

LETTER FROM MANAGUA BY DAVID GOLLOB



The Contras have attacked Abisinia, a settlement in Northern Nicaragua. In a humble peasant shack, a woman and her five children wail over the body of *Papito* –

“Little Father.”

The body is laid out in a coffin with a glass window over the face. The glass is smeared with finger smudges and tears. Decomposition is swift in the tropics, and the stench of death is overpowering. On the roof, the steady, drumbeat of a tropical rainstorm. It is late afternoon, the shack is dark, lit only by a few candles.

In the ruins of the community medical centre, a woman is giving birth. Her husband was killed, her home burned down. Labour was brought on prematurely by the trauma, the nurse explains. The woman is only eighteen and her baby is all she has left.

In a clandestine radio broadcast from neighbouring Honduras, the Contras claimed the attack on Abisinia was a great success, because, they said, they managed to destroy a military barracks and command post located on the fringe of the settlement. This is true. But the Contras did not explain why the bulk of the casualties were civilians, why twenty houses were burned down, or why several peasants, including two women, were kidnapped.

I used the sounds and images of the mourning family and the woman giving birth to illustrate my report on this attack, a report that I prepared for CBC Radio and also filed to an American Public Radio network. I was surprised to learn that the American network did not run the story – because, they said, the sound was too emotional. “We have made a policy decision,” an editor later explained, “To avoid dramatising or sensationalising this aspect of the war.”

I could see nothing “sensational” about the use of sound. It illustrated a basic truth about war. War is suffering, pain, and death – ugly and

unpleasant. But this war is also the policy of the US government. The highly-charged ideological climate that the Reagan Administration has created to justify its policies and to embarrass reluctant congressman into supporting them has made reporting on Nicaragua extremely difficult. At least three American reporters have been fired or forced to resign because of their coverage of Nicaragua.

“The Sandinistas have a record of broken promises,” President Reagan tells the world. Few jour-

is to have been jailed for fifteen days for taking part in an anti-government demonstration. In El Salvador, human rights activists are kidnapped or gunned down in the street in front of their children.

But we are not in El Salvador, we are in Nicaragua, where democratic freedom has become an issue, because, once again, it is one of the issues the Reagan Administration has seized on to justify its policies. As journalists in Nicaragua we must report on human rights violations in Nicaragua. It is not our job to point out the hypocrisy of launching a war to topple this government when the United States supports governments that are guilty of much worse.

The phrase “Contra aid” is another example of how we are

mercenaries. However, that’s not the point: no Western journalists would ever refer to the Contras as “mercenaries,” while the use of the word “aid” is universal, and surreptitiously promotes a distorted concept of the nature of the conflict.

An American journalist speculated in a conversation last November on how certain Contra leaders might react to the Sandinistas’ offer to hold indirect ceasefire talks. “What does it matter what the Contras think?” I asked him. “Surely they will do whatever the State Department or the CIA tells them to do.” The journalist, who has years of experience in the region and knows the story much better than I do, went silent for a moment. “I suppose you are right,” he said. Nevertheless, in the report he filed that day, Contra leaders were quoted as if they were in positions of authority, with the power to make weighty decisions on the course of the war.

Part of this derives from what journalists call “balance.” Every story has more than one side. We seek out the prime players, and highlight their contrasting views. However, to deny that the Contras are players in their own right is to make a political evaluation. The safest course of action is just to play along.

CBC Radio listeners heard the report on Abisinia, and to its credit, the American network later reversed its decision and ran the same story. Unfortunately, that network has a minority audience. Unfortunately, in the United States, the debate over Nicaragua is dominated by the unchallenged assumptions of the Reagan Administration, framed in empty, cold war rhetoric – not in the reality of a woman and five children wailing over the loss of their father, as rain drums on the roof, and the last candle dies. □

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nalists have attempted to challenge this judgement. To do so, would be to engage in advocacy on the part of the Sandinistas. So the statement goes unchallenged. When President Ortega signs a peace plan, the journalist’s question becomes, “Will he comply?” The assumption is, he won’t; after all, Ortega’s is a record of broken promises.

The Nicaraguan government is a “totalitarian dictatorship of the left,” Reagan tells us. Few journalists working in Nicaragua actually believe that. Nevertheless this is a society that has some repressive mechanisms. Middle-level opposition leaders have been jailed on flimsy or trumped-up charges. Censorship was in force for nearly five years. Opposition media have been shut down by the authorities, and so on. But this kind of repression is innocuous in comparison with the terror and intimidation that reigns in El Salvador, which receives two million dollars a day in aid from the US. The worst thing that has ever happened to a human rights activist in Nicaragua,

conceptually trapped. Every time we use it we are unwittingly accepting one of the fundamental theses of the Reagan Administration: that the war in Nicaragua is between Nicaraguans and that the United States is just “helping” a legitimate anti-totalitarian insurgency. This notion flies in the face of everything that is known about the history of the conflict. The US not only finances the war, it controls it, and even handpicks Contra leaders. This is not “aid,” it is something else. But that word has become graven in stone – to challenge it now would amount to picking an argument, not just with the US State Department, not just with one’s own editors, but with the universe of received opinions.

Of course, the Sandinista government’s insistence that the Contras are mercenaries in the service of the US government is equally fallacious. The average Contra foot-soldier is not fighting for money. Contra leaders do admit that without American “aid,” their insurgency would have collapsed long ago, but this does not make them

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