NICARAGUA, 1978-1979

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.

Few critical episodes in American foreign policy have been more shaped by their historical background than was the 1978-79 civil conflict in Nicaragua. For well over a century, the United States had played a major role in Nicaraguan politics and economics. Most Nicaraguans believed that no fundamental change was possible in their nation without Washington's approval. This belief was reinforced by the dominant, U.S.-educated Somoza family, which had controlled the country for over 40 years. The heritage provided both the conditions and the justification for the uprisings of 1978-79, helped shape American efforts to respond to the situation, and, ultimately, produced a radical alteration in Nicaragua's political system and in its international relations.

Largest of the five Central American republics, Nicaragua has an area roughly equal to that of Michigan and, in 1978, a population of approximately 2,600,000. Despite a devastating 1972 earthquake, nearly a quarter of that population was concentrated in and around the capital city of Managua.

Nicaragua had originally attracted the attention of the United States because of its potential for a
trans-isthmian canal route. The British, who maintained a quasi-protectorate over Nicaragua's Caribbean coast for much of the 19th century, were also interested in this possibility and, in 1850, signed the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty with the United States, guaranteeing that neither nation would seek to establish exclusive control over the region.

This Treaty did nothing to inhibit American entrepreneurs from establishing transport systems across Nicaragua in the 1850s to facilitate travel to the California gold fields. Then in 1855, a group of American soldiers of fortune, known as filibusters, landed and installed their leader, William Walker, as Nicaragua's president. Despite opposition not only from many Nicaraguans, but from a joint army raised by the rest of Central America and even from Cornelius Vanderbilt, who felt Walker's activities threatened his financial interests, the American filibuster managed to hang on until the spring of 1857, when he and the remnants of his force were evacuated to the United States on two U.S. Navy ships. While the administration of President Buchanan had actually opposed Walker's efforts, this episode laid the foundation for the popular belief in Nicaragua that the United States was determined to dominate that country.¹

Despite occasional strife between the rival Liberal and Conservative parties, Nicaragua remained relatively calm until early in the 20th century. Then, the U.S. decision to build a trans-isthmian canal through Panama instead of
Nicaragua bitterly disappointed many Nicaraguans and also made the United States much more concerned with promoting internal stability and pro-U.S. regimes throughout Central America. Increased tensions between the Nicaraguan ruler, Liberal Party leader Jose Santos Zelaya, and the United States led to American support of a 1909 uprising. Zelaya fled in December, but civil strife continued and in August 1912 the United States sent more than 2,000 Marines into Nicaragua to help restore order and ensure the survival of a pro-American Conservative Party government. After a few brief engagements, in one of which a prominent leader of Nicaragua's Liberal Party was killed, order was restored and most of the Marines were withdrawn. More than 100, however, remained in Managua until 1925 as a symbol of American support for the minority Conservative Party and of Washington's determination to prevent future revolutions. In return, the Nicaraguan government signed the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty in 1914, giving the United States exclusive control over the rights to construct a canal across Nicaragua and the option to lease a naval base on the Gulf of Fonseca.

In 1925 the last of the Marines were withdrawn and shortly thereafter civil conflict began again. Fearing radical Mexican support for the Liberal insurgents, the United States once again intervened, landing several thousand sailors and Marines in early 1927. A peace settlement was
imposed providing for the disarming of both government and insurgent forces, the disbanding of all police units, and the formation of a "non-partisan constabulary" trained and initially officered by U.S. Marines. The agreement also specified that the Conservatives would remain in power until 1928 when the United States would supervise national elections. The Government and most opposition leaders accepted these terms, but one Liberal General, Augusto Cesar Sandino, denounced them and began a five and one-half year guerrilla campaign against the Marines and the Nicaraguan government.

While the Marines and their allies, the Nicaraguan National Guard, won most of the battles, Sandino gained increasing fame and support throughout the hemisphere as a symbol of resistance to United States intervention. The Marines remained in Nicaragua through 1932, during which two supervised elections were won by the Liberal Party and the National Guard reached a strength of over 2,000 men. They finally withdrew in January 1933, turning over command to a U.S.-educated politician with great ambitions but little military experience, Anastasio Somoza Garcia whose wife was the niece of Nicaragua's new President, Juan B. Sacasa.

Shortly after the Marines' departure, General Sandino and President Sacasa signed a peace agreement which provided for the partial disarmament of Sandino's followers. Bitter antagonisms, however, remained between Sandino's followers
and the National Guard. In 1934, acting on General Somoza's orders, the Guard murdered Sandino and most of his leading lieutenants and massacred his supporters.5

With Sandino eliminated, Somoza began to arrange his own assumption of power. In 1936 he used the Guard to oust President Sacasa, then arranged his own election as President. By a variety of devices, he prolonged his term until 1947 when, under pressure from the United States and from domestic opposition, he allowed the installation of a hand-picked successor. When that individual showed signs of independence, Somoza again used his control of the Guard to stage a coup and install his elderly uncle as President. General Somoza Garcia himself resumed the presidency in 1950 and was planning his own re-election in 1956 when he was assassinated.

During his reign, General Somoza Garcia had based his power on three major factors. The first was absolute control over the National Guard. It was always commanded by him or one of his sons and was progressively transformed into a virtual personal guard. The second factor was the image of strong U.S. support. The Nicaraguan dictator constantly proclaimed his support for the United States, sent his family there for education, gave strong support to American positions in World War II, in the United Nations and during the 1954 CIA-sponsored Guatemalan invasion, and had his military trained and equipped by the United States. He even
managed to arrange an official visit to President Franklin Roosevelt, then re-named Managua's main street Avenida Roosevelt and built a huge monument to the U.S. President at the foot of his own presidential palace.

The final factor maintaining the regime was an ability to divide, co-opt and confuse the opposition politicians and to convince the upper class that he alone could ensure order, economic growth and exclusion of the left from power. Order was maintained and the economy did grow under his rule, but an amazing share of the benefits had accrued to the dictator, his relatives, and to the Guard. By the time of his death, General Somoza Garcia had made himself the wealthiest individual in Central America. 6

With the assassination of General Somoza Garcia, power passed to his two legitimate sons, Luis and Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Both had been educated in the United States with Anastasio graduating from the United States Military Academy. Luis now became President and Anastasio took command of the Guard. An illegitimate half-brother, Jose Somoza, was also incorporated into the family dynasty and rapidly promoted to the Guard's number two position.

Luis Somoza continued the close identification with the United States, including supplying the bases from which the abortive 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba was launched. This contributed to a bitter personal animosity between Fidel Castro and the Somozas, and in 1961, with
Cuban support a group of Nicaraguan students and would-be revolutionaries founded the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Their initial military efforts were near total failures and several times it appeared that the Guard had virtually wiped them out. But, under the leadership of Carlos Fonseca Amador and Tomas Borge, both self-avowed Marxists, the movement survived (in the 1970s, it would grow). Luis served as President until 1963. During that time he made some mild efforts at liberalizing the regime, even allowing the election of non-Somoza as his successor.

In 1967 Anastasio Somoza Debayle arranged his own election as President, an event which may have contributed to the fatal heart attack suffered by his brother, Luis, that same year. While maintaining the general policies of his father and older brother, this Somoza soon demonstrated that he lacked their personalities and political acumen. In 1972 he stepped down from the presidency, turning the office over to a three-member junta which was to preside over the writing of a new Constitution; however, in reality General Anastasio Somoza Debayle retained all real power in his own hands.

In December 1972 a devastating earthquake virtually destroyed Managua. This also signalled the beginning of the decline of the Somoza dynasty. Widespread corruption in the administration of relief supplies infuriated much of the population and helped produce increased sympathy for the FSLN. Business was increasingly alienated from the regime as
the Somozas used the earthquake to extend their economic power into such new areas as banking and construction. In December 1974 the regime's prestige was dealt a serious blow when the FSLN guerrillas seized a large group of prominent regime supporters, including the dictator's brother-in-law, and negotiated a large ransom and freeing of numerous political prisoners in return for release of the captives.7

During the 1970s, General Somoza Debayle also found himself involved in a growing conflict with the Roman Catholic Church over political and social conditions in Nicaragua. Criticism in the world press and in the U.S. Congress also increased in the mid-1970s. The 1977 inauguration of the Carter administration, with its stress on human rights, further increased the pressures on Nicaragua's dictator, and in July 1977 he suffered a serious heart attack. He was flown to Miami for treatment and soon recovered, but even his supporters now began to speculate on how much longer the dynasty could endure. A major Sandinista offensive in October 1977 was defeated with relative ease, but the guerrillas increased strength contributed to rising tensions within Nicaragua.

II. EVENTS LEADING TO THE CRISIS

The spark which ignited open civil conflict in Nicaragua was provided by the January 1978 assassination of
Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, leader of the unified political opposition (UDEL) and editor of La Prensa, Nicaragua's leading newspaper. It seems unlikely that Genaral Somoza Debayle, who had recently installed himself for yet another term as President, was directly involved in the murder, but some of his business associates probably were and even his son, Guard Major Anastasio Somoza Portocarrero, may have been. Nicaraguan and much of world opinion, however, blamed the Nicaraguan dictator for the crime.

Demonstrations against the regime broke out as soon as news of Chamorro's murder spread. The demonstrations, along with increased calls for Somoza's resignation, continued to escalate for several days. On 24 January, the political opposition, with the support of much of the business community, called a general strike. Many businessmen even agreed to pay their employees wages if they joined in the strike, which lasted until the second week of February. In the Organization of American States (OAS) Venezuela called for an investigation of human rights in Nicaragua, and on 30 January the U.S. State Department announced that because of human rights violations, Nicaragua's Foreign Military Sales credits for 1979 would be suspended.

There was considerable fighting outside of the capital in February 1978, some of it involving the FSLN, but most apparently representing spontaneous uprisings against
the regime. These were crushed, and by early March an uneasy order had been restored. Responding to domestic and international pressures, General Somoza Debayle promised not to run for re-election in 1981, and lifted some censorship over the press, though not over radio broadcasts. Under continued United States pressure, Somoza even allowed a group of leading political opponents (known as Los Doce, The Twelve), who had demanded his removal from office and the inclusion of the FSLN in any post-Somoza government, to return and openly campaign in Nicaragua. In response to these measures, President Carter sent Somoza a letter expressing appreciation for the improvement in human rights conditions and urging continued progress in this area. When this letter was leaked to the public in July it discouraged moderate opponents of the regime, who had begun to believe that the United States would oust Somoza for them, and further weakened U.S. influence and prestige in Nicaragua.10

On 22 August, in a spectacular gesture, a group of FSLN commandos led by Eden Pastora (Commander Zero) seized Nicaragua's Palacio Nacional, taking nearly the entire Nicaraguan Congress as hostages. After two days of negotiations with Managua's Archbishop acting as chief mediator, the guerrillas were given a half-million dollars ransom; sixty prisoners, including Tomas Borge, were released; and, to the accompaniment of enthusiastic demonstrations of popular support, the guerrillas and the
released prisoners were flown to Panama. At the same time the recently organized Broad Opposition Front, combining political opponents with some business and labor leaders, called for a new national strike and renewed demands for Somoza's resignation.\textsuperscript{11}

In early September popular uprisings against the government began to break out across the country. Supported, but not controlled by the FSLN, the uprisings began in the coffee-growing center of Matagalpa, and soon spread to several other cities, including Leon, second largest city in Nicaragua.\textsuperscript{12}

International pressures combined with the internal military and economic pressures to undermine Somoza's control. At the urging of Venezuela and Panama, the OAS held an emergency meeting on 6 September.\textsuperscript{14} The OAS soon called for a cease-fire, an inspection visit by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, and, ultimately, an international mediation of the dispute. At the same time Venezuela and Panama began to funnel arms to the FSLN through Costa Rica, and on 15 September Venezuela and Costa Rica signed a defense pact designed to forestall any retaliatory Nicaraguan attacks on Costa Rica.\textsuperscript{13} There were even reports that Venezuela was considering using its Canberra bombers to attack Somoza's headquarters. Alarmed by all these developments, the United States called for a cease-fire and a negotiated political settlement, but Somoza refused to consider any such action.\textsuperscript{14}
III. UNITED STATES POLICY OPTIONS

The Carter administration was apparently taken by surprise by the strength and extent of the September uprisings against the Somoza regime. There was deep concern, too, over the danger that the conflict could spread to neighboring countries. Although the leading role in the August seizure of the National Palace and the subsequent uprisings had evidently been played by the most moderate and broad-based of the three factions of the FSLN, the Marxist and Cuban connections of the Sandinistas were also the subject of considerable official concern. In responding to this situation a number of options were available. They included:

A. Adopt a neutral stance. This would be a decision to allow events to run their course. Mediation efforts by the OAS or other bodies within the hemisphere might be supported, but the United States would not take a leading role in resolving the crisis. This would avoid both the pitfalls of interventionism and of support for an unpopular dictator and might put pressure on other nations in the region to play an active role in bringing the conflict to a halt. But it would also make it more likely that the outcome would be decided by a protracted military conflict with increased external support for all factions. It would leave moderate, pro-Western domestic opposition groups with little effective support. It would also cast further doubt on the
credibility of the Carter administration's human rights policy and would be widely viewed as offering at least tacit support to Somoza's continued rule. As a result, there was never significant support for this option.

B. Support Somoza. This option would make the Marxist threat the primary focus of American policy. Efforts would be made to extract some concessions on political conditions and future elections from General Somoza, but the basic thrust would be to demonstrate that the United States would not tolerate Marxist attacks on a pro-U.S. regime, no matter how bad the record of such a regime might be. Such a policy, however, would be directly contrary to the professed human rights goals of the administration. Furthermore, it would alienate other democratic governments throughout the Hemisphere and would identify the United States even more closely with one of the most unpopular regimes in existence. In the words of then Assistant Secretary of State Viron P. Vaky:

Support for Somoza, however, was never, I believe, a viable option for us. A lid could not be kept indefinitely on the instability and deep alienation and opposition to his rule which existed in Nicaragua. To "hold one's nose and support an unsavory dictator," as Evans and Novak recently argued was never a prudent or wise course. It would have ignored the depth and the widespread make-up of the opposition to Somoza, and would have missed the true essence of the problem itself.15

There was never any real support for this option within the administration, but there was some support in the Congress, especially from two members of the House, Democrats
John Murphy of New York and Charles Wilson of Texas.\textsuperscript{16}

C. Take unilateral action to force Somoza out of office. Some action of this type would be the traditional response to political problems in Nicaragua. There was some support for this from the Embassy in Managua, but little within the Carter administration. Direct use of military force to accomplish this objective was ruled out for several reasons. It would produce adverse public and Congressional reactions. It was opposed by most other nations in the hemisphere, including those which strongly opposed Somoza.\textsuperscript{17} It was even opposed by most of the internal political factions in Nicaragua and it ran the risk of involving the Marines in a guerrilla conflict against the Sandinistas. Less direct methods had greater appeal. There was some sentiment in favor of promoting a coup within the National Guard. Somoza, however, had crushed one such plot, arresting the five officers directly involved and several others suspected of sympathy just before the September uprisings.\textsuperscript{18} Another officer who had openly voiced dissent from Somoza's tactics died in an unexplained plane crash in early September.\textsuperscript{19} Other officers who seemed to have some potential for leading the Guard against Somoza had been sent to attache posts abroad or put in positions where they had no authority over troop units. At best, this would be an extremely difficult and dangerous option to pursue, but it was also opposed by President Carter who believed that the
United States should not engage in direct intervention.

Strong economic and political pressures to force out
the Nicaraguan dictator seemed more feasible. The United
States could, for example, eliminate Nicaragua's meat and
sugar quotas, both of which would directly impact on Somoza
family enterprises. Action was taken to block a Nicaraguan
request for a loan from the International Monetary Fund and
some economic and military assistance was suspended, but any
stronger measures were blocked by threats from Congressmen
Murphy and Wilson to hold up enabling legislation related to
the Panama Canal Treaties. In any case, such measures
would have only gradual impact at best and might well prove
insufficient. While some degree of pressure was believed
necessary, major reliance could not be placed in this area.

D. Negotiate a transition of power from Somoza to
the moderate opposition. The basic premise of this option
was that Nicaragua's traditional dependence on the United
States would enable us to play a key role in shaping a
negotiated settlement and would facilitate gaining Somoza's
acceptance of giving up power. It would also avert the
dangers of renewed civil conflict, would undercut the appeal
of the radical left, largely based on opposition to the
Somozas, and could be expected to gain the support of
numerous allies in Latin America. The greatest risk was that
Somoza would refuse to bargain in good faith and would use
the negotiations in an effort to divide his opponents and
regain United States support. There was also the danger that a fragmented opposition would be unable to agree on arrangements for government in post-Somoza Nicaragua, precipitating a new round of civil conflict.

IV. COURSE OF ACTION SELECTED

It rapidly became clear that some form of option D was the only viable course of action acceptable to the President. It was further determined that the United States should seek OAS approval of such action and that we should seek to involve other Latin American nations with us in the mediation process. An appropriate OAS resolution was secured on 23 September and Ambassador William Jorden was dispatched to persuade Somoza and his opponents, loosely joined in the Broad Opposition Front (FAO), to agree to international mediation. After considerable negotiation, agreement was reached on creating what was known as "The OAS Sponsored Commission of Friendly Cooperation and Conciliation," made up of representatives from the United States, the Dominican Republic, and Guatemala. The FAO refused to meet directly with Somoza, but set up a three member negotiating team consisting of Alfonso Robelo of the Nicaraguan Democratic Movement (MDN), Rafael Cordova Rivas of the Conservative Party, and Sergio Ramirez of Los Doce. While not directly represented, the Sandinistas' interests and views were to be expressed through Ramirez. Actual negotiations got under
way in early October. In the words of Assistant Secretary of State Vaky:

In retrospect, the decision to attempt a mediation effort aimed at persuading Somoza to step down and facilitate an orderly transition to an interim government made up largely of moderates was, in my view, a sound one. It tackled the succession crisis at a time when it was still possible to achieve a moderate outcome and hold the radical elements of the Sandinista movement in check. . . . Recognizing the fragility of the opposition coalition, the mediators, without making special concessions to them, were nevertheless able to bring them along to direct talks and still preserve the essential unity of the group. . . . The mediation also identified procedures for effecting a viable transition and reconciliation, and secured full opposition support for them.23

V. INITIAL RESULTS

From its inception, the mediation effort was dogged by numerous problems. General Somoza insisted that he would remain in office until his term ended in 1981, while the opposition demanded his immediate resignation and exile. On 26 October, Sergio Ramirez and Los Doce withdrew from the negotiations, and shortly thereafter they and the FSLN began to denounce the entire effort as an American plot to continue somozaism ("somocismo") with or without Somoza.24 The effort seemed on the verge of foundering when Somoza proposed holding a plebiscite to determine his continuance in office. The chief U.S. negotiator, Ambassador William Bowdler, opposed accepting this idea, believing it was simply a tactic of Somoza's to gain time and divide the opposition, but he was overruled by the White House which felt that by demanding
international control over the plebiscite the suggestion could actually be used to force Somoza out of office.\textsuperscript{25} Under considerable U.S. pressure, the groups left in the FAO agreed to this proposal. Somoza, however, bitterly rejected effective international controls and continued to attach additional conditions to the holding of any plebiscite. He also rejected FAO demands that he leave the country during the plebiscite and that the Guard be confined to its barracks and all his relatives be removed from its command structure.\textsuperscript{26} In a futile effort to persuade Somoza to accept the mediators' proposals, Lieutenant General Dennis McAuliffe, Commander in Chief of the United States Southern Command, was flown to Managua from Panama to tell Somoza that the Joint Chiefs of Staff believed that "peace will not come to Nicaragua until you have removed yourself from the presidency and scene."\textsuperscript{27} This effort had no more effect on the Nicaraguan dictator than had any previous appeals, and in January 1979 the mediation process collapsed. Assistant Secretary of State Vaky noted that:

What was not foreseen was the obduracy of Somoza in negotiating his resignation and departure. It is now evident, looking back, that Somoza used the mediation to gain time in the belief that he could strengthen the National Guard and simply hold on. Somoza's fundamental rigidity shattered any possibility for compromise and a peaceful end to the Somoza dynasty.\textsuperscript{28}
VI. SECOND SET OF OPTIONS

The collapse of the mediation effort forced the United States to consider a second, more limited and less hopeful set of options. These were:

A. Attempt to find some way to continue negotiations for Somoza's resignation. This option offered little hope of producing results. The FAO now refused to have anything more to do with the process and, in any case, was showing signs of disintegration. It had become obvious that General Somoza had no intention of negotiating in good faith and had used the respite to obtain fresh arms from Argentina, Israel, and other sources. There was little support for this option.

B. Support Somoza. This alternative was even less palatable than it had been in September and was never seriously considered.

C. Withdraw until internal pressures convinced Somoza he could not survive. The basic argument for this option was that current events made negotiations impossible, but that Somoza's position was untenable and continued economic decline and internal violence would eventually either force him to recognize this or would lead the Guard to remove him. The economic situation was certainly in very bad shape. The gross domestic product declined by 5.9 percent in 1978, unemployment had passed 20 percent, and
capital flight was accelerating. In early January, Somoza had been forced to devalue the cordoba for the first time since World War II. All prospects were that the situation would continue to deteriorate during 1979.

D. Move actively to force Somoza out of office.

While direct military intervention was clearly ruled out, there was strong support for using all possible economic and diplomatic measures, coordinated if possible with other nations, to force Somoza out of office. These could range all the way from mild economic sanctions to a total break in diplomatic relations. The possibility of encouraging Guard opposition to the regime was also considered. This approach would encounter stiff opposition from Somoza's supporters in Congress. It ran the risk of accelerating the regime's fall without giving the United States a viable option for its replacement. It also laid the Carter administration open to charges of interventionism.

VII. OPTION SELECTED.

There was considerable debate between options C and D, with the State Department—notably Ambassador William Bowdler and Assistant Secretary of State Viron P. Vaky—supporting action option D. Some members of the President's staff including Henry Owen who was concerned over threats by Congressman Murphy and Wilson that they would hold up the entire Foreign Aid Bill if strong action were taken against
Somoza, argued for hands-off option C, provided that some actions were taken to demonstrate our displeasure with the Nicaraguan government.32 This viewpoint ultimately won out. The United States issued a strong statement blaming Nicaragua's government for the breakdown of the mediation effort. All remaining military training was terminated and the Military Group and Peace Corps were withdrawn from Nicaragua. Two assistance loans that had been signed but not implemented were suspended.33 However, all suggestions for stronger measures were rejected. Indeed, shortly thereafter the United States, reversing a previous position, did not oppose a $66 million International Monetary Fund loan to Nicaragua.34

VIII. THE OUTCOME.

The situation in Nicaragua steadily deteriorated in early 1979. Sandinista clashes with the Guard grew more and more frequent. Venezuela, with support from Panama and Costa Rica, shipped more and more arms to the insurgents who were also gathering hundreds of new recruits each month. Most were Nicaraguans, but some came from Panama, Colombia, and much of the rest of Latin America.35

In February U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua, Mauricio Solaun returned to the United States and in April resigned his position. His replacement, Ambassador Lawrence Pezzullo, did not reach Managua until 27 June, leaving the United
States without a high-level representative in Nicaragua for four critical months.

While U.S. policy drifted, the Sandinistas were busy preparing for an all-out attack on Somoza. In March the three factions within the FSLN announced their unification under a nine-member national directorate composed largely of known Marxists.36

Sandinista attacks increased in May, and on 1 June they announced an all-out offensive designed to topple the regime. Strikes and uprisings spread across the country, with even large sectors of Managua falling into Sandinista hands. A major invasion force entered the country from the South and tried to seize enough territory to install a provisional government, but it was blocked by the Guard. This time, however, the Guard was unable to regain control of areas where fighting had erupted. As casualties mounted, the regime began to weaken. On 16 June the Sandinistas established a five-member provisional junta, including two non-Sandinista moderates, and appealed for international support. Grenada promptly recognized the junta, followed later by Panama. The Andean Group (Columbia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia) announced that it was according the Sandinistas belligerent status, and Mexico broke relations with Nicaragua.37

On 21 June, the United States asked for an emergency meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Organization of
American States. At the OAS meeting the United States suggested that a peace-keeping force be sent to Nicaragua, but finding virtually no support for that position, supported an Andean Group proposal calling for Somoza's resignation, the installation of a new government which included "representatives of the major groups opposed to the Somoza regime," and free elections as soon as possible. The motion passed by a vote of 17 to 2 with 5 abstentions. Only Paraguay voted with Nicaragua.

The United States now embarked on a two-pronged effort to salvage something from the situation. Ambassador Bowdler flew to San Jose, Costa Rica, to try to pressure the FSLN provisional government into broadening its membership to include more moderates and even a representative of the Guard. Ambassador Pezullo headed for Managua to negotiate the terms of Somoza's resignation. Pezullo's efforts were somewhat more successful than those of Bowdler. The Sandinistas, despite pressure from Venezuela, refused to alter the composition of their junta, but did pledge to have a broad-based cabinet and appointed legislative body. When the remaining moderate parties in the FAO and the private business sector, speaking through the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP), endorsed the junta, Bowdler's room for negotiation diminished almost to the vanishing point.
Ambassador Pezullo had more initial success. Despite an outward appearance of bravado, it was soon clear that Somoza knew his days were numbered and his main concern was the future of the Guard and his other supporters. Negotiations dragged on until mid-July while the FSLN continued to make military advances, including occupying Leon, Nicaragua's second largest city. Pezullo made it clear from the start that only the details of Somoza's resignation, not the fact of it, were at issue. Final agreement provided that he would be allowed to fly to Miami, that he would have the puppet Congress select a successor who would quickly turn over power to a group of notables free from any connection with his regime, and that this group, which was tentatively supposed to include the Archbishop of Managua and the President of the Nicaraguan Red Cross, would then hand over power to the FSLN-appointed junta. The Guard's high command was to be purged and they were to be confined to their barracks. Some vague future integration of part of the Guard with the guerrillas was to be made. All of these provisions were ultimately accepted by Somoza and by the Sandinistas. On 17 July, Somoza resigned and flew to Miami with his family and closest supporters.

The agreement fell apart almost immediately. Provisional President Francisco Urcuyo announced that he planned to stay in office until 1981 and asked the Sandinistas to lay down their arms. The Guard, told by
Somoza that once he left they would receive U.S. support, tried to keep fighting. Infuriated, Ambassador Pezullo and his staff broke relations and left Nicaragua. Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher called Somoza in Miami and demanded that he tell Urcuyo to carry out the agreements. Somoza called Urcuyo and a few hours later, after less than 48 hours as President, Urcuyo and most of the remaining Guard high command fled the country. What was left of the Guard began to disintegrate or flee toward sanctuary in Honduras. On 19 July the FSLN entered Managua. A Marxist-led guerrilla force had taken over Nicaragua, and a new era in United States relations with Central America had begun.

IX. LESSONS LEARNED.

The fall of the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua continues to generate controversy and disagreement among both students and practitioners of U.S. foreign policy. Some observers would lump it with the fall of the Shah in Iran as classic lessons in the cost of failing to support a faithful ally. More recent experiences in attempting to deal with other Latin American military governments have lessened support for this position, but it can still muster support. There are, however, numerous other lessons available from this case.

1. The costs of close identification with an unpopular and corrupt government can very easily exceed the benefits derived from that relationship. Under the rule of
the Somozas, Nicaragua had almost always supported U.S. policy in Latin America and the United Nations. But it had also alienated its own population, become involved in a bitter controversy with the dominant Roman Catholic Church, achieved virtual pariah state status in the world community, and provided the Marxist FSLN with invaluable propaganda.44 The United States identification with this regime weakened its credibility and enabled the Marxist to rally support—not in favor of Marxism, but against foreign domination of their nation and foreign support for a hated regime. Without Somoza, the FSLN could never have gained power. That they well realized this was demonstrated by the fact that they never made any attempt on Somoza's life and were extremely upset when a non-Marxist group fired rockets at Somoza's bunker in 1978.45

2. The United States should not over-estimate its influence on a perceived client-state. There was a wide-spread impression that the United States could control Anastasio Somoza and the Nicaraguan National Guard. However, in the crisis actual U.S. influence turned out to be almost minimal; the dominant concerns of Somoza and his supporters were for retaining power and institutional survival.

3. Ignorance of internal realities in small states can prove very costly. United States officials lacked adequate information on power relationships within Nicaragua,
on the extent of FSLN appeal, and even on the past course of relations with Nicaragua under the Somozas. We had no experts on Nicaragua, but virtually every Nicaraguan government official had made a career out of dealing with and attempting to manipulate the United States.

4. Assigning too low a priority to a crisis and attempting to resolve it at minimum cost can be a formula for failure. This approach was demonstrated by the constant re-ordering and limiting of U.S. policies in the face of objections and threats by Somoza's supporters in Congress. It was further reinforced by the inability or unwillingness of the United States to use greater force or to intervene more directly in the crisis. United States officials did not feel that the Nicaraguan crisis was serious enough to risk the credibility of our commitment to non-intervention or a major break with our allies in Latin America. There was a serious gap between our desire to maintain basic control and our willingness to pay the price needed to maintain that control.

5. It is always wise to have a fall-back option in case the original plan fails. The United States put virtually all its eggs in the mediation basket, and when that effort collapsed the administration had no other option available and was unable to develop one for several months. Preoccupation with events in Iran contributed to this
failure, but the basic problem was the lack of long range planning and prioritized alternatives.

6. Polarization is the great enemy of U.S. influence in internal conflicts and is a basic goal of radical oppositions. Both Somoza and the Sandinistas sought to polarize the situation to portray themselves and their opponents as the only alternatives. The failure of the mediation fatally weakened the moderate center and contributed to polarization. Any situation which tends to reduce viable political options to only the far right and the far left gravely weakens the influence of the United States.

7. Time is not on our side in conflicts of this nature. The U.S. decision to let events run their course for the first few months of 1979 had a disastrous effect on our later ability to shape events. In addition, the prolonging of the mediation process for over three months simply served to give both sides in the conflict time to increase their arms and troop strength. This factor relates directly to lesson 6. When a polarization process has begun in a society, swift action to halt that process and promote a solution to the problem is a practical necessity.

8. It is always easier to destabilize a government than it is to reform it or to play a determinant role in developing the successor to that government. United States opposition helped bring down the Somoza dynasty, but this did not give us an effective voice in what came next. Also,
pressures to reform the government often succeeded only in further hardening its positions. As much as anything, the Nicaraguan case repeatedly demonstrated the limits of United States influence and the difficulties of utilizing what influence we did possess.

Our experience in the Nicaraguan crisis of 1978-79 was summarized by Assistant Secretary of State Vaky in late 1979 when he wrote Congressman Lee Hamilton that:

The failure of the mediation effort was clearly a watershed. That failure came close to destroying the moderate opposition, leaving it with no other alternative but withdrawal or radicalization. When the U.S. Government failed to react to Somoza's rejection of the mediators' last proposal, the opposition, the Sandinistas and the opposition's supporting patrons in Venezuela, Costa Rica, Panama and elsewhere concluded that either the U.S. was not serious or in any event that there was no solution to the crisis except by force of arms. It is from this period that the heavy buildup of the Sandinistas took place, and it was only after the mediation's failure and the beginning of the civil war in May 1979 that Sandinista elements became in effect legitimized as the main opposition leadership. And interestingly enough, although Cuba had supported the Sandinista movement from the mid-sixties, it was not until May when chance of military success suddenly became real—that Cuban material support jumped to significant levels. . . .

The tragedy in the Nicaraguan situation may in historical perspective lie in the perhaps unknowable answer to the question of whether we should have—or could have—exerted greater pressure and leverage to secure agreement to a peaceful transition when that was relatively easy to accomplish.46
FOOTNOTES


2. Dana G. Munro, Intervention and Dollar Diplomacy in the Caribbean, 1900-1921 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 216. The author was the United States charge d'affaires in Nicaragua in the mid-1920s and was later ambassador to Haiti.


4. General Somoza studied at the Pierce School of Accounting in Philadelphia where he also met his future wife and became an ardent baseball fan. It should be noted that Latin Americans frequently use a double last name, the father's family name followed by the mother's. Both will be used in this study when necessary to avoid confusion, notably between Anastasio Somoza Garcia, his son Anastasio Somoza Debayle, and his grandson Anastasio Somoza Portocarrero.


12. For a detailed chronology of the uprising see Julio Lopez, Orlando Nunez, Carlos Fernando Chamorro, and Pascual Serres, La caida del Somocismo y la lucha Sandinista en Nicaragua (San Jose, Costa Rica: EDUCA, 1979), pp. 192-209.


15. United States Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Letter from Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Viron P. Vaky to Congressman Lee H. Hamilton, 8 September 1979 in United States Policy Toward Nicaragua: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 96th Congress, 1st Session, June 21 and 26, 1979, p. 75. References to this letter will be cited hereafter as "Vaky Letter." Other sections of this document will be cited as United States Policy Toward Nicaragua.


17. Interview with former Costa Rican Vice-President Jose Alfaro Rodriguez, San Jose, Costa Rica, February 1983.

18. Interview with former National Guard Lieutenant Colonels Jose W. Mayorga and Bernadino Larrios, Managua, Nicaragua, August 1979.


20. Interview with former Assistant Secretary of State Viron P. Vaky, Washington, DC, September 1982.


23. Vaky Letter, p. 73.


26. Ibid. Ambassador Bowdler is convinced that General Somoza knew that he would lose any election which he could not control.


29. Diedrich, p. 216. Somoza and Cox, p. 239.

30. This attitude was conveyed to me in numerous discussions with State Department and National Security Council personnel, including Director of Central American Affairs Brewster Hemenway and NSC Staff Member in Charge of Latin American Affairs Robert Pastor, during conversations between January and May, 1979.


33. Policy Toward Nicaragua, p. 40.


36. Black, p. 147.


38. The text of the OAS Resolution is printed in Somoza and Cox, pp. 264-66.


42. Interviews with numerous ex-Guard officers in Miami, FL, June 1980.

43. Diedrich, p. 320. For President Urcuyo's highly biased view of this period see Francisco Urcuyo, Solos: las ultimas 43 horas en el bunker de Somoza (Guatemala City: Editorial Academico Centro Americana, 1979).

44. It is worth noting that the Archbishop of Managua, Msgr. Miguel Obando y Bravo, who so strongly opposed Anastasio Somoza Debayle, is now a leading critic of the Sandinistas. Nicaragua's status as a pariah state became abundantly clear during the June 1979 OAS meeting when only Paraguay, the longest-lasting military dictatorship in South America, would vote with Nicaragua. In addition, when Honduras decided to abstain on the final vote condemning the Somoza regime, both its ambassador to the OAS and its foreign minister resigned in protest.

45. Interview with former Nicaragua junta member Arturo Cruz, Arlington, VA, September 1982.

46. Vaky letter, pp. 74-75.