

Commentary: Contradictory political effects of war and crisis

continued from p.9

In Nicaragua a visitor experiences abrupt and striking changes of perception, perspective and mood. There can be euphoria and amazement on a visit to a liberation theology parish, a union meeting or in observing some Sandinista leaders speaking to a crowd. But you might return to the Nicaraguan family household where you are staying to find that they have been informed of the

death in combat of a nephew.

The 1977-79 struggle against the dictatorship cost 50 000 lives. Nearly 20 000 have died in the Contra war, or as some prefer, the U.S. war of aggression. Nearly half the national budget presently goes to the defense effort. The total dollar value of all the destroyed crops, farms, transport, infrastructure, schools, clinics, etc. over the last six years is more than the

total foreign exchange earned by Nicaragua's products on the world market.

Paradoxically, the undeclared U.S. war against Nicaragua has both achieved and not achieved its goals. Washington sought to delegitimize the revolution internationally, but has succeeded only in raising its profile. It sought to hurt the economy, and it has; but it has also consolidated the state

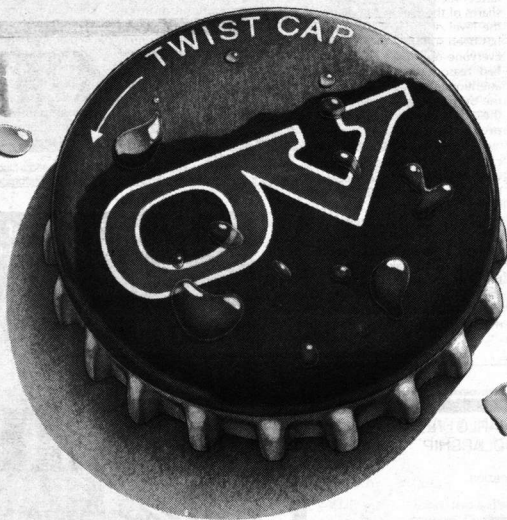
sector and the mixed economy model. It sought to divide the people from Sandinista leadership, and some of them have indeed parted company. But it has deepened the splits in the business sector dating back to the anti-Somoza opposition period. It sought to pitch the Catholic Church against the state, but it has succeeded in lessening the authority of the Church hierarchy and consolidating the liberation theology sectors. It has meant that defense is popularized, with some 300 000 rifles distributed to the population, especially the peasants in the war zones. And hundreds of thousand of urban youth have now had military

experience, often deepening their revolutionary political education.

My impression is that there has been some lessening in the breadth of popular support for the revolution, for all kinds of reasons. But those who support the revolution and the Sandinista leadership now support it more unreservedly. There are probably 800,000 or so who would go to the wall for the revolution. Another million could be counted on to resist a U.S. invasion, on the basis of patriotism, national honour, and judgments about what was best for Nicaragua. Besides the Contras, perhaps 200 000 to 300 000 would like the revolution to disappear. Maybe another half-million would go where the wind blows. Among the 800,000 are found many of the young and active, the more skilled workers, those with military experience and political education. I think that the second million are not going to be available for a counter-revolutionary alternative, particularly as the land reform, the policies of the revolution in the countryside and the experience of the leadership deepen. Most of the third million probably have some problem with the policies of the revolution, but their over-riding concern is with daily life. They have a deep desire for peace and a chance to get on with their lives. If the revolution can provide that, it would be quite acceptable.

Ultimately, judgments about the state of the revolutionary process in Nicaragua depend on the observer's or the participant's selection of factors to consider. Over the years the debate has raged whether the economic problems are due to "socialism's inherent flaws," to the mistakes, lack of experience and dogmatism of the Sandinista leadership, or to the U.S. war of aggression and the depredations of the Contras. Critics of the government say you can't blame the war for everything. For some time now, and if one paid close attention even very early on, the government has been saying the same. Major economic policy adjustments have taken place. Nonetheless, while an end to the war is not in itself a sufficient condition for improvements in economic, social and political conditions in Nicaragua, it is a necessary condition. Nothing else will really find effective solutions until that one pervading factor is resolved.

EVENING REFRESHER COURSES IN GREAT TASTE.



OUR BEER AROUND HERE

Dr. Fred Judson teaches Political Science at the University of Alberta. He has travelled extensively in Nicaragua in the past 5 years.