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Cold War and Contempt: The Lyndon B. Johnson Administration and Nicaragua

Introduction

In a 1967 report from Ambassador William Crockett to the U.S. State Department the diplomat commented on the leader and government of Nicaragua. Crockett lamented: “All of us who presume to know something about Nicaraguan politics wondered from the beginning how Anastasio Somoza Debayle could be so stupid as to insist on becoming President of Nicaragua.” The ambassador further explained: “President Somoza is possessed of one of the largest egos to be found anywhere and/or one of the largest inferiority complexes I have ever run across.” Clearly Crockett viewed Anastasio Somoza with disdain and disrespect. Yet the ambassador appreciated the Nicaraguan president’s staunch anticommunism. He recalled of Somoza: “He has been quite candid in telling me and almost as candid in stating publicly that when it comes to communist guerrillas and terrorists, the normal rule book goes out the window.” Though he doubted Somoza would order executions, Crockett insisted: “I have no reason to question his statement that the Guardia Nacional is under orders to take no prisoners when it comes to communist affiliated or inspired guerrillas and terrorists.”¹

Crockett’s opinion regarding Somoza illustrates the irony of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua during the 1960s. In Nicaragua, as throughout much of Latin America, U.S. policy makers grudgingly supported corrupt and inept leaders who maintained anticommunist views. The Cold War dominated U.S. foreign policy, and preventing the spread of communism

¹Cable, William Crockett to State, December 9, 1967, “Nicaragua,” Country File, NSF, Box 63, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas.

remained the top priority. President Lyndon B. Johnson firmly believed in the importance of containing communism in the Cold War world. This paper will examine the Johnson administration's relations with Nicaragua during its years in the White House (1963-1969). I will argue that the Cold War significantly influenced Johnson administration policy toward Nicaragua and caused the U.S. government to bear with the anticommunist Somoza regime, despite American contempt for Nicaraguan leaders.

The United States, the Cold War, and the 1960s

When thinking about Lyndon B. Johnson and foreign policy, the tragic Vietnam War immediately comes to mind. While Vietnam no doubt existed as the central international crisis of LBJ's presidency, the conflict in Southeast Asia served as part of a larger foreign policy based on preventing the spread of communism throughout the world. The Johnson administration monitored all parts of the globe as it remained on guard against Soviet Union-backed communist movements. The United States particularly concerned itself with the fate of its neighbors in the Western Hemisphere, Latin American countries.

World War II profoundly influenced Lyndon Johnson's beliefs about foreign policy. As a young Congressman in the 1930s, Johnson had witnessed the Allied Powers reluctance to confront Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan's dictatorships, until it became too late. LBJ served in the war, and came to believe in the necessity of firmly opposing international acts of aggression. He believed the Cold War mandated learning from mistakes of the past. The United States must not allow the Soviet Union to spread communism around the world.

Central to American Cold War policies were the domino theory and the containment doctrine. Developed by intellectuals in the State and Defense Departments in the early years of

the Cold War, the domino theory argued that as developing countries around the world succumbed to communism, other nation-states in the same region would fall to communism like dominoes. Direct confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union could lead to catastrophic nuclear war, and must be avoided. To prevent the spreading of communism without directly challenging the Soviet Union, the containment doctrine held that the United States should “contain” communism through economic and military aid to countries threatened by the subversive ideology. For Lyndon Johnson and his advisors, containing communism allowed the United States to prevent past mistakes of appeasing international aggressors.²

President John F. Kennedy created the Alliance for Progress in March 1961 to combat poverty and communism in Latin American countries, and President Johnson continued this program upon entering the White House. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations worried about Latin America’s political and economic stability, especially as Fidel Castro’s communist Cuba sought to extend its influence in the region. The Alliance for Progress called for immense foreign aid to battle poverty, which hopefully would reduce instability and lead to modernization in Latin America. Specifically, the Alliance for Progress promoted industrialization and education, health care, housing, and land reforms. Latin American leaders, with help from U.S. advisors, developed plans that would be approved and funded by Washington. The U.S. government expected Latin American policymakers to support initiatives which would lead to private investment in their countries, thereby thwarting the spread of communism. Presidents

²H. W. Brands, *The Wages of Globalism: Lyndon Johnson and the Limits of American Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), v-viii, 3-29.

Kennedy and Johnson believed the Alliance for Progress, through aid for political, economic, and social reform, would influence the development of liberal democracy in Latin America.³

Lyndon Johnson Enters the White House

Becoming president upon the tragic death of John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson pledged to continue the martyred leader's programs, including the Alliance for Progress. Throughout his years as the country's chief executive, LBJ often discussed his affection for Latin America. He reflected back on his teaching days at the segregated Mexican American elementary school in Cotulla, Texas, and on his years in Texas's combative politics, where Hispanics served as an increasingly important constituency. Four days after entering office, Johnson met in the White House with Latin American representatives and vowed his continued support of the Alliance for Progress, describing it as a "living memorial" to Kennedy.⁴

Yet privately LBJ fretted that the Alliance for Progress had become too idealistic and did not give enough attention to business interests. He worried its goals for political and social reform were abstract and beyond the capabilities of the United States to address realistically. They distracted from what he viewed as the primary vehicle for change in Latin America, aid for economic development. While continuing Kennedy's larger goals, the new president desired to assert his influence in foreign policy. Johnson particularly wanted to reform the chain of

³Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 69-108.

⁴Report, "The Department of State During the Administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson, November 1963-January 1969," Administration History of the Department of State, Box 2, LBJ Library; Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 22; and Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 56.

command in Alliance for Progress policies, and appointed a trusted friend, Thomas C. Mann, as director of the organization. Originally from Laredo, Texas, Mann previously worked in the State Department and served as ambassador to Mexico. While a supporter of Alliance aid programs, Mann, himself staunchly anticommunist, viewed the middle and upper class moderates in Latin America as the key to the region's future. Some former Kennedy aides feared Mann would focus predominantly on free market economics at the expense of social reform. Nonetheless Mann proved himself a tireless worker and loyal official, key traits Johnson admired.⁵

In the last months of the Johnson administration, a scholar conducted an oral history interview with Mann about his work with Latin America, specifically addressing claims that he had been more of a realist in foreign policy. Mann answered: "I hope I'm realistic. I hope also that Mr. Johnson and I shared a belief that ideals have their place in American foreign policy." He further proposed that the United States should concentrate on "how we can best help to promote democratic growth; how we can best help promote economic and social progress in the area." The diplomat commented on the Johnson administration's perception of revolution in Latin America: "I suppose the words realist and pragmatist . . . stem from perhaps a difference of opinion on whether we should, in effect, espouse revolution without defining what kind of revolution we're talking about." Mann continued: "I think in the Latin American mind, one who talks about revolution is understood to be saying that he favors violence in the streets and

⁵Randall B. Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 493-96; Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 91-93; and Report, "The Department of State."

disorders. I thought we should favor orderly revolution and be careful of what we said and orient our program so that that would be made clear.”⁶

Early in his tenure Mann explained that economic growth, protection of U.S. investments, nonintervention, and anticommunism served as his primary goals for policy in Latin America. Critics later would point to the paradox of claiming pursuits of both nonintervention and anticommunism. Historian Walter LaFeber argues that Johnson and Mann abandoned the Alliance for Progress’s original plans for democratization and structural change to focus on economic development and anticommunism. LaFeber suggests that Johnson returned to Dwight Eisenhower administration policy of reluctantly accepting military regimes in Latin America, provided they supported anticommunism.⁷

Nicaragua in the 1960s

The Nicaragua of the Johnson years possessed a long history of influence and aid by the United States. Since 1936 the Somoza family had ruled Nicaragua. Profligate and corrupt, the Somoza rulers received U.S. support due to their strong anticommunism. American leaders overlooked the Somozas’ excesses. The U.S. ambassador exercised significant power, and the American embassy stood next to the Nicaraguan president’s residence. Anastasio Somoza brutally consolidated his rule over Nicaragua through repression of political dissidents and ownership of vast amounts of land. He once remarked that “Nicaragua es mi finca” or “Nicaragua is my farm.” Following his assassination in 1956, Somoza’s two sons, Luis and

⁶Transcript, Thomas C. Mann Oral History Interview I, November 4, 1968, by Joe B. Frantz, Internet Copy, LBJ Library.

⁷Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1983), 156-58.

Anastasio Jr. (“Tachito”), controlled the country. Luis became president and Tachito headed the National Guard. From 1963 until his death in 1966, René Schick, a foreign minister for the elder Somoza, served as a puppet president while the Somozas exercised power behind the scenes. Tachito next became president, and when Luis died shortly afterward, Anastasio, Jr., led Nicaragua with sole power, blatantly corrupt yet staunchly anticommunist.⁸

René Schick was titular president of Nicaragua when Lyndon Johnson entered the White House, and despite being controlled by the Somozas, Schick gave U.S. foreign policymakers hopes that he could bring some democratic reforms to the country. In April 1964, the Central Intelligence Agency published a secret “Survey of Latin America,” part of which examined the status of Nicaragua. The report noted Schick’s efforts “to continue a hazardous transition from an authoritarian, paternalistic society toward one which is more democratic.” However, the CIA worried that Tachito Somoza, who controlled the National Guard, would not give Schick much political independence and would attempt to establish his own power. Despite unease with Somoza, the report proclaimed: “The Schick administration, including General Somoza, is outspokenly pro-US, anti-communist, and anti-Castro. There is little likelihood that the government will markedly alter these policies.”⁹

The CIA analysis commented on the growth of the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Nicaragua, “a Cuban-supported, and Communist-infiltrated subversive group.” The Somozas had banned the Nicaraguan Communist Party in 1945, and many of the group’s leaders remained in exile. However, there remained perhaps 250 party members and 1,000 sympathizers in Nicaragua. The report warned: “Although the party is effectively suppressed and underground,

⁸LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 68-69, 160-61.

⁹Report, “Survey of Latin America,” Central Intelligence Agency, April 1, 1964, Latin America, Country File, NSF, Box 1, LBJ Library.

Communists have exerted considerable influence among groups opposed to the Somozas, especially leftist youth and labor organizations.” Supposedly the FLN received support from Cuba, and was “dedicated to the establishment of a Castro-style regime in Nicaragua.” The CIA expressed confidence that the National Guard, which was receiving U.S. assistance and training, could prevent the FLN from becoming a major problem.

The CIA report continued its survey by studying facets of Nicaragua that reveal much about the country in the 1960s. Nicaragua’s economy generally was productive, yet dependent upon exporting coffee and cotton, making it susceptible to natural disasters or international events. Nicaragua possessed a large unskilled and illiterate workforce, as well as unequal distribution of wealth, hurting its economy. However, the country had remained a steadfast supporter of the Alliance for Progress. The CIA perceived Nicaragua’s most serious international problem as its hostility with Cuba, illustrating Nicaragua’s positive alliance with the United States. The Somozas charged Fidel Castro with undermining national security by supporting communist groups in Nicaragua. The report explained: “There is a possibility that the Somozas will force President Schick to associate his regime with aggressive acts against Cuba—a position which could pose a threat to the government by demonstrating the President’s lack of control and making him responsible for any failure.” The Somozas, in their zeal to confront Castro, were willing to let Schick take the fall if problems persisted with Cuba. The CIA cryptically noted: “Nicaragua has continued to favor right-wing ruling groups in neighboring countries [implying Guatemala and El Salvador].”

The CIA provided a list of data which further details the state of Nicaragua in the 1960s. As of January 1963, the projected population of Nicaragua stood at 1.5 million persons, with 255,000 fit for military service. The ethnic composition of the country was 68 percent ladino; 15

percent white; 9 percent black; and 5 percent indigenous. Nicaragua's literacy rate remained low at 40 percent; organized labor consisted of only 2 percent of the entire work force; and sanitation was "fair by Latin American standards." Perhaps most important to the CIA, the study described the Nicaraguan government's attitude toward the United States as "friendly." The CIA report presented Nicaragua as not without its problems, but a firm Cold War ally to the United States.¹⁰

U.S. Aid to Nicaragua During the Early Years of the Johnson Administration

On December 26, 1963, the Latin America Policy Committee of the State Department approved a plan of action for Nicaragua during 1964. The Committee created several goals for the country in the new year. State Department officials, like the CIA, saw in President Schick the possibility of transition away from the authoritarianism of the Somozas to a more democratic process. For this reason, they proclaimed their support for Schick. Other goals included the development of an independent judiciary and a more diversified and industrialized economy in Nicaragua. The State Department hoped that Nicaragua would maintain friendly relations with its Central American neighbors and work for better economic integration of the region. Predictably, thwarting communism would be critical for the country in 1964, through strengthening law enforcement and military forces. The report explained: "These forces should be capable of dealing with Communist subversive action, controlling extremist groups within the country, restraining mob violence and preventing border and coastal violations by rebel groups." Combating communism in Nicaragua would be supplemented further by "greater participation by non-government groups (especially students, professional, business and civic groups) in Alliance for Progress activities."

¹⁰Ibid.

The State Department report listed specific plans of action for Nicaragua in 1964. A significant political policy would be to “continue to foster the cooperative attitude with the United States which has characterized the GON [Government of Nicaragua] in recent years.” Explicit economic and social action involved aid to government programs concerned with development; loans for agriculture, industry, and infrastructure; rural development programs; human resources training; incentives to encourage private investment in the economy; and improvement of Nicaragua’s National University. U.S. officials stressed the psychological side of their initiatives, planning to “utilize all suitable media to promote country objectives wherever feasible. Emphasize promotion of Alliance for Progress as a partnership effort and the dangers to Nicaragua of Castro-communism.” Furthermore, American military aid would continue flowing to Nicaragua to keep stability in the region. The report illustrated the State Department’s determination to prevent the rise of communism in Nicaragua through reform and political, economic, and social assistance.¹¹

The Department of State’s plan of action for Nicaragua during 1965 remained similar to that of the previous year. The report concluded: “Nicaragua must still be regarded as in the early stages of the development process. The great mass of the people in the countryside are only beginning to emerge from their traditional past and in their backwardness are to a large extent still divorced from the advances being made by the urban and rural middle class.” American officials persisted in their anxiety about communism in Nicaragua. They noted that “the

¹¹Cable, State to American Embassy in Managua, January 3, 1964, “Nicaragua,” Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library.

presence in and near Nicaragua of about 50 Cuban-trained Nicaraguan communists constitutes a continuing threat.”¹²

The Johnson administration continued supplying aid to Nicaragua through the Alliance for Progress in the 1960s. In January 1964, the State Department announced a \$1.2 million Alliance for Progress credit to Nicaragua for use in purchasing American equipment for grain storage. New grain facilities would be built near five major cities in Nicaragua. American officials explained that since agriculture existed as the critical aspect of the country’s exports and workforce, “the new grain storage capacities will be an essential support both to Nicaragua’s economy and to its plans for agricultural improvement and diversification.”¹³ Educational reform, long of interest to President Johnson, who was himself a former teacher, also consisted as part of Alliance for Progress programs. In 1965 the Teaching College for Men and Women of Masaya, Nicaragua, requested funds for a new classroom building. Employing flattery in their proposition, the educators declared: “It is our wish that the name of this educational center be that of the illustrious President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson. His name will be for the students of our school a compass and a guide, a constant example of what an honest, patriotic, and intellectual citizen and teacher, might be for his country.” Nicaraguan and American leaders saw education as a method for aiding society and combating communism in the country.¹⁴

¹²Cable, State to American Embassy in Managua, February 11, 1965, “Nicaragua,” Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library.

¹³Cable, State to American Embassy in Managua, January 17, 1964, “Nicaragua,” Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library.

¹⁴Letter, Rolando Rizo Rivera to Alejandro Jose Abaunza, August 11, 1965, “Nicaragua,” Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library.

Johnson Administration Attitude Toward the Somoza Regime

Although René Schick served as a puppet for the Somoza family during his presidency (1963-1966), the Johnson administration hoped he could bring a more democratic process to Nicaragua, while maintaining strident anticommunism. Schick frequently asserted that Nicaragua existed as “a democratic country firmly opposed to Communism.” American leaders personally respected Schick, especially in comparison to the corrupt Somozas. One U.S. State official noted that “Schick is about as modest as chiefs of state come these days.”¹⁵

In May 1966, while traveling in the United States, Schick sent a message to LBJ reiterating his country’s special relationship with America. He asserted that Nicaragua shared the same ideals and values as the United States. The Nicaraguan president proclaimed: “I avail myself of this opportunity to reaffirm to your Excellency our steadfast resolve to strengthen still further the bonds of friendship with the United States of America, which, under your Excellency’s inspiration, are sustaining the doctrines of freedom and justice in the complex world of our time.”¹⁶

The following month President Schick visited the White House to meet with President Johnson. LBJ made remarks to the press thanking the Nicaraguan government for its strong support of U.S. policy. Johnson commented on the United States’s current domestic challenges such as civil rights, educational, and health care reform. He noted that Nicaragua faced similar problems, and pledged continued American support of the country. LBJ specifically congratulated Schick for his efforts in fuller economic integration among Central American

¹⁵Cable, American Embassy in Managua to State, March 20, 1964, “Nicaragua,” Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library; and Cable, American Embassy in Managua to State, October 15, 1965, “Nicaragua,” Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library.

¹⁶Cable, René Schick to Lyndon B. Johnson, May 13, 1966, “Nicaragua,” Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library.

countries, insisting: “We feel this is essential to improve the economic lot of the good people who inhabit this continent with us.” Focusing on the two countries’ partnership in reform and against communism, Johnson concluded: “Our two countries share common objectives on the world scenes and as well as in this Hemisphere.”¹⁷

Later that summer, however, the American embassy in Managua reported to the State Department a series of sensational rumors circulating in Nicaragua about President Schick. The embassy continued to hold Schick in high esteem and commented that: “We do not exclude the possibility that much of the gossip has been promoted by the Somozas in order to discredit the President in reaction to the popular sentiment that ‘what this country needs is another Schick,’ throwing mud on his person, but being careful to leave unblemished his conduct as a Liberal Party President.” The Somozas might be jealous of Schick’s popularity, but sought to claim his achievements. The embassy reluctantly reported the scandals because local sources had revealed their accuracy and the rumors had become common knowledge among the Nicaraguan public. “The fact is that Schick’s image as a man of integrity and personal respect is diminishing. This could weaken his role as a moderating force.”

The rumors surrounding Schick indeed were astounding. Perhaps the most sensational piece of gossip related to the president carrying on a romantic affair with the wife of his stepson. Furthermore, “President Schick’s late evenings at the poker table have long been the subject of public gossip. Known to be personally honest and a man of limited personal wealth, his rumored heavy losses have caused raised eyebrows.” Whispers that gambling debts led Schick to place

¹⁷Press Release, “Exchange of Remarks Between the President and President René Schick of Nicaragua on the South Lawn,” June 9, 1966, “Nicaragua,” Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library.

cronies in political offices had surfaced, though the embassy doubted this occurred.¹⁸ Many Nicaraguans decried Schick's extravagant spending while on recent trips to Europe and the United States, and lamented on the quantity of schools which could have been built with these funds. The relationship between Schick and his wife, whom the embassy report called "a battleship of a woman," supposedly was cool. American diplomats described Mrs. Schick as "outwardly charming and in perfect control, she is known to be under tension." Mrs. Schick desired to return to private life. The report summarized: "Her attitude is variously ascribed to the pressures of the position, to Schick's poker playing (but she reportedly plays heavily herself), and to Schick's rumored relationship with her daughter-in-law."

The American embassy concluded with their reluctance to promote these rumors, continuing to hold President Schick in high regard. The report commented of the president: "We continue to regard him as a man of principle (though perhaps not of strength) who has done his best under difficult conditions to overcome obstacles to economic, social and political progress for Nicaragua." Nevertheless, the veracity of the rumors in the public meant they must be taken seriously. American diplomats feared the scandals would undermine Schick's rule. They described their suspicion of the Somozas: "We also do not exclude the possibility that Schick's present tarnished image has been carefully stage managed by the Somozas, who know their man and who cleverly capitalized and will continue to do so on his assets and his weaknesses." As always, the Somoza dictatorship appeared to be calling the shots in Nicaragua.¹⁹

United States fears regarding Schick's alleged scandals soon disappeared, as the Nicaraguan president suddenly died of heart failure only days after the embassy's report. The

¹⁸Cable, American Embassy in Managua to State, July 27, 1966, "Nicaragua," Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library.

¹⁹Ibid.

Johnson administration mourned Schick's death. A State Department report explained: "Schick's death removes an important moderating influence from the Nicaraguan scene just as the campaign for next year's presidential election is getting underway. . . . During his tenure in office, President Schick had grown in stature as a responsible leader and a Nicaraguan President relatively independent of—though not antagonistic toward—the Somozas." A Somoza supporter ascended to the presidency to complete Schick's term in office, and as widely expected, on February 5, 1967, General Anastasio "Tachito" Somoza, Jr., became president of Nicaragua.²⁰

Despite appreciating his commitment to anticommunism, the Johnson administration disdained and privately ridiculed Anastasio Somoza. Shortly after his election, the new Nicaraguan president toured the United States hoping to improve his image in the country. He visited New York, San Antonio, Houston, New Orleans, and Miami. The American press particularly viewed Tachito Somoza as retrogressive to Nicaragua's progress and criticized the Somoza family's dictatorial rule. In a move administration aides termed "untimely," Somoza requested a visit with President Johnson at the White House. LBJ, already having his own problems with the press and also not wanting to antagonize Latin American leaders uncomfortable with Somoza, declined a meeting. Johnson advisors thought it best to keep a certain public distance from the controversial leader.²¹

Shortly after Tachito Somoza became president, his brother Luis died. American diplomats privately discussed the impact of Anastasio Somoza, Jr., as the sole remaining heir of the Somoza legacy. One official ominously warned: "With steady, smart Luis Somoza dead,

²⁰Memo, Thomas L. Hughes to Dean Rusk, August 3, 1966, "Nicaragua," Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library.

²¹Memo, Benjamin H. Read to Walt W. Rostow, March 14, 1967, "Nicaragua," Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library.

only erratic, and heavy-handed Tachito remains in the family dynasty. Opposition against the Somozas runs strong—even in death. . . . This augurs ill for the future.” The diplomat compared the funerals of René Schick and Luis Somoza, illustrating the growing resentment in Nicaragua toward the Somozas. He recalled: “Although the crowds that took part in various stages of [the] three day funeral program were large, public turnout for President Schick’s funeral last August was substantially greater, and the grief that attended it seemed to us to be more genuine and much more widely and deeply felt by the mass of Nicaraguans (particularly campesinos, urban poor and opposition).”²²

A scathing evaluation of Anastasio Somoza, Jr., by U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua William Crockett demonstrates the Johnson administration’s complicated view of the anticommunist dictator. Crockett presented an image of Somoza as vain, eccentric, and neurotic. He noted: “President Somoza misses no opportunity to project his extreme confidence (or the façade of compensation for a feeling of inferiority) whether the subject is Nicaraguan politics and economics or the Vietnam War.” Sure to raise President Johnson’s ire, Crockett explained: “He has on numerous occasions subjected me, and in my presence a number of qualified general officers of the United States Armed Forces, to extensive harangues on the shortcomings of the U.S. pursuit of the Vietnam War. He modestly predicates his postulations on the experience he has had in contending with insurgency in Nicaragua.”

Crockett described Tachito Somoza as perceiving himself with delusions of grandeur. Tachito boasted that the successes of his father and brother were due to his personal influence. He desired all major decisions for the country to be made by himself, infamously declaring: “I would rather screw it up myself than let some other s. o. b. do it for me.” Yet the ambassador

²²Memo, W. G. Bowdler to Bob Cox, April 19, 1967, “Nicaragua,” Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library.

claimed Somoza possessed a complete lack of charisma. “When Anastasio Somoza Debayle flashes his broad smile . . . its warmth is roughly comparable to that of a Nepalese glacier, or perhaps more appropriately a Nepalese tiger.” Somoza would put on an air of humility around foreign leaders, but lambasted his Nicaraguan aides like a tough military leader, unable to move past his time in control of the National Guard.

Crockett continued with interesting but unflattering remarks on Somoza’s health. “He regularly follows a schedule that would kill a mule.” Crockett claimed he often witnessed Somoza work ten-hour days followed by late nights of drinking and socializing with his many mistresses. Both friends and critics worried that Somoza drank too much. Somoza attempted to manage his diet, though Crockett judges him to have had little success with this endeavor. “He is obviously overweight although I am not in a position to judge just how much.” Although Crockett would not pass judgment on Somoza’s weight, he allowed State officials to reach their own verdict, by including two embarrassing photographs of Somoza lounging at the presidential pool.

The ambassador described the unusual marriage of Tachito and Doña Hope Somoza. The couple spent little time together, yet the first lady proudly pursued her own agenda for Nicaragua, focusing on the administration’s health and cultural programs. Crockett described her as forceful and ambitious. He surmised: “I suspect, and many Nicaraguans are fully convinced, that a great deal of President Somoza’s forward motion is the result of Doña Hope’s prodding from behind. In his role as candidate and as President, she is an unquestionable and a very attractive asset, until you get to know her better.”

Despite these criticisms about Somoza’s character, Crockett believed that overall the Nicaraguan president carried out his duties well. Somoza especially welcomed U.S. business

interests and remained staunchly anticommunist. The ambassador noted: “To put it in the words of one of the U.S.’s wealthiest and most successful corporate executives, it is a pleasure for businessmen to do business with President Somoza.” The Somoza regime had no tolerance for communism, and actively persecuted its adherents in Nicaragua and frequently spoke out against Fidel Castro’s Cuba. Crockett concluded about Tachito Somoza: “We have a very human man, very humanly motivated, and very anxious to do what he thinks is right and best for his country . . . and for himself.”²³

U.S. Aid to Nicaragua During the Later Years of the Johnson Administration

The Johnson administration continued providing aid to Nicaragua through the Alliance for Progress hoping to bring reform and combat communism in the country. Rural electrification in Nicaragua served as an important program, reminiscent of LBJ’s efforts to bring electric power to the Texas Hill Country as a Congressman in the 1930s. Alliance aid provided funds for new buildings to bring electricity to rural areas of Nicaragua. President Johnson commented: “My country is proud to have played a part in this model electrification project.”²⁴ Other form of aid included medicine to combat polio in Nicaragua and agricultural programs to lessen livestock maladies such as foot and mouth disease. The United States even contemplated building a canal through Nicaragua, especially during the tense Panama crisis of 1964, though ultimately the Johnson administration decided against pursuing a Nicaraguan canal.²⁵

²³Cable, William Crockett to State, December 9, 1967, “Nicaragua,” Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library.

²⁴Cable, Lyndon B. Johnson to American Embassy in Managua, January 10, 1967, “Nicaragua,” Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library.

²⁵“Nicaragua,” Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library.

However, the Johnson administration became increasingly frustrated with Somoza's slowness in publicizing American aid to Nicaragua. National Security Advisor Walt W. Rostow sent multiple memos to LBJ during the fall of 1967 and in early 1968 detailing Somoza's lack of providing recognition in his country of American support. Finally, after receiving significant Alliance aid for his country during this time period and a personal letter from President Johnson expressing his hopes for the success of the Nicaraguan people, President Somoza publicly praised the United States for its support. In a letter to LBJ, Somoza promised: "Your Excellency's letter was widely publicized in Nicaragua and, echoing the feeling of the Nicaraguan people, I thank you for it most sincerely, because it is an eloquent confirmation of our faith in the fulfillment of commitments assumed by your great nation and of its steadfast cooperation in our struggle to reach higher levels of economic and social progress." One wonders why Somoza delayed in giving the United States credit for its aid to Nicaragua. Possibly he desired to give himself the glory for successes paid by Alliance for Progress funds.²⁶

The United States also monitored the growth of subversive groups in Nicaragua. A top secret intelligence report in late August 1967 noted two unidentified men who were not Nicaraguans but spoke in Spanish of a possible plot to assassinate President Somoza. Intelligence believed these potential assassins were linked to the "FSLN-Sandinist National Liberation Front, a Communist-dominated and Cuban-oriented revolutionary, terrorist organization." The National Guard recently had defeated small numbers of communist guerrillas

²⁶Letter, Anastasio Somoza, Jr., to Lyndon B. Johnson, May 10, 1968, "Nicaragua," Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library.

in the northern mountains of Nicaragua, and the Johnson administration carefully watched for further signs of subversion.²⁷

A CIA study titled “National Intelligence Estimate” examined the state of affairs in Nicaragua in late 1967. The CIA noted Somoza’s mercurial personality and strong anticommunist views. The report commented on the growth of communist opposition in Nicaragua. “There is a Castro-oriented organization, the Sandinista Front of National Liberation (FSLN), which has from time to time fielded guerrilla bands and has had some success in carrying out individual terrorist acts and robberies.” Intelligence estimated around one hundred Sandinistas, many of whom were trained in insurgency in Cuba and Guatemala. The CIA did not see the Sandinistas as a major threat in the late 1960s, but would monitor their activities.²⁸ The Johnson administration supplied \$1.2 million to Nicaragua’s defense budget, which accounted for 13 percent of its total. By the end of 1967, the United States also stationed twenty-five military advisors in Nicaragua to maintain stability and train local forces. Furthermore, President Somoza mandated that each Nicaraguan military officer spend a year at the School of the Americas in the Panama Canal Zone for education by U.S. forces.²⁹

Conclusion

As Lyndon B. Johnson left the presidency in January 1969, Nicaragua, like much of Latin America, remained in transition. U.S. aid with the Alliance for Progress had provided some

²⁷Cable, Central Intelligence Agency, August 31, 1967, “Nicaragua,” Country File, NSF, Box 63, LBJ Library.

²⁸Report, “The Political Prospects in Nicaragua Over the Next Year or So,” Central Intelligence Agency, October 12, 1967, “National Intelligence Estimates,” NSF, Box 8, LBJ Library.

²⁹LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 163-64.

benefits for the region, but countries continued to be troubled by poverty and underdevelopment. Left-wing movements, including communism, remained and were growing, and national governments were becoming more arrogant and abusive toward their citizens.

During his time in the White House, LBJ sought to extend U.S. liberal aid abroad into countries such as Nicaragua. This paper argued that the Johnson administration, while often displaying distaste for Nicaraguan leaders, provided aid through the Alliance for Progress, hoping to modernize society and thwart the spread of communism in Nicaragua. The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union dominated the thinking of American foreign policy makers. Influenced by their experiences in World War II, these officials believed in the necessity of containing communism from spreading across the globe. If the United States failed in its efforts, the domino theory held that Soviet Union-backed communism would infiltrate country after country, and the U.S. government saw little reason to doubt this as the likely outcome of such inaction.

Latin America, so close in geographic proximity, was a critical region for the United States in the Cold War. Americans historically had feared revolutions in Latin America, and the Cold War gave rise to this feeling of apprehension once again in the United States. Fidel Castro's conversion of Cuba to communism, as well as growing leftist sentiment in Latin America by the early 1960s, terrified U.S. foreign policy makers as a new threat to American victory in the Cold War. To promote U.S. ideals and combat the spread of communism in Latin America, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations supported the Alliance for Progress, designed to provide political, economic, and social aid to the region. President Lyndon B. Johnson brought such Cold War convictions to the White House, and determined particularly to focus on economic reform as the central aspect of the Alliance for Progress.

The Nicaragua of the 1960s remained a steadfast supporter of the United States during the Cold War, led by the powerful Somoza family. Since the 1930s the Somozas had courted U.S. favor for Nicaragua through supporting American foreign priorities. Anastasio Somoza, and his sons Luis and Anastasio, Jr., were fervently anticommunist. A Somoza-backed militancy against communism filtered through all levels of the Nicaraguan government, from puppet presidents to the army. The United States rewarded Nicaragua for its strong stance against communism by sending large quantities of Alliance for Progress aid to the country for internal improvements and development of its economy during the Johnson years. The White House further hoped to prevent future communist movements in Nicaragua through such financial support of a staunchly anticommunist government.

Yet though the Johnson administration believed in the necessity of ensuring Nicaragua's strident anticommunism, it viewed the Somoza leaders with disdain and contempt. American officials loathed the blatant corruption of Somoza family members, who often seemed more concerned with expanding their wealth and enjoying lascivious lifestyles than in improving Nicaragua. The two Somoza sons even undermined their puppet president, René Schick, when they became jealous of his successes. Johnson government officials especially disliked Anastasio Somoza, Jr., who became ruler of Nicaragua after the deaths of his brother Luis and Schick. U.S. policy makers privately ridiculed the younger Somoza's ineffective leadership, debauchery, and physical appearance. Administration officials repeatedly complained about his arrogance and slowness in giving the U.S. credit for Alliance for Progress aid to Nicaragua. LBJ himself refused to meet with Somoza when he toured the United States. Yet despite this exasperation with the Somoza family, the Johnson administration recognized Nicaragua's significance as a staunchly anticommunist ally and continued to provide the country Alliance for

Progress support. The Cold War necessitated overlooking the excesses of foreign leaders who supported American efforts to contain the spread of communism.

Unfortunately for the United States, Alliance funds could only do so much good. By the time Lyndon Johnson entered retirement at his Texas ranch in 1969, the Sandinistas, determined to overthrow the Somoza dynasty, were gaining in strength. As the 1970s later would illustrate, Nicaraguans, tired of U.S. hegemony, sought relief from the increasingly unstable and repressive Somoza dictatorship.

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