

THE ELECTORAL DEFEAT OF THE SANDINISTA REGIME:

A Postmortem

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A FAUSTIAN BARGAIN: U.S. INTERVENTION IN THE NICARAGUAN ELECTIONS AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA. By William I. Robinson. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1992. Pp. 310. \$54.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.)

REVOLUTION AND COUNTERREVOLUTION IN NICARAGUA. Edited by Thomas Walker. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1991. Pp. 419. \$49.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)

NICARAGUA: SELF-DETERMINATION AND SURVIVAL. By Hazel Smith. (Boulder, Colo.: Pluto, 1993. Pp. 340. \$59.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper.)

THE 1990 ELECTIONS IN NICARAGUA AND THEIR AFTERMATH. Edited by Vanessa Castro and Gary Prevost. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992. Pp. 240. \$55.00 cloth, \$24.50 paper.)

DEMOCRACY AND SOCIALISM IN SANDINISTA NICARAGUA. By Harry Vanden and Gary Prevost. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1993. Pp. 172. \$32.00 cloth.)

In July of 1979, a broad cross-class coalition of Nicaraguans rose up in revolution and overthrew their country's brutal dictator, Anastasio Somoza Debayle. The Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), a Marxist vanguard political-military organization coordinating the revolutionary movement, consolidated its power through a junta and began a socialist transformation of the economy. Although many leftists at home and abroad praised Nicaragua's experimental development path for its achievements in meeting basic human needs, U.S. President Ronald Reagan charged that the Sandinistas were constructing a "totalitarian dungeon" and made removal of the socialist regime his number-one foreign-policy priority.¹ Thus when the FSLN and opposition political parties agreed to compete in national elections in 1990, the vote caught world-

1. On the Nicaraguan Revolution, see John A. Booth, *The End and the Beginning* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1985). On the development of U.S. policy toward the Sandinista regime, see Roy Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy: The Making of American Policy in Nicaragua, 1981-1987* (New York: Touchstone, 1989); and Thomas Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).

wide attention. Thousands of international observers and journalists descended on Nicaragua to scrutinize electoral preparations and the casting of ballots. In a shocking upset, the FSLN lost the election and peaceably ceded control of the government to its conservative opponents, who had formed a coalition known as UNO (Unión Nacional Opositora).

The 1990 election signified an unprecedented transition from socialist revolution to democracy, and it has generated a new spate of books that offer postmortems on the Sandinista regime.² The works under review here encompass perspectives from Nicaragua, the United States, and Europe in an array of single-author, coauthored, and edited volumes ranging from theoretically driven inquiries to muckraking exposés. Some of the authors are Sandinistas, others are constructive critics, but all have felt compelled to address questions raised by this watershed election. Why did the Sandinistas lose the 1990 election? Why did so few observers anticipate their loss? Does the election signify that liberal democratic institutions inevitably undermine socialist transitions? What role did foreign actors play in derailing the socialist experiment? The various answers reveal a central divide between authors who explain the FSLN's electoral defeat as a consequence of external pressures and those who view it as rooted equally in internal problems.

William Robinson's *A Faustian Bargain: U.S. Intervention in the Nicaraguan Elections and American Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Era* is sure to be the most controversial of the postmortem collection. This analysis places itself at one extreme of the explanatory continuum in blaming U.S. aggression for toppling the Sandinista regime. Robinson seeks to show that through a long war of attrition and by specific measures taken during the election campaign, the United States skewed the choices that Nicaraguans believed they faced on election day: it was either elect UNO to obtain peace and economic aid or reelect the FSLN and risk continuation of the war and the U.S. economic embargo. He argues that an array of U.S. governmental and nongovernmental organizations implemented a carefully planned strategy to unseat the FSLN at the polls. Easily the most polemical of the works under review here, *A Faustian Bargain* attacks the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Congress, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the Pentagon and also excoriates the National Endowment for Democracy, the Venezuelan and Costa Rican governments, some of the election observer groups, and a host of policy institutes in the United States. Robinson's analysis is anything but subtle, missing important distinctions among Washington agencies. For exam-

2. Additional titles not under review here include Oscar René Vargas, *Adonde va Nicaragua* (Managua: Nicarao, 1991); Guillermo Cortés Domínguez, *La lucha por el poder* (Managua: Vanguardia, 1990); Roger Miranda and William Ratliff, *The Civil War in Nicaragua: Inside the Sandinistas* (London: Transaction, 1993); and Alejandro Martínez Cuenca, *Nicaragua: Una década de retos* (Managua: Nueva Nicaragua, 1990).

ple, Robinson treats the National Endowment for Democracy as a unitary organization when in fact the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs and its Republican sister organization operated separately throughout the election, each with its own representatives and agenda.

On the plus side, Robinson conducted some penetrating high-level interviews and obtained previously unavailable documents, including internal memos and letters from organizations involved in this electoral intervention effort. Photocopies of many of these documents are reprinted at the end of the volume in an appendix. *A Faustian Bargain* suggests how the United States adapted its strategy of aggression in the wake of the Iran-Contra scandal in order to maintain political pressure on the Sandinista regime. Crucially, Robinson illustrates how U.S. money and advising helped to unite opposition parties of every ideological stripe around Violeta Chamorro, the most electable candidate. Meanwhile, U.S. humanitarian aid kept the Contras in the field and even enabled them to revitalize military pressure during the campaign, thus discrediting the FSLN's assertion that a Sandinista victory would bring peace.

Regrettably, Robinson overstates his case. He places too much emphasis on the amount of money spent by the United States to fund the UNO campaign indirectly. In reality, the FSLN clearly outspent its opposition on flashy rallies and television commercials. Similarly, one finds implausible elements in Robinson's scenario of sustained collaboration between U.S. agencies and Nicaraguan as well as U.S. front organizations bent on overthrowing the Sandinistas. His thesis calls for a degree of fluid coordination by and from Washington that seems unlikely, particularly given interagency rivalries.

Robinson's heavy-handed criticism of the United States is likely to leave him preaching to the converted and being dismissed by the policy-makers whose behavior he would presumably like to change. Indeed, he leaves himself open to charges of ideological bias in questioning the Right at every turn but too often taking Sandinista statements at face value. For example, Daniel Ortega's claims that "we Sandinistas have never sought to cling to power" and "we will be satisfied to die poor" go unexamined. The postelection "piñata" giveaway of government properties flew in the face of such assertions and laid the FSLN open to charges of corruption. The problem in perspective is intrinsic to the way in which Robinson cast his basic question. His project is to expose the U.S. role, and consequently he pays too little attention to Sandinista errors, relegating that topic to a different book. But without serious discussion of the FSLN's mixed record in governing, it is not possible to understand how U.S. efforts to oust the FSLN flourished in fertile soil.

The FSLN undertook its own process of internal criticism, aimed at reforming the organization enough to regain power in the next election. Sandinistas now acknowledge a long list of mistakes: forced relocation of

Misquito Indians on the Atlantic Coast; tardy realization that many peasants wanted individual titles to land; abuse of power by some FSLN cadres in mass organizations; failure to buffer adequately the poorest segment of society against the 1988 austerity measures; and unsupportable criminal convictions by informal courts set up to try former Contras and accused collaborators.³ It can also be argued that the FSLN bears some responsibility for the mutual hostility that developed with the Catholic Church and for occasional heavy-handed application of authoritarian police laws. Robinson's decision not to explore these problems resulted in his overlooking crucial internal dynamics that left the Sandinistas susceptible to electoral intervention. The upshot is that external factors wound up weighting Robinson's thinking disproportionately. Despite his intention to treat Nicaraguans as responsible subjects of their own history, they appear in his account as easily manipulated puppets in a world where the United States pulls the political strings. Further, in reducing the first electoral turnover by a revolutionary socialist government to a well-executed policy concocted in Washington, Robinson misses the significance that the event could hold for the development of democratic socialist theory. Further, he inadvertently supports undue claiming of credit by conservatives of the Reagan era, claims that obscure the fact that the United States did not get what it wanted in Nicaragua: elections were a second-best option that Washington supported only after it failed to obtain a military victory intended to eliminate the FSLN from Nicaraguan politics altogether.

Robinson concludes that the United States has developed a policy strategy that combines "low-intensity conflict" with electoral intervention to overthrow foreign governments. Although Robinson calls it "the new intervention," electoral manipulation in the name of democracy is not new.⁴ Driven by security concerns and a genuine missionary impulse to spread the American way of life, the United States has repeatedly intervened in elections throughout the Caribbean and Central America. In fact, in the early part of the twentieth century, candidates for Nicaraguan elections were chosen with U.S. approval, electoral laws were drawn up by U.S. experts, the body administering elections was headed by a U.S. citizen, balloting was overseen by U.S. Marines, and the resulting governments survived only if they were granted diplomatic recognition by the United States.⁵ To his credit, Robinson identifies a new twist on this old theme in pointing out that "low-intensity" warfare has largely replaced

3. See the FSLN's analysis of why it lost the 1990 election at its meeting in El Crucero in June 1990, published in *Barricada* in four segments beginning 16 June 1990. See also the appendices in the volume under review here edited by Castro and Prevost.

4. See *Exporting Democracy: The United States and Latin America*, edited by Abraham Lowenthal (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), especially the contributions by Paul Drake and Leslie Bethell.

5. For an electoral history of Nicaragua, see Oscar René Vargas, *Elecciones en Nicaragua: Elecciones presidenciales en Nicaragua, 1912–1932* (Managua: Dilesa, 1989).

invasions by U.S. Marines, Panama and Grenada notwithstanding. In this regard, *A Faustian Bargain* raises a useful warning flag: the democracies under which most Latin Americans now live will not survive if elections come to be viewed as instruments of external intervention.

Tagged on at the end of *A Faustian Bargain* are two brief commentaries. The first is by Alejandro Bendaña, cofounder of the Centro para Estudios Internacionales (CEI), one of several social science research institutes established by high-level Sandinista officials following their electoral loss. Bendaña's lucid exposition cautions readers not to "exaggerate the importance of elections and governmental power as levers of social change" (p. 171). Neither socialist theory nor Latin American history, with its cyclical return to authoritarianism, invites confidence in Nicaragua's new political order. In the second commentary, "Old Habits, New Opportunities in Nicaragua," Robert Pastor damns Robinson with faint praise, lauding his idealism while suggesting that it is naive. One goal here may have been to clear the election observers from former President Jimmy Carter's Council of Freely Elected Heads of Government of any implied meddling. But Pastor also disagrees with Robinson's central thesis, arguing that UNO was more than a marionette. Pastor admits that the war and the economic embargo battered Nicaragua badly but asserts that Nicaraguan voters were given a chance to blame their circumstances on the United States and chose instead to blame the FSLN. This analysis blithely ignores the fact that voters were made aware that blaming the United States would not necessarily end the war and the embargo whereas blaming the FSLN well might. Strategic voting surely took place.

Thomas Walker is a veteran of Nicaraguan affairs whose interest predates the Sandinista era and much of the faddish literature it has generated. Most recently, Walker edited *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua*, whose list of contributors includes scholars and policy professionals from the United States and Nicaragua and mixes established writers with a few newcomers.⁶ The collection hangs together loosely. No attempt was made to present an analytical framework, to address any central theoretical concern, or to impose any structure or discourse on individual contributions. Lacking a conclusion as well, the text sells itself short in missing the opportunity to draw lessons from its essays. Nonetheless, the contributors' collective ability to capture the subtle shading among actors in the Nicaraguan social conflict sets this volume apart.

Walker limited the volume's time frame. The collection refrains

6. Some of the material in the Walker volume has been published elsewhere in similar form. See Peter Kornbluh, *Iran-Contra Scandal: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* (New York: Bowker, 1987); William Goodfellow and James Morell in *Political Parties and Democracy in Central America*, edited by Louis W. Goodman, William M. LeoGrande, and Johanna Mendelson Forman (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1992); and Gary Prevost's contributions in the Castro and Prevost collection under review here.

from rehashing Nicaraguan history and reserves comment on Chamorro's conservative project.⁷ Nor does the collection set out to compare Nicaragua with other Central American countries, as Walker has done elsewhere.⁸ What it accomplishes is compilation of a detailed record of the Sandinistas' decade in power. Although the dense factual material (with its alphabet soup of acronyms) may intimidate readers who lack background knowledge on Nicaragua, *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua* provides excellent grist for the mills of seasoned Latin Americanists interested in revolutionary consolidation and transitions to socialism or democratization.

After a brief historical introduction, the book examines Nicaraguan political and social actors, Sandinista government policy, the counterrevolution, and the search for peace that resulted in elections. *Revolution and Counterrevolution* offers a sympathetic but not uncritical review of the Sandinista regime. The strongest portion of the collection is the early material on state formation (by Andrew Reding), the armed forces (Tom Walker), the FSLN (Gary Prevost), and the opposition (Eric Weaver and William Barnes). These essays correctly pinpoint the main issues and provide persuasive corroborating evidence for their arguments. The contributors sketch a portrait of Nicaragua in which the counterrevolutionary war placed growing constraints on the possibilities for radical change and popular democracy. As in Robinson's analysis, the lion's share of blame for the Sandinista electoral loss is placed on the United States. Economic difficulties tend to be treated as integral to the war and the broader policy of U.S. aggression. But in contrast to Robinson's piece, the discussion in this collection is well nuanced, enabling readers to draw on this material to address a variety of theoretical concerns.

From England comes another overview of the revolutionary period, Hazel Smith's *Nicaragua: Self-Determination and Survival*. The limitations of Smith's research are outlined up front in a methodological note explaining that the author has not had the opportunity to live in Nicaragua, despite four trips there, and has limited facility in Spanish. Given these drawbacks, the book does as well as possible, relying on myriad secondary sources and published interviews, adroitly employing quotations that capture salient points precisely. Pitched at an introductory level, Smith's volume adds little that is new but does draw attention to studies conducted in Nicaragua that have gone largely unnoticed abroad.

The strength of *Nicaragua: Self-Determination and Survival* lies in its historical section. The remainder of the book focuses on the revolution's social project, including reforms affecting women, the Atlantic Coast,

7. Walker is preparing a new and more closely edited volume on the Chamorro era that is expected to be published prior to the 1996 elections.

8. See Thomas W. Walker and John A. Booth, *Understanding Central America* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1993).

health care, and education. Smith discusses policy shortcomings as products of wartime constraints and also as reflections of the Sandinistas' inexperience in governance. But the Sandinista government's policy choices are never linked to underlying political antagonisms over the socialist project. The book thus begs the question of how the FSLN lost electoral support among voters who had benefited from revolutionary policies. Moreover, by pitching her discussion at the level of government policy rather than regime formation, Smith underemphasizes the struggles to institutionalize the revolution—such as the development of the *Ley de Partidos Políticos*, the *Ley Electoral*, and the constitution—all of which established space for opposition and presaged the electoral showdown between the FSLN and UNO.

Vanessa Castro and Gary Prevost have coedited a volume that seeks to understand why Nicaraguans who initially supported the FSLN and benefited from revolutionary policies decided to vote for UNO in 1990. Like Walker's edited volume, *The 1990 Elections in Nicaragua and Their Aftermath* is simply a collection of essays. It is nonetheless invaluable in preserving the postelection analyses undertaken by Nicaraguan think tanks that were set up by Sandinistas in the wake of their defeat.

The lead essay, "The Sociopolitical Dynamics of the 1990 Nicaraguan Elections," was written by Paul Oquist, a political advisor to former President Daniel Ortega and founder of the Instituto para Estudios Nicaragüenses (IEN). This piece covers research conducted immediately following the election, including data drawn from a broad survey, intensive follow-up interviews, and focus groups that targeted key social sectors. Oquist stresses how the changing sociopolitical environment in which the Nicaraguan Revolution occurred affected the vote. Many factors constrained the Sandinistas' options and the revolution's success—the collapse of the socialist bloc, increasing U.S. hegemony and Reagan's rollback policy, an extended economic crisis in the non-oil-exporting developing countries, and the development of an international rather than a domestically driven peace process (the Arias Plan)—all of which ultimately reduced voter support. Like Walker and Robinson, Oquist cites U.S. aggression, including electoral intervention in 1984 and 1990, as the main cause of the Sandinista electoral loss.

Oquist's most valuable contribution is his tracing of the erosion of the FSLN's electoral base among the bourgeoisie, professionals, *campesinos*, the informal sector, homeworkers, and wage workers. He asks why these groups switched their support to UNO as well as when they did so. An interesting finding is that 28 percent of those who voted for the FSLN in 1984 but for the UNO in 1990 had ceased supporting the Sandinistas by 1985. Another 13 percent had stopped supporting the FSLN in 1986, and an additional 15 percent in 1987 (Castro and Prevost, p. 21). Attrition was thus greatest during the heaviest years of fighting the counterrevolution-

ary war, prior to the draconian economic austerity measures of 1988. This analysis suggests that the war was the primary reason for the Sandinista loss.

According to Oquist's data, 72 percent of voters had made up their minds about how to vote before the election campaign opened (p. 22). The remaining voters were influenced by external factors that came into play during the campaign to the disadvantage of the FSLN, including the continuing collapse of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, the U.S. invasion of Panama, and President George Bush's announcement that an UNO victory would end the U.S. embargo. The FSLN and UNO campaigns determined the undecided vote, particularly for single-issue voters who rejected the FSLN because it refused to end military conscription.

Oquist charges that some UNO votes were bought outright, although he fails to explain how this fraud worked, given the secret ballot. More persuasive is his candid assessment that some UNO votes signified a rejection of the social model that the revolution proposed to forge. Significantly, 46 percent of a focus group of UNO supporters thought that "oppression and totalitarianism" had helped cause the FSLN's defeat (p. 25). This language echoes precisely the discourse employed by the Reagan and Bush administrations, leading Oquist to conclude that the United States succeeded in establishing an internal social base for its policy. But he offers no solution to the Sandinista dilemma of how to prevent the formation of a potentially counterrevolutionary opposition without violating human rights and civil liberties.

Vanessa Castro, Executive Director of the Instituto para el Desarrollo de la Democracia (IPADE), focused her research more narrowly on the rural sector. Her methodology included a poll conducted in August 1990, along with related focus groups and open-ended interviews. She set out to learn why rural dwellers, a segment of the population that had benefited from the revolution, voted heavily against the FSLN. Castro first reviews the data from the 1984 election in which the FSLN won 65 percent of the rural vote. She points out that this figure is misleading because nearly a third of the rural populace abstained from voting. The abstainers represented an opposing faction that went to the polls to vote for Chamorro in 1990, leaving the FSLN to win only 36 percent of the rural vote (p. 131). In an effort to discover why voters rejected the FSLN, Castro set up a controlled comparison between areas where the FSLN won the rural vote in 1990 and those where it lost.

Castro's thesis rests on the idea that rural areas have a peasant culture characterized by religiosity, high regard for the family, paternalistic relationships, and a belief in the importance of peasants' freedom to produce and sell. She argues that the Sandinista project meshed badly with this culture. Even after helping overthrow Somoza, peasants clung to a social hierarchy rooted in the firm belief that the rich were necessary

participants in the peasant economy. FSLN cadres found it difficult to make inroads in a populace that looked for leadership to the old families of the rural aristocracy. Peasants resented the national government's restrictions on sales of their harvests and its early reluctance to grant land titles to individuals under the agrarian reform. In the end, the FSLN could capitalize on the social benefits it brought to the countryside only under specific conditions: when contradictions between local and national projects were resolved through dialogue; where Sandinista leaders had roots in the community that provided credibility; and where those leaders effectively used their resources to ease the contradictions generated by the Sandinista project of revolutionary change. Elsewhere the project lost support among the same peasant electorate that it had mobilized.

Castro introduces some striking data on rural voters' relationships to the land. Poor peasants supported the FSLN at about the national level of 41 percent, collectivized peasants voted Sandinista by a 7 percent margin, and workers in state agricultural enterprises voted for the FSLN by a whopping 16 percent margin. In contrast, medium-level producers and private agricultural workers overwhelmingly rejected the FSLN. This voting pattern is explained in part by the manner in which peasants were recruited into the military. State enterprise workers were largely mobilized on a voluntary basis. The Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo (ATC) cushioned the blow effectively by providing economic aid to enlisted men's families. For peasant farmers, however, recruitment of a son meant a serious and uncompensated loss to the family economic unit. The Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos (UNAG), which represented small farmers, found that geographic isolation made it difficult to help poor peasants affected by recruitment. As a result, many poor peasants voted against the FSLN, while the rural proletariat remained loyal.

Some difficulties arise with Castro's explanation. The policy measures most alien to peasant culture were implemented prior to 1984, yet the FSLN won the 1984 elections, including the rural vote. But even though some of those policies were later changed, the FSLN did not recover peasant support. Further, Castro's discussion of military recruitment procedures may be an unnecessarily complex explanation of the reasons why the state sector voted Sandinista. The loyalty of state agricultural workers may be attributed to simple self-interest: the Sandinista government paid their salaries, whereas UNO was advocating privatization and cuts in subsidies.

The coeditor of *The 1990 Elections in Nicaragua*, Gary Prevost, published his assessment of the FSLN and its prospects for change as part of the Walker volume and in another book under review here coauthored with Harry Vanden. No matter where it appears, Prevost's discussion of the FSLN is perceptive, but especially so in *The 1990 Elections*, where he outlines the internal debate that arose between those who wanted the

FSLN to become an inclusive social-democratic party structured to win elections and those who insisted that the FSLN remain a cadre party. A second tactical debate also emerged between "the pragmatists," who promoted cooperation with the Chamorro government to achieve economic recovery, and "the principled," who argued that revolutionary socialism was still a viable path. The latter insisted that the United States was working against the FSLN as much through Chamorro's administration as through the hard-line right-wing forces affiliated with Vice President Virgilio Godoy and Managua Mayor Arnoldo Alemán. Prevost also examines the degree of openness to criticism within party ranks and the thorny issue of how the Dirección Nacional was selected.⁹

These debates culminated in a split within the FSLN that solidified at its most recent party congress in May 1994, despite the FSLN's reputation for cohesion in a country where splintering and factionalism are the norm.¹⁰ Within the FSLN, an orthodox revolutionary wing headed by former President Daniel Ortega now opposes the moderates gathered around former Vice President Sergio Ramírez. The split became public when Ramírez was removed from the Dirección Nacional and has since been reinforced by his creation of a new and separate party. It is anyone's guess what coalitions will form in the 1996 elections.¹¹

The remaining essay of the four in *The 1990 Elections* is "Rereading the Nicaraguan Pre-Election Polls in Light of the Election Results," in which Bill Barnes explores the reasons why pollsters erroneously concluded that the FSLN was destined to win the 1990 election. His review is something of a mea culpa in that he served as an advisor to the Boston-based election-monitoring group Hemisphere Initiatives, which was among those predicting an FSLN victory on the basis of polling data. Barnes's contribution reads as an honest and constructively thoughtful reconsideration of the evidence.

Barnes argues that at no time during the campaign did Ortega have a solid lead. Almost all the polls from June 1988 until the election showed that the FSLN had the support of 25 to 30 percent of the voting-age population, the opposition had 20 to 35 percent, another 10 to 20 percent of the electorate held no political opinions, and between 25 and 40 percent had mixed feelings (Castro and Prevost, p. 45). Pollsters pre-

9. The appendix to the volume contains copies in English of the statutes of the FSLN and "Principles and Political Programs," both adopted at the First Congress of the FSLN in July 1991.

10. Factionalism is encouraged by Nicaragua's Ley Electoral and Ley de Partidos Políticos. They establish minimal requirements for founding a political party, a system of relatively pure proportional representation, minimal thresholds for obtaining a seat in the National Assembly, and equal allocation of money and media time to small parties.

11. For an update on the divisions within the FSLN, see the analysis offered in *Envío*: "The FSLN Congress: What's at Stake," *Envío* 13, no. 155 (June 1994):16-18; and "A Rather Extraordinary Congress," *Envío* 13, no. 156 (July 1994):10-13.

dicting an Ortega victory erred because they misallocated the votes of what Barnes calls the “mixed middle,” meaning those with ambivalent views on the FSLN regime. In the end, Chamorro won 50 to 70 percent of the undecided votes and Ortega received only 10 to 20 percent, many fewer than pollsters declaring an Ortega lead had expected.

Barnes rejects the conservative argument that an anti-Sandinista majority existing for years finally got the chance to express its will in 1990. He notes that the opposition became a credible election alternative only after it coalesced around Violeta Chamorro as its candidate. Barnes also rejects the thesis that Daniel Ortega was in the lead until the December 1989 Panama invasion or until the FSLN failed to rescind the draft at its final rally in February 1990. In Barnes’s estimation, these late campaign developments accounted for no more than half of Chamorro’s margin of victory. Serious problems plagued the UNO campaign in January, including the delay of U.S. funds and Chamorro’s knee injury, factors that offset any major last-minute slide to Chamorro. Like Oquist, Barnes believes that the causes of the Sandinista defeat were largely long-term.

More particularly, Barnes concedes that the election probably hinged on one or two commanding issues made salient by international forces, meaning that the outcome might well have been different absent the war. Yet he dismisses as simplistic the argument that the majority of Nicaraguans were pro-Sandinista in their hearts and elected Chamorro only to relieve U.S. economic and military pressure. FSLN opportunism, sectarianism, adventurism, and vanguardism also influenced the votes of the “mixed middle.” During the election, the FSLN’s brand of triumphalism reinforced the illusion that it was bound to win, a costly act of self-deception. The debate in the final months was not over whether the Sandinistas would win but by what margin. Consequently, polls showing an unexpected surge in support for Chamorro in February were simply plugged into the margin-of-victory debate and thus missed the big picture.

Should we disregard the polls showing Ortega leading throughout the campaign in their entirety? Barnes says no. The Nicaraguan electorate was one the most intensively surveyed in history, an effort yielding a mass of data that can readily be mined by careful scholars. Elections address the single question of who should rule, but the polls asked many more. Most important, the poll results suggest policy areas in which the FSLN retained support even among those who voted for UNO. A key implication (which Barnes regrettably does not explore) is that UNO’s so-called landslide victory did not signal a mandate for sweeping counter-revolutionary change. Poll findings might have usefully informed UNO internal debates over the pace and extent of neoliberal reform.

Unfortunately, many Nicaraguan and U.S. conservatives discount this impressive data bank by arguing that voters lied to the pollsters who found Ortega in the lead out of fear of FSLN reprisals in what voters

perceived as a totalitarian state. But Barnes points out that in the very polls where respondents misidentified themselves as Ortega supporters, they felt free to criticize the FSLN on any number of policy questions, showing that fear was not their motive. Barnes finds no basis for the claim that pollsters finding Chamorro leading were more professional and effective or that pollsters declaring Ortega in the lead were blatantly partisan and even fabricated results. The degree of exaggeration of the Ortega vote was consistent across regions and among the main polling agencies. Nor did “passive” partisan cues hinting at the pollsters’ politics (such as the now-famous red-pen experiment) encourage interviewees to overstate their preference for Ortega. But such passive cues may have provoked or reinforced the Chamorro voters’ desire to keep their voting intentions secret. The large number of polls, all of which were reported in blazing headlines, meant that respondents did not experience polling as confidential. Some neighborhoods were surveyed repeatedly, and respondents soon learned to state a preference when in fact they were still undecided in order to avoid being selected for follow-up polling.

The most theoretically minded postelection analysis under review here is *Democracy and Socialism in Sandinista Nicaragua*, a slim volume coauthored by Harry Vanden and Gary Prevost. It treats the Nicaraguan case as a transition to socialism gone awry, emphasizing the contradictions introduced into the Sandinista project by the attempt to construct a version of socialism that would be democratic. The authors’ central concern is the potentially conflictive relationship between participatory and representative forms of democracy, which competed for institutional space in Nicaraguan revolutionary politics.

Democracy and Socialism begins with a brief history of democratic thought from Aristotle to Samuel Huntington, focusing on the difference between capitalist and socialist conceptions of democracy. The discussion then moves into the case material, providing a concise history of the uprising led by Augusto César Sandino from 1927 to 1933, the establishment of the FSLN, and the revolution against dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Vanden and Prevost emphasize how historic struggles helped forge a nationalist ideology (Sandinismo) that contained both democratic and socialist elements.¹² But the cross-class coalition that won the revolution held two disparate notions of what democracy meant—one liberal and representative, the other socialist and direct.

The FSLN subscribed to the popular socialist definition. Political pluralism would be permitted, but the hegemony of the vanguard party was understood as a central feature of the revolutionary state. Internally, the FSLN was supposed to practice democratic centralism. Government

12. On the origins of *Sandinismo*, see Donald C. Hodges, *Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

policy in the new Nicaragua would be guided by “the logic of the majority,” promoting democracy via the enfranchisement of the lower classes. From 1979 to 1983, mass organizations served as the main instruments for popular participation in decision making. Consolidation of Sandinista hegemony, however, precipitated the dissolution of the revolutionary coalition. An emerging opposition disputed the direct democracy model, rejecting the mass organizations as mere “conveyor belts” for government policy and demanding liberal democratic elections. Vanden and Prevost present the mass organizations as laudable if imperfect experiments in direct democracy. They praise the many social reforms that the mass organizations helped implement but also note their policy errors and lament their declining independence from the FSLN. Tension developed between the FSLN’s role as a vanguard, which implied that its cadres should lead the masses, and the role of the mass organizations as advocates of specific interests that sometimes were at odds with Sandinista policies. This tension was never fully resolved.¹³ But on balance, Vanden and Prevost conclude, Sandinista Nicaragua was more democratic than any previous state in transition to socialism.

Over time, the Sandinista political project was modified to adapt to the realities of governance and the constraints imposed by the international system, including the war and economic aggression by the United States. Direct democracy was an early casualty. The first Sandinista legislature, a semi-corporatist and largely advisory body formed in 1980, had drawn many of its members from mass organizations. To undercut aggression from the United States and counter criticism in democratic Europe, Nicaragua replaced that legislature in 1984 with a new one modeled along liberal democratic lines. Its membership consisted solely of political party representatives, elected on a territorial basis. Relatively clean, if imperfectly competitive, national elections were held in 1984, and the FSLN won handily. The price of democratic institutionalization on liberal terms was that mass organizations were displaced from the legislature and the popular base lost a substantial degree of access to government decision making. Vanden and Prevost herald the 1984 election as “a significant expansion of the political horizon for Marxist-oriented regimes, if not a turning point in the evolution of Marxism,” but they are dubious about the responsiveness of the liberal representative institutions established in this contest (p. 82). Between the lines, they hint that this turning point may have headed Marxist socialism down a dead-end street.

A similar evolution took place in Sandinista economic policy. Pressured by the economic crisis caused by the war and the U.S. embargo,

13. Two good books on the mass organizations and their relationship to the FSLN are Gary Ruchwarger, *People in Power: Forging a Grassroots Democracy in Nicaragua* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1987); and Dennis Gilbert, *Sandinistas: The Party and the Revolution* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

revolutionary socialist economic policies gradually gave way to a social democratic economic model that relied more on the market. The Sandinistas failed, however, to buffer their poor constituents adequately against austerity measures taken in 1988, the same measures that benefited the private agro-export sector. By the time the 1990 election campaign began, the economy was no longer serving the interests of the poor majority. Moreover, the day-to-day scramble for survival sapped popular energy for participation in mass organizations and government programs.¹⁴ Without denying the connections between the economic crisis and the war, Vanden and Prevost imply that the economic crisis and its poor handling by the FSLN were the immediate reasons why Nicaraguans voted for UNO in the 1990 elections.

What differentiates Vanden and Prevost from many leftists is the degree to which they are critical of the FSLN. They argue that the Leninist architecture of the party—its small numbers, militarized recruitment, and rigid hierarchy—was incompatible with the direct democracy to which the revolution was initially committed. Party decision making was top-down, absorbing minimal grassroots input, and consequently, the Sandinistas lost touch with their base and failed to realize the magnitude of popular concerns over economic hardship and military conscription. Nicaraguans were thus forced to communicate their desperate circumstances through the crude instrument of the ballot box, which lent itself to an either-or choice. Many Nicaraguans felt continuing support for aspects of the revolutionary project but voted nonetheless for UNO. Vanden and Prevost insist that the FSLN must assume the responsibility for its electoral loss with all that defeat implied. International factors sharpened the contradictions in the revolutionary project but did not create them. U.S. hostility constrained Sandinista choices but did not determine them.

The chapter on the 1990 elections in *Democracy and Socialism in Sandinista Nicaragua* makes it clear that Vanden and Prevost view the triumph of liberal representative procedures as problematic for democracy as well as for socialism. They favor internal democratization of the FSLN aimed at reinstitutionalizing its commitment to participatory democracy and revitalizing the mass organizations as independent agents. Yet the recent split in the FSLN resulted precisely from differences over the pace and direction of such internal reform. Ultimately, introducing more democracy into the party has meant losing the unity that was essential to the revolution's successes.

Despite Vanden and Prevost's sharp analysis, the tough questions

14. The economic problems arising from the war and the U.S. embargo are the subject of *The Political Economy of Revolutionary Nicaragua*, edited by Rose J. Spalding (Boston, Mass.: Allen and Unwin, 1987).

are left hanging in the absence of a concluding chapter linking the case back to democratic and socialist theory. Where parallel structures exist between the vanguard party and the state, will verticalist standard operating procedures necessarily impose matching top-down dynamics in government policy making? If so, must representative forms of democracy displace direct democracy? If revolutionary socialist parties become inclusive and dilute their platforms to forge electorally viable coalitions, will they lose sight of their transitional agenda?¹⁵ And with reference to Nicaragua, would greater reliance on grassroots democracy have saved the Sandinista Revolution, or might it merely have rendered the revolutionary government's policy incoherent for lack of a guiding vision? These dilemmas are familiar to anyone who has studied the tensions inherent in vanguardism, democratic centralism, and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Vanden and Prevost illustrate how those tensions surfaced in the Nicaraguan case, but they stop short of drawing generalized lessons for socialist theory, noting simply that the forms of democracy and extent of their institutionalization must be worked out in practice. Vanden and Prevost's reluctance is unfortunate because theoretical arguments are desperately needed in the current era of reconceptualization following the demise of socialist governments in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Why did the Sandinistas lose the 1990 election? The authors reviewed here agree that the causes of the Sandinista defeat were largely long-term, the revolutionary government's options were heavily constrained by an increasingly unreceptive international context, and U.S. aggression was the most salient of the external pressures. There the consensus ends. Robinson blames U.S. electoral intervention and low-intensity conflict, finding external pressures determinative. Oquist too cites the war as the most pressing of an array of external changes that framed the election process. But unlike Robinson's survey, Oquist's analysis looks inward, exploring how external pressures manifested themselves in domestic politics and helped erode FSLN support among different sectors over time. Vanessa Castro argues that the Sandinista project clashed with authoritarian cultural vestiges of Nicaragua's undemocratic past. In her view, the war and accompanying military recruitment merely underscored preexisting tensions generated by Sandinista efforts to transform the rural economy and society. Vanden and Prevost as well as Barnes go one step further. They argue that the contradictions imposed by the revolutionary project were exacerbated by external forces but also by the FSLN. The FSLN's vertical chain of command left it blind to the desperate

15. The difficulty of retaining support after broadening the party base is discussed in Adam Przeworski and John Sprague, *Paper Stones: A History of Electoral Socialism* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

economic needs of its 1984 constituency, who moved into the “mixed middle” and ended up voting for UNO. The difference between the 1984 and 1990 elections—between victory and defeat for the revolution—was not just the worsening of the war and the economic crisis but the displacement of mass organizations and other institutions of direct democracy that had connected the FSLN to its base.

The drama of the 1990 elections has focused scholarly attention on why Nicaraguans voted to expel the Sandinistas from office. Most researchers have structured their inquiries around policy questions, asking whether Sandinista programs alienated constituents and how U.S. aggression influenced the vote. What has been left out is concern for the prior question of how a vanguard party committed to a socialist transition came to hold liberal democratic elections at all. Walker's *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua* documents how a competitive party system, a fair electoral law, and a constitution that guarantees civil liberties were established. Vanden and Prevost tie this institutionalization to the revolution's dualistic commitment to a liberal and socialist, representative and popular democracy. These works point ongoing inquiry in the right direction, toward a theoretically informed analysis of regime formation. By placing the Nicaraguan case in comparative context and interpreting the revolutionary period through the lens of democratization theory, we may come to understand better Nicaragua's unexpected and rapid transition from revolution to democracy.¹⁶ Further, the Nicaraguan experience may enhance the growing body of theory about democratic transitions, helping scholars understand movements toward democracy around the globe.

16. Relevant works on transitions to democracy include Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Lawrence Whitehead, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); John A. Booth and Mitchell A. Seligson, *Elections and Democracy in Central America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late-Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993); and *Democracy in the Americas: Stopping the Pendulum*, edited by Robert Pastor (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1989).