a revolution in Nicaragua promised hope and dignity to the people of Central America. Things didn't work out that way.

Bill Gentile covered the Central American wars of the 1980s that haunt the United States to this day. In the first chapter of this series he wrote about [the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua](#). In the second, he looked at the [U.S.-backed counter-revolution](#). Here he looks at what has become of the region, and of journalism.

Return Trips

MANAGUA, Nicaragua—Journalists follow the news. So when peace came to Central America at the beginning of the 1990s, I knew it was time for me to leave.

The story there that had dominated front pages and nightly news for more than a decade dissipated almost overnight.

In any case, I was ready to expand my work from Latin America and the Caribbean to more distant frontiers and Claudia, my Nicaraguan wife, was glad to escape the pressure cooker of a country mired in perpetual crisis. So we moved to Miami, a blend of developed and developing countries, where I still could cover major national and international stories, where my experience in conflict reporting and fluency in Spanish would be assets, and from where I could cover not just the region but stories far beyond.

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ENEMIGO DE LA HUMANIDAD

Central America's Wars of the '80s Still Haunt the U.S.

Bill Gentile



It was a difficult transition. The logistics made sense, but the profession itself faced growing threats. By the end of the 1980s and especially at the beginning of the 1990s, the craft of photojournalism was contracting. Digital photography was becoming accessible to everyone; social media began to compete with the old mainstream operations, and 24/7 cable meant legacy outlets like Newsweek, my employer, became the platforms of old news before they even hit the stands.



A peasant walks past a cotton plantation in western Nicaragua.
Courtesy Bill Gentile

I moved to Philadelphia and began working for Video News International (VNI), the first company in the nation to use the new digital “prosumer” cameras to generate television content. Claudia and I separated and eventually divorced. When VNI fell apart, I turned to freelancing with video. By the year 2000 I had begun teaching as my main gig and freelancing as much as time and energy would allow.

But Nicaragua never left me. And I never left Nicaragua.

'The World Stopped Watching'

White Pine Pictures is a Canadian documentary film production company whose members in 1986 produced *The World Is Watching*, about the coverage of the Contra War in Nicaragua by Western media. I was one of the featured journalists. In 2002, some 16 years later, White Pine contacted me to ask whether I would be willing to return to Nicaragua to film a sequel.

"Absolutely."

I proposed we scan a handful of images from my book, *Nicaragua*, and publish them in the country's newspapers. We'd ask people to contact our producer in Managua if anyone recognized the people in the pictures, then we'd follow up on their stories since the Sandinista victory on July 19, 1979.

It worked. Sandinista soldiers. Contra fighters. Peasants. Workers. Our producer's phone rang off the hook. And in the end? I found myself trying to explain how terrible those days had been, in large part because they failed to advance the Sandinistas' plan for a more equitable Nicaragua than the one they inherited from the Somoza dictatorship.

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[LUCHAMOS CONTRA EL YANQUI](#)

'Terrible and Glorious Days': The Contra War of the 1980s

Bill Gentile



Calling their sequel *The World Stopped Watching*, the White Pine filmmakers produced a documentary explaining how the absence of international media loosens the restraints on the bad guys, who can do whatever they want because we, the international observers and watchdogs, are not around to hold them accountable. And that's exactly what has happened.

At their electoral defeat in 1990, the Sandinista government accepted the process and, with no small amount of urging by former President Jimmy Carter, handed over power to a new government. It was the first time in Nicaragua's history that a sitting government peacefully handed over power as the result of a legitimate, internationally recognized election.

At a news conference recognizing their landslide loss, Sandinista leaders, including ousted President Daniel Ortega, showed up with pallid, drawn faces. Most of the international press corps was stunned by the results as well.

“El cuadro esta pintado,” one high-ranking Sandinista official declared just days before the vote. “The painting is finished,” he said, assuring me with blind confidence that the Sandinistas would crush the opposition. The result was a measure of how deeply the Sandinista leadership was disconnected from the people.

But at a rally not long after the vote, Ortega promised his followers that, “We will rule from below.” In other words, the highly organized Sandinista party would flex its muscles and get its way no matter who was president.

Malign Neglect

Anthony Quinton is Distinguished Diplomat in Residence in the School of International Service (SIS) at American University in Washington, D.C. He spent 38 years in the U.S. foreign services as a diplomat in Nicaragua, Peru, Kuwait and the Central African Republic. He also served as Coordinator of the Office for Combating Terrorism.

At a recent conference, Quinton delivered a keynote speech titled, “Managua and Washington in the Early Sandinista Revolution,” calling his his assignment in Nicaragua in the early 1980s “Mission Impossible.”

He argued that had the United States made a major and long-term commitment to the social and economic development of the region and backed off its support for corrupt regimes, “some of the problems we are now encountering might have been avoided or at least ameliorated. Unfortunately when the Sandinistas were eventually voted out of power in 1990, the United States largely lost interest in the region. We are reaping the whirlwind of that neglect in the refugee and gang crises we are now facing,” he said.

Both sides could not see beyond their ideologies. Neither could escape from its history.

— **Anthony Quainton, former U.S. ambassador to Nicaragua**

“Opportunities to create a more stable Central America existed four decades ago,” said Quainton. “They were lost. Both sides could not see beyond their ideologies. Neither could escape from its history. The Sandinistas believed that they were a vanguard party and that history had entrusted them a revolutionary mission. ... They could not escape from the troubled history of Yankee intervention. We could not escape from Vietnam and the experiences of the Cold War. Bridging the historical, ideological and emotional divide between us was more than I or my colleagues could do. Try as we could, the Mission was always impossible.”

Quainton’s argument is balanced and cogent, but it presumes there was some kind of parity in 1979 between a little country devastated by earthquakes and wars with no tradition of good governance, and a stable, global, functional democracy and superpower some 200 years old. Prior to 1979 much of the Sandinista leadership lived in La Montaña and in clandestine cells. They had little or no institutional foundation to build on. No Harvard or Oxford background to draw from. No Jefferson, Washington or Lincoln to emulate.

Instead, they were forced to cope with political, economic and military aggression by the single most powerful nation on the planet. To justify that action, Ronald Reagan warned a group of conservative supporters that defeat of the contras would create “a privileged sanctuary for terrorists and subversives just two days’ driving time from Harlingen, Texas.” He warned that “feet people” trudging north would be “swarming into our country” to escape communism.

But if, as the Trump administration claims, Central Americans are now headed north in huge numbers, it's because of the complete failure to address their hopes, their needs, and their safety.

Rule and Ruin

Yet none of this justifies what Sandinista rule has become.

Today, most of the original Sandinista leadership has abandoned the Ortega regime, viewing it as a betrayal of the organization's original promises to the Nicaraguan people. Daniel Ortega has been president, once again, for the past 10 years. His wife, Rosario Murillo, is vice president.

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NO PASARAN

Facing Down the Death Squads of Nicaragua

Christopher Dickey,

Bianca Jagger



During anti-government protests in the spring of 2018, Sandinista police and Sandinista-backed armed thugs killed an estimated 300 people. Media outlets are constantly harassed and shut down. Even international non-governmental organizations whose only agenda is to help the poor and underprivileged have abandoned the country because of government restrictions and intervention. Nicaragua continues to be rated as the second poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere.

So where do journalists and journalism fit into all this? How do we see our role? Four decades after my first arrival in Managua, have I helped bring about positive change? Did I do any good here?

I certainly hope so. I hope the images I created and published via UPI, Newsweek magazine, my Nicaragua book and other outlets, have contributed to the visual record of that time and that place in history. It's important to remember that, at the time when I was covering the region, there was no Facebook, no Google, no Instagram, no email. There was no internet! Television was limited to ABC, CBS and NBC. CNN was just beginning. Fox did not exist. So most of the world relied on a handful of magazines including Newsweek, Time and U.S. News & World

Report, Life and National Geographic, for its visual explanation of the globe. Major newspapers like The New York Times and The Washington Post published only black and white pictures back then.

A tiny handful of women and men, including myself, were privileged to be part of a small cadre of photojournalists entrusted with the mission of providing the world with a visual explanation of itself. And we did so sometimes despite great peril.

But there is another dimension to what we do, perhaps more important than our impact on the wider world. And that is the mere act of practicing our craft defines and validates us. Like La Montaña for the guerrillas, journalism is the anvil upon which we test, forge and mold ourselves into what we aspire to be.