

The Seductiveness of Revolution

Monticello

March 19, 2012

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The most dreaded of all diplomatic viruses is “localitis”, which when caught engenders an emotional attachment to the people, culture, language and idiosyncrasies of another country. The virus may be particularly virulent in situations of Revolution where the clients are young, energetic, and filled with admirable moral fervor. This is a disease which I acquired in Nicaragua in 1982 and which was nearly fatal for my Foreign Service career. A change of air to the pre-Arab Spring Middle East restored me to functioning professional well-being. Absence from the heady atmosphere of a revolution certainly did not make the heart grow fonder.

It is very difficult to get back into the highly charged atmosphere at the end of the Carter and the beginning of the Reagan Administrations in terms of how Central American was perceived. On the one hand the Carter Administration had distanced itself from the autocratic and authoritarian Somoza regime in Nicaragua and had hoped to shape the revolutionary process in ways that would protect both democracy and a mixed free market economy. It believed that the Sandinistas and their moderate allies were committed to these values. The Reagan administration on the other hand saw an incipient Marxist Leninist regime, working to establish a base for Communism in the region and intent on pushing over dominoes to its north. Neither assessment was entirely accurate. The Sandinistas certainly were far from being committed to free market democracy in which their status as a vanguard party could be challenged. Nor did they seek to protect the private property interests of their conservative opposition. They also showed more than a theoretical interest in spreading revolution throughout the region, particularly in their support to the FMLN in El Salvador. But overall their highest priority both in terms of domestic and foreign policy was their own survival.

Although I had spent months being briefed on the rapidly evolving Central American situation and on the growing gap between the Sandinistas and the internal opposition, I was not prepared for the revolutionary world into which I was thrust nor for the high level of emotional intensity which any discussion of the situation on the ground entailed. I arrived on March 15, 1981, the first day of the “Secret War”, to learn that the CIA had just orchestrated the blowing up of bridges connecting Nicaragua and Honduras, an operation of which I had not been forewarned. I found myself from day one caught up in the problem of a dual policy. The State Department sought to achieve through negotiation an outcome in which the Sandinistas would live up to their original democratic promises. The White House, backed by CIA Director Casey, sought regime change. I found myself swimming diplomatically between these two opposing currents. This turned out to be no easy task. Indeed, in the event, it turned out to be an impossible one.

From my very first day I was on the defensive with the Sandinistas as I tried to explain away the covert attacks of the CIA as evidence of legitimate opposition and not as a rejection of negotiation. I also faced a rising tide of domestic criticism from the American political and religious left who saw the policies of the Administration as nothing more than an illegitimate effort to topple the Revolution. Hardly a week passed when I was not faced on one hand with a group of angry American church leaders demanding that we give the Sandinistas a chance and on the other with a steadily escalating program of pressures, economic, political, overt and clandestine, designed to weaken and eventually overthrow the regime. In my first week in Managua I met with a group of American church leaders who in my office solemnly prayed for the overthrow not of the Sandinistas, but of the Reagan Administration. They were not alone in their criticism of American policy in the region. Every Thursday there was a formal protest demonstration by American citizens outside the front gate of the embassy. .

The Embassy itself was deeply divided between those who favored negotiations and accommodation and those who thought that only a hard line had any chance of success. By training, experience and temperament I found myself in the former camp. I came to Nicaragua with no previous Latin American experience and was greatly influenced by my briefings and by what I had read. I had little sympathy for our long-standing support for the various past Somoza regimes. I shared the view that the Nicaraguan upper classes had shown almost no interest in social

justice or political freedom. The Sandinistas by way of contrast clearly articulated a social and economic vision which promised greater equality and political participation for the majority of Nicaraguans who had historically been marginalized. I was temperamentally prepared to give the Sandinistas the benefit of the doubt. My own tendencies were reinforced by the constant pressure from visiting American delegations, pointing out the positive elements of Sandinista rule, most notably the famous literacy campaign of 1981, which had received international praise from UNESCO, and by the Sandinista government's focus on health and education. It is hard to overstate the corrosive impact of almost daily encounters with one's own citizens all of whom were critical of the policy which Washington was carrying out, and not just critical on practical terms, but on moral grounds as well. Some of my colleagues were sympathetic, others were merely angry at what they saw as the naiveté of their fellow citizens.

All of this would have been difficult enough if the situation had resembled the gray brutality of Eastern Europe. But Sandinista Nicaragua was different. The revolution was colorful. Artists abounded. Poetry thrived. Music was everywhere. Folk art was encouraged. The public rhetoric of the Sandinistas was highly religious and moralistic. Many priests and pastors, both foreign and domestic, had joined the revolution with enthusiasm. The Revolution was young and energetic; the opposition was old, conservative and self-satisfied. Although I routinely had to sit through the singing of the Sandinista hymn, which spoke of the "Yankee enemy of mankind", I found Sandinista leaders warm, welcoming and anxious to work with us.

While I and the Embassy faithfully reported on the human rights abuses of the regime, the discrimination against the political opposition, the confiscations of opposition businesses, and the growing Cuban and East German presence, I continued to see the glass as half full. Washington never saw it as more than half empty. At one point I was reprimanded in a White House meeting, for reporting too much good news. The truth was that we tried to report all the news both good and bad and there was good news as well as bad.

The diplomacy of regime change is not something that comes naturally to Foreign Service Officers. I did not share the assumptions of the Administration nor did I

like its tactics, particularly the drumbeat of covert operations, the blowing up of bridges, the sabotage of pipelines, the mining of harbors. It is perhaps not a surprise that after the Kissinger Commission came to Managua in October 1983 they took back the message that I was not exactly on the same page as the White House and that the United States would be better off if I were somewhere else. I was told a month later that I would be removed, but with uncharacteristic insouciance, the Administration left me at post for another six months while the Department tried to find someone who would meet the hard-line requirements of the White House. My transfer to Kuwait in May of the following year finally removed me from the dilemmas of trying to carry out an impossible diplomatic role.

My wife looking back on our experience in Nicaragua said that she had reached three conclusions: there had had been a real Revolution in Nicaragua; that it was bad, but it was not all bad. I would have said that it was good, but not all good. I realize now that I was overly impressed by the achievements and the promises of the Revolution. I still wish that it could have lived up to its potential. I was in some ways the wrong man for this job. The White House assumed that having been the Carter Administration's counter terrorist; I would recognize the sinister forces at work in Central America. The Sandinistas (and the Cubans and the Soviets) assumed I was a skilled and experienced regime-changer. In truth I was neither. I brought my own prejudices and religious sympathies to the job. I was skeptical of the efficacy or the appropriateness of covert operations, and I hoped that the noble promises of the revolution could somehow be salvaged without the civil war which the United States seemed intent on organizing.

Since revolutions have an internal dynamic of their own, diplomats have a very limited capacity to channel them or to persuade revolutionaries to adopt policies consistent with our own expectations of what positive change would or should look like. For ten years we struggled with this dilemma in Nicaragua, until ultimately a war-weary Nicaraguan public, abandoned the Revolution in the elections of 1990 that brought Violetta Chamorro to power. Ironically she had been a member of the first revolutionary junta in 1979. The Sandinistas were out of power, but in a sense the revolutionary wheel had come full circle.

For my successors the task was somewhat easier. The luster of the Revolution dimmed. The Sandinistas became more oppressive. The enthusiasm of the youth dissipated and much of the American domestic support dried up. But when the Revolution was young it was hard not to be caught up in its fervor. If I was not actually seduced by the Revolution, I, like many others, was certainly aware of its seductiveness.