as the Embassy flacks because he is making his speech from the gutter, not a soap box. And there is some real love in that gutter. What he says about the origin of the death squads, United States complicity, and the American training received by the Roberto D'Aubuisson look-alike, Major Max, as the movie's head of death squads is absolutely accurate. D'Aubuisson was trained by the CIA at Georgetown, and in American bases in Panama. This simple and key fact is something the big media will never tell us unequivocally.

Boyle's betrayal of the guerrillas who trusted him is an insignificant breach of journalistic ethics compared to the sleazy deals regular television correspondents make. In 1980-81, you could have seen them in the Camino Real or Sheraton hotels, bored out of their minds, making the nightly run to the brothel, snorting coke, going off in rat packs to feed off the bodies or shoot the bang-bang, then returning to do gutless stand-ups with Salvador behind them, as if a country were just a billboard. Boyle doesn't like a perfectly cast network Barbie Doll reporter. He believes she really sucked her way up the corporate ladder. We watch her on assignment, lying and talking around the truth.

Boyle's other friend, a photographer modeled after John Hoagland, killed under fire, is an avatar out of another myth: two eyes on the prowl for the perfect shot. John Savage plays the character with proper perspiring obsession. He pays for his big picture with a rattle in the throat as he dies while covering a guerrilla offensive. Boyle sucks the blood out after giving his friend an emergency tracheotomy. As he holds his dying buddy in his arms, taking the blood- and dust-soaked rolls of film, you know Stone and Boyle have seen combat deaths.

"Salvador" also preserves small details and ambiguities—as in the American Ambassador, modeled on real envoy Robert White. Our emissary cuts off military aid after the four American missionaries are raped and murdered, only to restore it after a pouty little speech when the guerrillas strike in force. More death is preferable to losing Salvador. American arrogance comes in two doses, liberal and conservative. Both are lethal.

Boyle and his woman friend do finally get through the countries between El Salvador and the U.S. At the border he comes home. She and the kids are hauled out of the land of the free and the home of the brave by the Border Patrol, wearing uniforms most Americans only see on their suburban garbage men. The film has already told us enough. We don't have to be told now how they treat Central Americans in detention centers along our glorious frontiers. Boyle reacts to the Border Patrol as if they were death squads, and the response is authentic, for both are instruments of the same policy. It appears that our shores now welcome only worn-out dictators and idle murderers. ●

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were the various opposition parties in Nicaragua, as we shall see.

Access to the Ballot

A variety of parties may compete in an election but if they are denied roughly equal conditions of competition or access to the ballot or shoved to the edge of the political arena, it cannot be said that democratic competition exists. In the U.S. all fifty states have laws, written and enforced by Republican and Democratic officials, regulating party access to the ballot—often in ways restrictive enough to keep smaller parties from participating, thus depriving the electorate of the freedom to choose someone other than a Democrat or a Republican. Minor parties are often required to gather a large number of signatures on nominating petitions in a limited time. Thus in Pennsylvania third-party state-wide candidates must collect 36,000 signatures in a three-week period; in Maryland candidates are required to collect over 55,000 signatures in a short time. Sometimes a 5 percent requirement for signatures has been interpreted to mean 5 percent of voters from every district within the state—an impossible task for a third party whose base might be confined to a few urban areas.

In some states voters who are registered with the major parties are not allowed to sign or circulate minor-party nominating petitions. Petitions are sometimes thrown out by hostile officials on trivial and sometimes unlawful technicalities (as happened to the Communist Party in Illinois and Connecticut in recent elections) compelling minor parties to pursue expensive court battles that further strain their financial resources.

In some states minor parties must pay exorbitant filing fees: $5,000 in Louisiana for an independent candidate. To get on the ballot in all 50 states, a third party would have to expend an estimated $750,000 in filing fees and other expenses and collect 1.2 million signatures, a feat accomplished in 1984 by no third party. And the trend is toward less and less ballot access: in the last 12 years, sixteen states have tightened the restrictions. Between 1980 and 1984, for example, the states of Indiana and North Dakota quadrupled the number of signatures required to get on the ballot.

In Nicaragua, in striking contrast, the electoral law favors the smaller political parties. In 1984 any party could register to field candidates by merely presenting a national directorate and two representatives from each of the country's nine regions. One of the parties that so registered, the Independent Liberal Party (PLI) asked to withdraw from the contest four days before election day. The Electoral Council ruled that it was too late for a party to pull out but that individual candidates could withdraw their names if they chose. None did so.

Accessibility to the Electorate

Being on the ballot does little good if the bulk of the voters have never heard of you or never hear *from* you. Third parties in the United States are given almost no national media coverage during campaigns. News media focus exclusively on the two major parties, failing even to report the votes that third parties get on election day (usually between one and two million all together), thus treating the minor parties as if they do not exist. Lacking the huge sums available to the major parties, especially the Republicans, the smaller parties are unable to buy major media time and space of their own. The Federal Election Campaign Act of 1974 finances the major parties, giving each tens of millions of dollars for their presidential campaigns, but the smaller parties can obtain federal funds only after they glean 5 percent of the national vote (about 4 million votes for any one party) In sum, they cannot get the money until they get the 5 percent, but they cannot get the 5 percent until they get the money.

In contrast, the Nicaraguan electoral law provided public financing of 9 million cordobas ($321,000) for each participating party *regardless of size* and guaranteed an equal amount of time each day on the state-run radio stations and television channels. Each party was also permitted to receive unlimited

funds from private donors, including people and organizations outside Nicaragua, a provision that worked to the advantage of the centrist and rightist parties. As the campaign got under way, complaints from the participating parties led to changes in the electoral law, including an increase in radio and television time, an additional 3 million cordobas in government campaign funds for each party, and a lengthening of the campaign period. Parties were also guaranteed access to products in short supply in Nicaragua: paper, printing facilities, transportation and gasoline. The various parties also produced their own party newspapers, together with leaflets and billboards.

Absence of Coercion

Instances of coercion and harassment of candidates have not been an unusual occurrence in U.S. elections. In the United States third-party candidates especially those of a pronouncedly leftist hue have run into difficulties of this sort. Harassment may not be confined to the candidates themselves but may include their supporters and canvassers. In 1972 in Vermont, persons who merely signed Communist Party ballot petitions found their names publicized by town clerks in an effort to embarrass them into withdrawing their signatures. Generally though, in modern times American elections have not been marked by violence nor by any serious degree of threat against candidates. The coercions are largely of the legal kind noted earlier which work well enough against third parties. In regard to individual voters, however, it should be noted that not every American citizen has the right to an uncoerced vote, as testified by the continuing need for a Civil Rights Voting Act, the renewal of which President Reagan opposed.

Turning to Nicaragua, we find there were serious acts of violence and murder in the 1984 election—all committed by the forces supported by the Reagan administration. The *contras* killed the presidents of two polling stations and two volunteer workers involved in registration. In the Jinotega mountains, one polling station worker's throat was cut by the *contras* in front of his wife and family. On election day a member of the electoral police was shot to death by *contras* in La Tronca. In all, twelve election workers lost their lives in assaults by counterrevolutionaries.

The election was less than flawless in its procedures, but the overall performance was one that the Nicaraguan democracy can be proud of. There was free and open campaigning in every area of the country except in some war zones. According to estimates by the Supreme Electoral Council, there were some 250 public rallies. In general the election was characterized by untrammeled and vigorous political debate. If the FSLN was instituting a totalitarian regime, it was going about it in the wrong way.

About five of the public rallies were marred by incidents of violence, but no serious injuries were reported. During the first months of the campaign a number of parties also reported that their campaign workers had been harassed by members of the FSLN, or that their posters had been destroyed. The Sandinista leadership denounced these incidents and they seemed to diminish thereafter. In addition, several rallies held by the Nicaraguan Democratic Coordinating Committee (CDN), a coalition of conservative business-oriented parties that abstained from the election, were disrupted by fights between CDN supporters and Sandinista counterdemonstrators. These rallies were technically illegal since the CDN had refused to participate in the election and indeed spent its time during the campaign attacking the electoral system itself. Once the CDN decided to conduct what seemed like a sabotage of the electoral effort (in the eyes of FSLN supporters), clashes with counterdemonstrators were difficult to avoid.

Because of these incidents, Arturo Cruz claimed that he was attacked by "mobs" and that free electoral competition did not exist. It should be recalled that the country is at war and that Cruz openly identified with the enemy and was not at any time functioning as a legal or serious candidate. When Cruz, a banker in Washington, arrived in Managua five months before the election, the CDN suddenly announced he would be their unified presidential candidate. Without officially registering as a candidate, Cruz toured the country for several days, drawing small crowds. As suddenly as he arrived, he left, announcing he would not run under the prevailing electoral conditions. Throughout this period the U.S. media and the U.S. government described him as the "major opposition candidate" and treated his nonparticipation as evidence that the election was an unfair and meaningless exercise. In conflict with this view is the one expressed in the report, cited herein, by U.S. citizens in Nicaragua:

> In general, our perception of the electoral campaign period is that the harassment and fistfights were scattered incidents that did not affect the generally free atmosphere of the electoral process. We found our neighbors and co-workers unafraid to voice their opinions, and heard and read virulent criticism of the FSLN. We know of no pressure on Nicaraguans to vote for the Sandinista Front. In particular, we found no truth in the charge made by *La Prensa* that the cards which entitle families to receive subsidized food allotments were controlled in a concerted effort to influence Nicaraguans' votes. We conclude that the electoral campaign provided Nicaraguans with abundant information on which to base a free decision about their vote.

A similar conclusion was reached by the 460 official observers from all over the world who were free to check out all aspects of the voting process and ballot counting. None of the seven participating parties filed any charges of fraud.

System of Representation

The FSLN won 64.9% of the vote, a victory that was only a few percentage points higher than the one enjoyed by Ronald Reagan in 1984. The two runner-up parties, both center-rightist, won 13% and 9% respectively. The National Assembly seats were allocated according to proportional representation so that minority parties were assured of 35 of the 96 seats (including six seats that under the electoral law are allotted to the losing presidential candidates of each party). All this was dismissed by Reagan as "an electoral farce without any meaningful political opposition."

In contrast, the single-member-district electoral system used in the United States is much less representative and therefore less democratic. The party that polls a plurality of the vote, be it 40, 50 or 60 percent, wins 100 percent of a district's representation, while smaller parties, regardless of their vote, receive zero representation. Proportional representation provides a party with legislative seats roughly in accordance with the percentage of votes it wins, thus assuring minor parties of some parliamentary presence. But the single-member, winner-take-all system magnifies the strength of the major parties and leaves the minor parties with a percentage of seats (if any) that is far lower than its percentage of votes. The winner-take-all system deprives third parties not only of representation but eventually of voters too, since not many citizens wish to

"waste" their ballots on a party that seems incapable of establishing a legislative presence.

Minorities

There are other criteria by which the American and Nicaraguan democracies might be compared. For instance, there is the treatment of minorities. Much is made of the Sandinistas' forced relocation of Miskito Indians during a time of serious border attack, a policy that quickly proved not only wrong but in some instances wrongful. Today Managua is now trying to undo its previous policy and resettle the Miskito on their lands, an approach that compares favorably with the U.S. treatment of Native American Indians, to say the least, and with the forced relocation of the Japanese into concentration camps during World War II, uprooting them from California communities that—unlike Nicaragua—were never threatened by enemy invasion. Nor did the U.S. government ever compensate the Japanese for the losses they sustained in the way of homes, businesses and farms.

Political Dissent

There is the more general question of freedom of communication for dissenting ideas. *La Prensa* is not the only opposition voice in Nicaragua. About half of the radio and television stations in the country are privately owned and most of these give the government a daily ideological pounding that makes National Public Radio look like the tepid establishment mouthpiece it is. The various political parties also produced their own newspapers during the campaign. There is a war going on in Nicaragua. The country is encircled by hostile forces, has endured invasions on both of its borders and has suffered much loss of life and destruction of property, yet the censorship imposed is no worse and probably less restrictive than what the U.S. government imposed during World War II, and Managua's treatment of dissenters and collaborators has been far more tolerant and liberal than the treatment accorded Tory sympathizers during and immediately after the American revolution or dissenters who received long prison terms during World War I.

In the United States, dissenting views that go beyond the mainstream, or even much left of center, are rarely allowed time or space in the major media, but are consigned to small-circulation magazines that teeter on the edge of insolvency. In short, there is a greater plurality of ideas, ideologies, and debate in Nicaragua than in the United States. On this score Nicaragua is a more open, more pluralistic society. It may not always remain so however. Subject to enough threat and siege, assault and murder, the Nicaraguans will start tightening up, choosing security over dissent, survival over pluralism. Indeed, it is miraculous that they haven't already done so. The signs are there; President Daniel Ortega has said: "In the hardest moments we have to convert the defeats into more ideological unity, more political unity ... [and] more organization." (*Miami Herald*, August 4, 1985).

If the U.S. government were really interested in encouraging pluralistic dissent in Nicaragua, it would pursue a policy quite the opposite of the one now in the saddle, offering Managua friendship and support and the hope for peaceful independence and security. Democracy is a delicate flower that does not do well when repeatedly stomped upon.

Religious Freedom

The Reagan administration has charged that there is religious persecution in Nicaragua. But the Catholic church is alive and well. Elements of its clergy and laity can be found playing prominent roles on both sides within Nicaragua, struggling hard to build—or destroy—the revolution. Religious practice is not interfered with. The Rev. Miguel Gray, a Nicaraguan Baptist minister, hailed the religious freedom enjoyed in that country and pointed to the building of 19 additional churches since 1979—in a desperately poor country where not too many buildings of any kind are going up.

The level of religious tolerance in the United States today is as good as might be found anywhere. But in recent years the disturbing intolerance manifested by such groups as the Moral Majority, and the President's open association with the religious Right, including his announcement that "ours is a Christian nation," might cause us to give more attention to the question of religious tolerance here at home.

Human Needs

If democracy means more than a set of procedures but implies something about the substantive conditions of life, then here too poor Nicaragua looks better than rich America in the era of Ronald Reagan. Decades of colonialism, Somocista pillaging, earthquake, revolution and counterrevolution, have left Nicaragua with a legacy of extreme poverty, yet the very worst is not happening to the poor citizens of that country as it is to the poor on the streets in Washington D.C.; no one is starving and no one has been tossed aside like so much human refuse.

International Behavior

Finally, in comparing Nicaragua with the United States, we might consider the degree to which each country is interfering with the political development and security of the other. As Reagan himself aptly put it: "Democracies do not spend a lot of money on arms, build large armies or invade or destabilize their neighbors." With typical Orwellian inversion he was aiming this remark at Nicaragua but it applies most perfectly to his own administration, which spends more money on arms and more time destabilizing and invading neighbors than we could ever imagine Nicaragua doing. The truth is also inverted when Reagan calls the Sandinistas "terrorists." To be sure, there is plenty of terrorism going on in Nicaragua and plenty being exported to other countries in Central America, but it is conducted by *contra* mercenaries and Hondurean, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran death squads and military, all financed and advised by the U.S.

Those "democratic socialist" critics on the left, who give qualified and skittish support to Nicaragua, who are quick to point out how they have "problems" with some of the things the Sandinistas are doing, who impose flawless democratic standards upon a tiny country that is under mortal siege from the Yankee Colossus, those critics might want to consider the realities of the situation. It is the United States which should be the object of their professedly democratic concerns; it is the U.S. which falls so dismally short of practicing the democratic pluralism it preaches to others, exporting violence and terrorism, and pummeling a smaller neighbor that is trying to develop a democratic society of its own.

If one criterion of democracy is that a country not act like a thug and aggressor in its dealings with another country—even to the point of refusing to show up in (world) court to defend itself when so charged—then the United States under Reagan comes off looking far less fair, less open, and less democratic than Nicaragua. ●

Is Nicaragua More Democratic Than the United States?

By Michael Parenti*

To justify the policies of attack, encirclement, embargo, and destabilization directed against Nicaragua, the Reagan administration has charged that the Sandinista government is on the road to totalitarianism, that it denies religious and political freedom and is a threat to the security of its neighbors. The goal of U.S. policy, claims President Reagan, is to bring about a pluralistic open society in Nicaragua, a goal that never loomed very large during the fifty years of the Somoza dictatorship. More recently in a book on the Nicaraguan revolution, journalist Shirley Christian echoed this line, arguing that the *contra* war was a justifiable attempt "to force the Sandinista Front into accepting major structural changes toward an open political society."

In response to this position, supporters of the Sandinista revolution have argued that Nicaragua does have a pluralistic society, is attempting to make a better life for its people, has no aggressive designs upon its neighbors, and instead is itself being invaded along two of its borders. Others have shown that by every standard, Nicaragua's elections have been more open and democratic than El Salvador's and its society more humane than most others in Latin America.

Indeed it can be further argued that by every standard Nicaragua is a more democratic society than the one waging aggression against it—and I do not mean Honduras. By every major democratic criterion, Nicaragua comes off looking better than the United States. Let us begin with a comparison of the national elections held in November 1984 in both the United States and Nicaragua.[1]

Popular Participation

One crucial measure of an open political system is the degree of popular participation. Most voting studies in the United States and elsewhere find that nonvoters show a high degree of alienation from the political process; they believe voting is not a means of effecting changes, and they often fail to see a meaningful choice in the candidates presented to them. (This is the view also of a surprisingly large number of persons who *do* vote in the United States.) Therefore a comparison of the respective rates of turnouts in the Nicaraguan and U.S. elections might be worth pondering for a moment.

The turnout in the United States in the 1984 election was a little less than 53 percent of the eligible voters, one of the lowest of any western nation. Yet the press took little note of this and instead treated Reagan's reelection as a landslide victory and a democratic mandate. In contrast, voter turnout was nearly 82 percent in Managua and 75.4 percent in Nicaragua as a whole. Yet this turnout was described in the U.S. press as "disappointing" because the Sandinistas had hoped for an 80 percent national turnout. (Left unmentioned was the fact that in Nicaragua the voting was voluntary, unlike most Latin American countries.)

Range of Political Choice

Elections that offer little choice are said to be wanting in democratic standards. The choice in Nicaragua was noticeably wider and more democratic than in the United States. Seven parties ran for seats in the national assembly and for the presidency, representing a broad ideological range: from those on the far left (who damned the FSLN for its moderate policies and for allegedly betraying the workers and peasants) to those on the center and right (who accused the FSLN of exercising a rigid control over the country, wrecking the economy and leading Nicaragua to war). All these charges and countercharges were reported and debated extensively in the public and private press in Nicaragua.

In the United States the choice was limited largely to Democrats and Republicans, who in many races are often hard to tell apart. True, there were a variety of minor parties but these were not accorded the same opportunity for participation as

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1. Much of the information regarding the 1984 Nicaraguan national election is from "Their Vote Decided" a report by the Committee of U.S. Citizens Living in Nicaragua (CUSCLIN, Managua, Nicaragua).

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