

## The Action Plan, Or: How Reagan Convinced the American People to Love the Contras

By Joshua Stern

In this section, Temple University Graduate Student Joshua Stern argues that that a document from the Office of Public Diplomacy titled Public Diplomacy Action Plan: Support for the White House Education Campaign served as the “primary organizational blueprint for one of the largest domestic propaganda campaigns of the 20th century.”

For the first four years of the 1980s, a revolutionary Marxist movement called the Frente Sannista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) led by Daniel Ortega was fighting a United States supported paramilitary army famously named the Contras. Their official political organization the Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense (FDN), was struggling to gain public support from both inside and outside Central America. Ronald Reagan in his 1983 address before the Joint Session of Congress on Central America, made clear that his administration supported the FDN and their Contra freedom fighters, describing them as “heroes” who were “denied any part in the new government because they truly wanted democracy for Nicaragua.”<sup>1</sup> The American People, however, were unwilling to support another war after their experience with Vietnam. As a result, the State Department and the CIA coordinated in an effort to convince Congress and their constituents that supporting the Contras was necessary to ensure freedom and democracy prevailed over communist tyranny. At the request of the Reagan White House, the Office of Public Diplomacy (OPD) was established in 1983 to convince Americans of the threat of communism in Central America and promote the Contras as fighters for freedom and democracy.

After a successful reelection campaign in 1984, the Reagan Administration went into high-gear to convince Congress to supply the Contras substantial military aid. The Director of OPD, Otto Reich, created a task force to strategize how best to “educate” the public that “a vote to aid the freedom fighters” in Central America was of “vital national interest.” In a nine-page National Security Council staff paper written on March 12th, 1985 by Lt. Col. Daniel Jacobowitz titled Public Diplomacy Action Plan: Support for the White House Education Campaign, the goals, perceptions, impediments, themes, assets, and actions were outlined in incredible detail.<sup>2</sup> Jacobowitz was an expert in psychological warfare, a term that had a growing popularity in the field of low-intensity conflict, which was later defined as “a limited political-military struggle to achieve political, social, economic, and psychological objectives” or in layman’s terms “a struggle for people’s minds.”<sup>3</sup> A classic case of covert operations, the war for people’s minds were targeted not just at those fighting for the Sandinistas, but primarily to three domestic audiences: “US Congress, US media, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Reagan, Address Before the Joint Session of Congress on Central America, April 27, 1983

<sup>2</sup> U.S. State Department: Office for Public Diplomacy, “Public Diplomacy Action Plan,” 1. The Action Plan can be found here <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB40/00934.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> United States Army Training and Doctrine Command, “Joint Low-Intensity Conflict Project Final Report: Volume I Analytical Review of Low-Intensity Conflict,” August 1, 1986, 14-1

Interest Groups.”<sup>4</sup> The Reagan Doctrine was unofficially, and illegally, at war with the minds of the American public.<sup>5</sup> For nearly five years they had rejected the Reagan line of militarization as a mechanism of democratic change, and now they needed to be convinced of their ignorance.

The Action Plan served as the primary organizational blueprint for one of the largest domestic propaganda campaigns of the 20th century. An analysis of the document’s themes, language and stated goals within the context of an increasingly anti-interventionist populace demonstrated the importance of domestic propaganda in supporting the Contras, and by extension, the foreign policy goals of the Reagan Administration.

The language used in the Action Plan document highlighted the Reagan Administration’s cynical nature toward the American people. To start, the phrase public diplomacy implies a duty by the US government to persuade the public of the truth of their intentions. However, the a panel of high ranking military officials defined the term in a report on low-intensity conflict as “the use of international information programs together with cultural exchanges to create ideas and attitudes which support foreign policy and national goals.”<sup>6</sup> The key word here is “create,” which implies that the State Department along with the NSC was in the business of manufacturing a story, and selling it to the public. The Action Plan does not list the

creation of ideas as truths, but rather as “perceptions.” Disseminating truth was not their prerogative. Convincing Congress of its duty to support freedom fighters, and by extension the American people, from Soviet and Cuban expansionism was their true goal. This would help to elongate the sustainability of the Contras and thus threaten the Sandinista revolution. The more the Sandinistas were forced to spend their miniscule revenues on defense rather than on their popular social programs, the more their legitimacy would degrade.

Following the list of “primary perceptions” on the Action Plan was a list of “supporting perceptions” that the OPD could propagate to the public.<sup>7</sup> One was that “US history requires support to freedom fighters.” The document didn’t include any explicit mention of historic US support for freedom fighters abroad. One can assume OPD was referencing the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Time magazine gave the man of the year title to the “Hungarian Freedom Fighter.”<sup>8</sup> Ironically, the leader of the FSLN, Carlos Fonseca, also justified his guerrilla war by historical means. His interpretation of Augusto Sandino’s writings during his war against US imperialism painted the revolutionary as a Marxist. Historian Steven Palmer described Fonseca’s interpretation as the “FSLN’s Sandinismo,” consisting of “a settling of the possible contradictions inherent in the synthesis of Sandino’s discourse, political project, and mythical legacy” and a “justification of the primacy and moral authority of the FSLN as the revolutionary vanguard.”<sup>9</sup> Fonesca's history

---

<sup>4</sup> U.S. State Department: Office for Public Diplomacy, “Public Diplomacy Action Plan,” 1

<sup>5</sup> Section 501 of the Departments of Commerce, Justice and State, the Judiciary, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 1985 Section 501 states “No part of any appropriation contained in this Act shall be used for publicity or propaganda purposes not authorized by the Congress.” Letter from Comptroller General Harry Van Cleve to Chairman of Committee on Foreign Affairs Dante B. Fascell, September 30, 1987

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, “Joint Low-Intensity Conflict,” 15-2

<sup>7</sup> U.S. State Department: Office of Public Diplomacy, “Public Diplomacy Action Plan,” 1

<sup>8</sup> “Freedom Fighter,” Time, 7 January 1957

<sup>9</sup> Steven Palmer, “Carlos Fonseca and the Construction of Sandinismo in Nicaragua.” Latin American Research Review 23, no. 1 (1988): 97

created a historically deterministic authority over the Nicaraguan revolution when many different factions were vying for power. A similar production of history was propagated during a speech by Secretary Shultz when he stated, “throughout our own history, we have always believed that freedom is the birthright of all people and that we could not be true to ourselves or our principles unless we stood for freedom and democracy not only for ourselves but for others.”<sup>10</sup> Just as Fonseca argued that the true principles of all Nicaraguans was to fight the moral battle against imperialism and capitalism, Shultz propagated that Americans should fight for freedom and democracy against the tyranny of communism.

Other supporting perceptions said that the FSLN were “puppets of the soviets” and “racists” who “repress human rights.”<sup>11</sup> From the beginning, US politicians highlighted the lack of freedoms and rights the people of the Soviet Union had under Stalin’s dictatorship and subsequent regimes. OPD propagandists wanted Congress to make the logical conclusion of Sandinistas repressing human rights, proving their proxy status to the Soviet Union and the threat they caused to US national security. The indigenous populations were the faces of Sandinista repression, with the Miskitus being the largest and most publicized. Populations on the eastern coast

had a complex history of struggle against the Spanish colonizers and the independent Nicaraguan state stretching back centuries along lines of class and race (the eastern coast had a large black population due to Jamaican settlement). This continued with the Sandinista Revolution and was the topic of many historical monographs produced during the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>12</sup> There was also well documented reports of war crimes perpetrated by the Ejército Popular Sandinista (EPS or Sandinista Popular Army), including the forced migration of some 10,000 Miskitu peasants from sites with high risk of violence. Even though these actions were nowhere near the quantity or horror of contra war crimes, the forced relocation eliminated any remaining Miskitu sympathy with the Sandinista government in northeastern Nicaragua.<sup>13</sup> Reagan used the event to garner international sympathy for the counterrevolutionary cause by classifying the move as a human rights violation, and likening the Tasba Pri refugee camps to Nazi concentration camps.<sup>14</sup> In reality, human rights observers found the camps to be as adequate if not better than the standard of living in traditional villages.<sup>15</sup>

The Catholic Church in Nicaragua was one of the major opposition groups to the Sandinista Government and the OPD used this fact to highlight what they considered an attack on freedom of religion. Under the sub-header

---

10 Special to the New York Times, “Excerpts from Shultz’s Speech Contrasting Communism and Democracy,” New York Times, February 23, 1985

11 U.S. State Department: Office for Public Diplomacy, “Public Diplomacy Action Plan,” 1

12 See Baracco, Luciano. “We Fought for our Land: Miskitu insurgency and the struggle for autonomy on Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast (1981-1987)” in *AlterNative*, Vol. 7 no. 3, 2011. 233-245. Hale, Charles R. Jr. *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894-1987*. Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1994. Vilas, Carlos M. *State, Class, and Ethnicity in Nicaragua: Capitalist Modernization and Revolutionary Change on the Atlantic Coast*, trans. Susan Norwood. Boulder, CO.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1989. 13 Rone, Human Rights in Nicaragua: 1986, 15-18

14 Dunbar-Ortiz comments extensively on the allegations of human rights abuses committed by the Sandinistas and proves that the vast majority of allegations did not occur. Furthermore, in a speech by U.S. President Ronald Reagan, he refers to the Miskitu as “Freedom Fighters” and claims that they in serious danger of extermination at the hands of the communist Sandinistas: Reagan, Ronald, “Let me Set the Record Straight on Nicaragua,” from *The Nicaragua Reader: Documents of a Revolution Under Fire*, edited by Peter Rosset and John Vandermeer (New York City, NY.: Grove Press, Inc., 1983), 14-17.

15 Katherine Yih, “Documents of a Revolution Under Fire” from *The Nicaragua Reader: Documents of a Revolution Under Fire*, edited by Peter Rosset and John Vandermeer (New York City, NY.: 1983), 90-94

“Supporting Perceptions,” a bullet point read “Sandinistas as Anti-Religious,” exemplifying propaganda produced by the FDN and third parties aligned with the Reagan Administration characterizing the Marxist government in Nicaragua as atheists out for revenge against the church. For example, with the help of Woody Kepner Associates Publishing in Miami, the OPD produced and dropped thousands of posters and leaflets that proclaimed God supported the Contras. One leaflet had a picture of Jesus with text reading “Libéranos del yugo. Dános la Libertad. Cristo es El Libertador” (“Liberate us from the yoke. Give us freedom. Christ is the Liberator”) above the FDN logo.<sup>16</sup> Edgar Chamorro confirmed the use of anti-religious propaganda after he stopped receiving a paycheck from the CIA. “The agency knows what a tremendous influence the [Catholic] Church is in Central America, and they told us to emphasize religious themes,” he said. “We were to make the contra war look like the Crusades--an effort to stop the Sandinistas’ ‘evil, godless empire.’”<sup>17</sup>

Also present in the Action Plan were two key “Impediments” to US government propaganda: “the idea that: US actions violate international law, and aid to the contras hurts ‘the moderates in Nicaragua.’”<sup>18</sup> The first impediment was almost certainly included because of the World Court decision made in October of 1984 claiming the US broke

international law with the covert mining of Nicaraguan harbors and the obligation not to violate national sovereignty by supporting the Contras.<sup>19</sup> The international response was nearly unanimous. Nicaragua’s sovereignty should be “fully respected” and that Washington should halt any blockade. Reagan later deemed the decision a “propaganda spectacular.”<sup>20</sup> In an attempt to initially hide the CIA’s responsibility in the mining, CIA officials told former Sandinista government official turned FDN spokesperson Edgar Chamorro to take full responsibility for the mining. This was later leaked by the press.<sup>21</sup>

The second impediment revealed the ignorance of US State Department officials of the political complexity in Nicaragua. Since the phrase “the moderates in Nicaragua” was quoted in the document, one can assume that Jacobowitz and those in his circle did not believe there to be any moderates in Nicaragua. On the ground, however, political scientists conducted interviews with people across the economic spectrum from 1982 to 1990 and found, in each economic class, there existed people that opposed certain Sandinista policies and agreed with others.<sup>22</sup> Since there was very little understanding by the average American about the composition of the Nicaraguan population and their relationship with the government, the second impediment was largely inconsequential while the first was marginal.

---

16 Kornbluh, *The Price of Intervention*, 40

17 Janet Sharkley, “How the CIA’s secret propaganda campaign controls what we know about Nicaragua,” *Common Cause*, September/October, 1986.

18 U.S. State Department: Office of Public Diplomacy, “Public Diplomacy Action Plan,” 2

19 Martin Cleaver and Mark Tran, “US dismisses World Court ruling on contras,” *The Guardian*, June 28, 1986

20 Kornbluh, *The Price of Intervention*, 51-2

21 *Ibid*, 49

22 Rose J. Spalding, *Capitalists and Revolution in Nicaragua: Opposition and Accommodation, 1979-1993*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 133

## Strategic Visions: Volume 18, Number I

The section “Assets” in the Action Plan, included “the Great Communicator [Reagan]” and “some supportive media representatives.”<sup>23</sup> One of those representatives was a Mr. John F. Guilmartin, a professor of history at Rice University and former Lt. Col. in the Air Force, who wrote an article in the *Wall Street Journal* that was “prepared at the request of government officials and partially or wholly paid for with government funds.”<sup>24</sup> In the article titled, “Nicaragua is Armed for Trouble,” Guilmartin minimized the falsely reported delivery of Soviet MiG fighters to Nicaragua. He instead played up the antiquated 12 helicopters found in the actual cargo, insisting that these were just the first step in a probable escalation of Soviet military support. The goal of Guilmartin’s article was to convince the American people that the Sandinistas were a growing threat to US national security, a gross exaggeration. Furthermore, Guilmartin insisted that the helicopter deliveries were characteristic of a purely offensive military strategy by the Sandinista government, similar to the arrival of Soviet tanks years before.<sup>25</sup> In reality, the Soviet tanks were purely a defensive measure according to retired marine Lt. Col. John Buchanan in his testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee.<sup>26</sup> In the same month, the CIA released a white paper titled *The Soviet-Cuban Connection in Central America* that highlighted the increase of Sandinista troops and quoted Panamanian General Manuel Noriega’s fear that, if left unchecked, a “holocaust in the entire Caribbean region” could take place.<sup>27</sup>

\* \* \*

On June 25th, 1986, the House passed \$100 million in military (\$70 million) and non-lethal (\$30 million) aid to the contras by a vote of 221 to 209. The propaganda action plan by OPD proved successful with the help of White House Cold War rhetoric. According to historian Peter Kornbluh, the propaganda campaign “cast the debate in black and white, East versus West, totalitarianism against democracy.”<sup>28</sup> Reagan increasingly painted Congress as the enemy, saying that those who voted against the Contras were voting for communist tyranny. There were no “palatable alternatives” in Nicaragua because the Sandinista government was incapable of democratic reform in the eyes of the Reagan administration.<sup>29</sup> Congressional aid for the Contras allowed them to survive through the 1980s, continuing a war that had already seen close to 200,000 displaced and tens of thousands dead.<sup>30</sup>

Problems of underdevelopment and political corruption continued in Nicaragua, partly as a result of the Contra war. The targeting of cooperative farms, schools, and peasant political institutions in the countryside eliminated a grassroots peasant movement stymied the success of democratic organizations like the National Union of Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG). As a result, the political and economic system reoriented back towards dependency on the United States through neoliberal economic policies, the most recent case being Daniel Ortega himself. His presidency (2007-present) was only won by ridding himself of his previous Sandinista backers, embracing corporate capital, adopting the most retrograded positions of the church, and reached an understanding with the U.S foreign policy platforms of anti-immigration and anti-drug policies.<sup>31</sup> Recent attempts at

---

<sup>23</sup> U.S. State Department: Office of Public Diplomacy, “Public Diplomacy Action Plan,” 2

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Harry Van Cleve to Dante B. Fascell, 2

<sup>25</sup> John F. Guilmartin, “Nicaragua is armed for trouble,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 1985. The original false report was an article in the *New York Times* on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1984 titled by Philip Taubman titled, “Nicaragua Said To Get Soviet Helicopters.”

<sup>26</sup> Chamorro, *Packaging the Contras*, 48

<sup>27</sup> Central Intelligence Agency Report, “The Soviet-Cuban Connection in Central America and the Caribbean,” March 11, 1985, 11-13

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 192-3

<sup>29</sup> Scott, “Interbranch Rivalry,” 250

<sup>30</sup> Dianna Melrose, *Nicaragua: The Threat of a Good Example?* (Oxford, UK: OxFam, 1985), 37

## Strategic Visions: Volume 18, Number I

cutting the state pensions that he helped create decades only demonstrates the depressed state of economic, political, and social life in Nicaragua.

Similarly, the US has changed little in regards to domestic propaganda permeating the mainstream media to promote executive power and interventionist foreign policy. The War on Terror, much like the War on Communism, inundates mainstream media outlets. From August 2002 through March 19th, 2003, there were more than 140 front page stories at the Washington Post that focused heavily on administration rhetoric against Iraq.<sup>32</sup> The associate editor for the Post at the time, Karen DeYoung, said in 2004, “We are inevitably the mouthpiece of whatever administration is in power.”<sup>33</sup> With the rise of executive branch power in the form of Authorized Use of Military Force in combination with incredibly powerful media tools like Facebook, academics of history and international relations should give domestic propaganda appropriate scrutiny when analyzing foreign relations.

Joshua Stern  
Temple University Graduate Student

---

32 Howard Kurtz, "Media's Failure on Iraq Still Stings," CNN, March 11, 2013

33 Michael Massing, "Now They Tell Us," The New York Review of Books, 26 February 2004