# UNFINISHED REVOLUTION

## Daniel Ortega and Nicaragua's Struggle for Liberation

Kenneth E. Morris

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# 1

# THE MAKING OF A REVOLUTIONARY

Nicaragua, most of its population and many visitors believe, is the most beautiful country on earth. Volcanic mountains tower beside shimmering lakes before the landscape melts into jungle thickets in one direction and pristine seashores in the other. Exotic wildflowers sprout forth from the dense underbrush while plump water droplets glisten on fat banana leaves after the tropical rains. It lies between Honduras to the north and Costa Rica to the south. Its sunsets are especially spectacular. The sky will curl around a darkening land, hugging it in a blaze of colors, only slowly to fade into the encroaching nightfall. Then the glow from a hundred flickering lights comes slowly into view. These are not the stars, but the fires from the wood stoves on which many Nicaraguan families still cook—beans and rice, usually plantain, sometimes a little chicken or pork, often corn tortillas—and their faint lights punctuate the blackness.

Yet there is danger too. Almost every day nature issues a warning in the quiver of the earth, ever so slight, as the tectonic plates beneath the isthmus that links North and South America adjust their positions. About once a generation, at no predictable intervals, nature makes good on this daily warning. The land buckles with such ferocity that buildings fall to rubble in an instant, the

dreams of yet another generation dashed as quickly. Meanwhile, for about half the year, when the rains come, torrents of water rush down village and city streets, temporarily turning them into raging rivers. Periodically nature unleashes its full aquatic fury by hurling hurricanes across the fragile land. The damages often total hundreds of millions of dollars, and death tolls can reach the thousands.

Nevertheless, nature is not the dominant force in Nicaragua, and has not been for nearly half a millennium. The fiercest destruction has always appeared in human form. The conquistadores who arrived in 1522 quickly reduced the native population from around a million to fewer than a hundred thousand. This 90-plus percent elimination of population was achieved in the usual ways—exposing some of the natives to European diseases, selling others into slavery, and slaughtering still more outright—and was far more catastrophic than any natural disaster.[1] Indeed, nature is not to blame for the fact that many twenty-first-century Nicaraguans still cook on wood-fired stoves—or often go hungry. As Daniel Ortega insists, Nicaragua not only has the potential to feed itself but also to become the "breadbasket of Central America." It is not the land but human beings who are to blame for Nicaragua's failure to realize its agricultural potential. Nor is the landscape to blame for the fact that although not much more than two hundred miles separate Nicaragua's Pacific and Caribbean coasts, the trip from one to the other is still better taken by plane. Nicaragua's mountainous interior is rugged, but that hardly excuses the country's continuing failure to build decent roads. And the absence of decent roads is one reason agriculture production lags. If farmers cannot get their crops to market before they spoil, they understandably do not bother to raise them in the first place.

Moreover, although there have been relatively tranquil interludes, the story of Nicaragua more often than not is a story of dominant foreign powers, usually allied with local elites, oppressing the population into subservience and savaging those who

resist. Nicaragua's recent revolutionaries and present-day leaders were born into a world soaked in the blood of the violent past. This past shaped what their outlooks would be even before they were born, and understanding it is the first step in understanding the continuing struggle of Nicaraguans for the liberation of their bewitching land.

## The Impress of the Past

THE FIRST MISTAKE MANY foreigners make about Nicaragua is to minimize the mark that Spanish domination left on the country. It was exactly three hundred years after the Spanish conquistador Gil González commanded the first expedition into Nicaragua in 1522 that Nicaragua finally gained independence from Spain. Nicaragua's more proximate history involves its domination by the United States, but the Spanish were fiercer and more brutal than their successors. Except for pockets along Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, separated by geography and British rule from the more populous and politically dominant Pacific coast, Nicaragua bears the marks of its Spanish legacy much more deeply than those of its more recent associations with other countries. It is a Spanish-speaking, predominately Roman Catholic country in which the bulk of the 5.5 million inhabitants are of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry.

Historical legacies are primarily relevant to the present only to the extent and manner that people remember them. It is with this in mind that a tale, often told by Nicaraguan men standing on street corners, about the founding of their country is worth repeating. As the story goes, when the Spanish conquistadores arrived they had spent three long months at sea in the company of only other men. Accordingly, as soon as they set foot on land they had one goal in their minds: sex. The easy acquisition of this goal, however, was thwarted by the presence of native men. The conquistadores handled this complication by killing or enslav-

ing whatever native men they came across, and then raping the women.

This street-corner story stands in sharp contrast to the founding myth in the United States, namely the Thanksgiving story, according to which the United States was founded by God-fearing pilgrim families searching for religious freedom in a new world. Their tale is one of progress premised upon hard work, strong values, and social cooperation. As the Thanksgiving story has it, the pilgrims and the natives even sat down together as brothers and sisters, each sharing what they had, to enjoy the bountiful harvest feast that God had provided. The Thanksgiving story is no more accurate than the street-corner tale told by the Nicaraguan men. The mythical meanings of the two stories, however, are diametrically opposed. The American myth tells of a bountiful land where success lies within reach of anyone of strong character who is willing to work in harmony with others to achieve their common dreams. The American myth also places couple-centered families at center stage. The Nicaraguan myth has none of these components. The new world does not provide bounty enough for everyone, and in fact there is not enough to go around. The strong must take what they want from the weak. Moreover, this is why the strong arrived in the new world in the first place—not to create a God-fearing community but to plunder the land for profits. (The conquistadores were after gold, and they got a lot of it.) Nor did they arrive as families, but rather as single men who raped and murdered and enslaved. Superior moral values do not prevail in this Nicaraguan story, but rather raw power.

It goes without saying that Nicaragua celebrates no Thanksgiving holiday. For Nicaraguans recalling their founding, life is a zero-sum affair. A person is either a conqueror or among the conquered. And none of this is to say that Nicaraguans feel imprisoned by a myth of their founding any more than adults in the United States take the Thanksgiving story as historical fact. Nicaraguans can and do see life as other than zero-sum, and in particular as allowing for all parties to gain. They also understand

the importance of hard work, strong values, nuclear families, and social cooperation. Even so, myths of foundings—like the foundings themselves—can have subliminal influences over the way people feel and act in the present. If you listen, for example, you will notice that Nicaraguans use the verb "to conquer" (*conquistar*) in everyday speech with greater frequency than it is normally used in English. In fact, it would appear that a Nicaraguan will sometimes use "to conquer" where an American would use "to succeed" (a verb that has no Spanish cognate). It is only a matter of connotations, but it is as if to this day, for Nicaraguans, "succeeding" involves "conquering."

Nicaraguans may see the world as divided between the conquered and the conquerors, but the Spaniards also provided them with an alternative to each extreme of this awful dialectic: the romantic figure of Don Quixote. Most literate Nicaraguans know this story as well as most people in the United States know *Huckleberry Finn. Don Quixote* tells us that winning or losing—conquering or being conquered—is not necessarily life's most important outcome. More important sometimes are the integrity of people's dreams and the nobility of the vision that animates their quests. Reality has no hold on Don Quixote, and his defiance of it, coupled with his insistence on superimposing a glorious frame onto it, comprises his inspiration. Many Nicaraguans are at least a little like Don Quixote in their elevation of passion and romance over practicality and reason.

The quixotic impulse was eventually institutionalized in Nicaragua. Romantic resistance fighters—or guerrillas—to this day camp out in clusters of a dozen or so like-minded comrades and dream of overthrowing whatever regime happens to be in place, though rarely do they have a clear idea of how their revolution will succeed or what they would do if it did. And the national sense of humor perpetually finds amusement in one's own and others' foibles—provided the foibles are the inversions of noble intentions. A T-shirt recently for sale in Managua's central shopping mall links these two forms of the quixotic impulse by depict-