

Benjamin Linder, Contra Victim

“HE

was not an ideological sort of person; he thought he could make a difference. What inspired him was the new political system; for him, it was nice to be working in a country where the needs of the people had priority.”

Since assuming the Presidency in 1981, Ronald Reagan has made it a priority to actively resist “Marxist” regimes wherever they may arise. The Nicaraguan revolution, due to its propulsion of a leftist regime into power as well as its proximity to American borders, became the primary focus of Reagan’s aggressive foreign policy.

For the past six years, Washington has backed the contras, a counter-revolutionary force determined to overthrow the Sandinista government. American public opinion, however, is one of disenchantment with the contra war.

At present, many Americans have volunteered to assist the Sandinistas in a variety of developmental goals. Benjamin Linder, a mechanical engineer, was one American who used his skills towards improving the Nicaraguan peasantry’s standard of living. Linder, unfortunately, was murdered in April of 1987 during a contra raid in northern Nicaragua. According to the Reagan administration, it was his choice to work for the Sandinistas; thus, he dug his own grave.

Ben’s brother, Jonathan, recently embarked on a North American tour that brought him to York University on October 26. Jonathan is attempting to raise money for a memorial fund, named after his brother, which is dedicated to completing the project that Ben was working on at the time of his death.

by Jeff Shinder and Steve Somer

In a typical contra operation, Benjamin Linder was killed by a point-blank shot to the head as he lay helplessly wounded.

These are the words of John Linder, brother of Ben, whose efforts in assisting the Nicaraguan people to develop their war-torn country eventually cost him his life.

Benjamin Linder was an American citizen, trained in his native land as a mechanical engineer, who was determined to commit his skills towards developing alternatives to nuclear energy. However, he encountered little support in America due to the effective power of the nuclear energy lobby in the United States. Linder thus turned his attention to the nascent Nicaraguan revolution, as the Sandinistas were searching for technical assistance to achieve their developmental goals.

In 1983, Benjamin Linder assumed a position for the Nicaraguan National Energy Institute. Shortly thereafter, Benjamin turned his attention towards the plight of El Cua, a town in northern Nicaragua. El Cua was typical of Nicaraguan underdevelopment; lacking electricity, it was deprived of the basic necessities taken for granted in the Western industrialized world.

To redress El Cua’s poverty, a team of engineers began the construction of a small hydro electric dam. By May 1986 the plant was completed, bringing electricity to the remote town for the first time. Electrification had a multiplier effect, providing the peasants with the means to conduct night classes and set up medical clinics equipped with refrigerated supplies. Moreover, the project had wider economic implications for the town. “People of the town for the first time had control over their economic development. They set up a lumber mill, rice and food processing plants. This was Ben’s view of what the Sandinistas are all about,” said Jonathan Linder.

Unfortunately, with the great leap into the 20th century, El Cua’s hydro plant became a prime target on the contra insurgency list. The contras, as a guerrilla unit, focus on striking at soft targets in order to destabilize the advancement of the Sandinista revolution. Social infrastructure like hydro plants, irrigation systems, and dams are priority targets in such a struggle. In a typical contra operation, Benjamin Linder was killed by a point blank shot to the head as he lay helplessly wounded. At the time, Ben and five Nicaraguans were beginning plans for the construction of a

second plant to service the El Cua region.

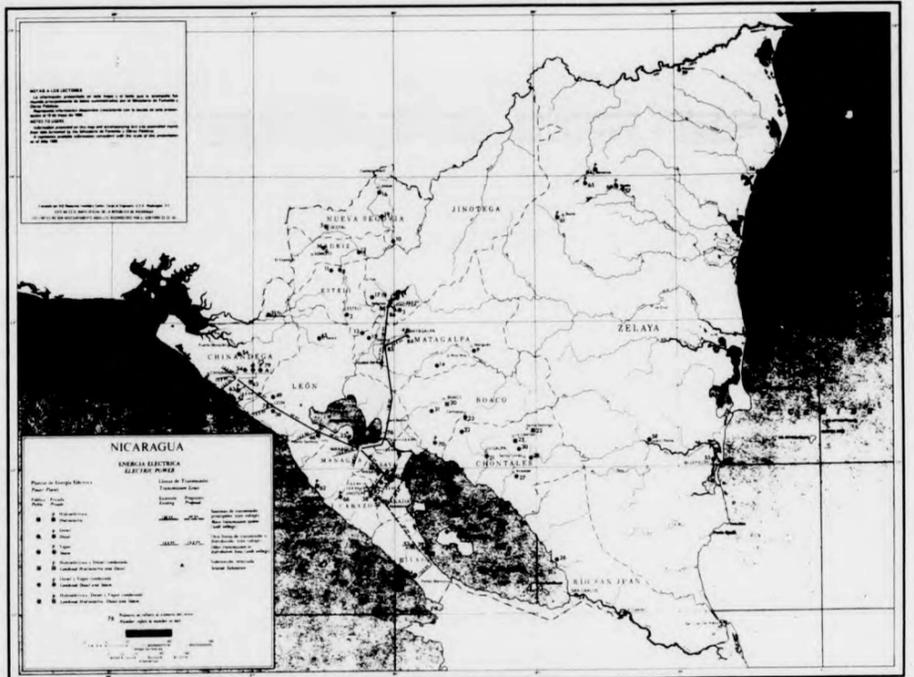
It was obvious that Ben’s death was not the result of crossfire, as initially explained by the contras, but a one-sided attack where contra rebels sought to sabotage any Sandinista development program. As noted by United States Vice-President George Bush, “The policy of the American government is to support the contras. Ben chose the other side and paid the price.” One is inclined to ask Bush and his contra surrogates whether progress and development for the Nicaraguan people is the real enemy confronting the United States.

In essence, the United States fears the ramifications that a successful popular revolution might hold for the region. “The United States does not want an Honduran farmer to look at Nicaraguan land reform and demand the same for themselves,” Jonathan Linder explained. “The war is a war to bleed Nicaragua into submission. It is the hope of the United States that the people of Nicaragua will say the price of freedom is too high.”

Along these lines, the contra insurgency has been rather successful. Four years of counter-insurgency has definitely undermined the Sandi-

government in Nicaragua. This is especially true given the lame popular support they enjoy within the country. Regardless, an unceasing war of attrition serves to reinforce the concept of American hegemony in the minds of all Central Americans. The notion to be implanted is that a popular revolution, contrary to American interests, will never succeed.

The idea of American domination over Central America has been ingrained deeply within the American psyche. With the introduction of the Monroe doctrine in the early 19th century, the United States established its belief in an exclusive sphere of influence in Central and Latin America. Since the conclusion of the Second World War, America’s “ideology” has been coloured by a zealous anti-communism. This has permitted a variety of American administrations to label a number of revolutions as Marxist, paving the way for policy-makers in Washington to vigorously defend their domination of the region. Examples include American intervention in Guatemala in the ‘50s, the aborted Bay of Pigs invasion, and the overthrow of the Dominican Republic in 1965. Simply put, these two currents place Washington firmly at odds with almost any form of Central American popular self-determination.



Nicaragua’s hydro-electric system is still in the developmental stage. Hydro plants, irrigation system and dams are priority targets for contras based in neighbouring Honduras.

nistas’ ability to provide a precedent that could serve as a model for her neighbours. In September of 1983, the contras, under CIA direction, destroyed the oil unloading facilities at Puerto Sandino in addition to the bombing of the port of Benjamin Zeledon, an essential port for oil entering Nicaragua. Also, attacks on Corinto destroyed supplies of food and medicine by the ton. By the end of 1983, over 300 rural schools had to be closed due to the increasing number of contra operations.

Contra warfare against the economic and social infrastructure of Nicaragua has been combined with a policy of economic strangulation from Washington. For example, in March of 1981 the United States suspended the payment of \$15 million worth of credit to Nicaragua. Washington followed that up by depriving Managua of \$11.4 million, designed for assistance in rural development and health care programmes. A plan to develop agricultural cooperatives with the aid of a world bank loan was also shelved because of resistance raised by the American representative on the bank. Furthermore, the United States slashed its quota of sugar imports from Nicaragua by 90%.

Nicaragua, deprived for the most part of her primary trading partner, and besieged by an encroaching counter-insurgency, faces a grave economic outlook. At present, the Nicaraguan regime is plagued by shortages of oil and medical supplies, and Managua is forced to ration basic foodstuffs. Efforts at rural development, despite many successes, have been battered by the war. Struggling to survive, Nicaragua has not emerged as that shining developmental model for the region.

Consequently, American aims in the region have been quite successful. Nobody, with the exception of perhaps the most rigid right-wing ideologists in Washington, believes the contras have the slightest chance of forming an alternative

The last decade of Central American politics has demonstrated the growing unwillingness of the region’s inhabitants to accept American domination. The Nicaraguan revolution and the raging civil war in El Salvador are a testimony to the region’s emerging volatility. In a major rebuff to Washington’s leadership in the area, the five Central American presidents have developed a regional peace plan (commonly referred to as the Arias Plan) that explicitly recognizes the Sandinista regime. Perhaps the Plan’s greatest strength is its “made-in-Central-America” character. To many in the embattled region, it is tantamount to a declaration of independence from Washington. Despite the many obstacles facing the Arias Plan, it does represent the erosion of American hegemony over Central America. History, it seems, is running against Washington.

Fortunately the American people have begun to question the policy of the Reagan administration towards the region. Ben Linder was one of the scores of Americans who have volunteered to assist the Sandinistas. The policy of supporting the contras has fallen into disrepute, as demonstrated by the Congressional decision to withhold further military equipment. The actions of Oliver North, despite his fleeting star status, have demonstrated to many in the United States the moral hypocrisy of American intervention in the region. Subversion of laws is hardly consistent with defending democracy.

Indeed, what can be more damaging to Washington’s claims of moral righteousness than the death of a well-intentioned American citizen at the hands of America’s surrogate army? As noted by Jonathan Linder, “Not one individual in the administration condemned my brother’s murder. Ben’s death was not an accident; in fact, my brother’s death was policy. To condemn Ben’s death would mean a condemnation of the policy which has led to the contra war.”