

Contemporary American Print Media Coverage of Nicaragua's Miskitu People during the Contra  
War

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By

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## Introduction

The Contra War thrust Nicaragua's indigenous Miskitu people from their lives as a little-known indigenous people on the country's Atlantic Coast to the center of the international stage. A prolonged affair commonly dubbed a low-intensity conflict, violence started in 1979 shortly after the country's Sandinista revolutionaries deposed the Somoza regime and only ended in 1990.<sup>1</sup> Swept up in the middle of this dramatic Cold War conflict that brought the battle of capitalism versus socialism uncomfortably close for many Americans, the Miskitu people's plight came to be almost constantly featured in the United States' national media. For millions of American citizens the news was their window into Nicaragua, but the twenty-four hour televised news of today was in its infancy. Thus print media held massive clout when it came to creating the commonly understood narrative of the war. So what did people flipping through their morning paper throughout the early 1980s read about the Nicaragua situation?

Just as propaganda and distortion are key elements of conventional war efforts they have great weight in proxy conflicts. That the newly-ascended Reagan administration aided the anti-Sandinista Contras through campaigns of covert and eventually illegal funding comes as no surprise to most who have even passingly studied American history. However, the extent to which it conducted a simultaneous propaganda campaign is a less-discussed facet of the Cold War's legacy. Freedom of the press is remembered as a defining split between the East and the West – socialist or communist state media manipulating the truth for their domestic consumption was a matter that Western leaders used to highlight the immorality and oppressive nature of their

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<sup>1</sup> The use of Sandinist/Sandinista, Sandinists/Sandinistas, and Sandinistan as descriptors of Nicaragua's government and/or the movement itself varies by source within the primary documentation and secondary literature on the topic. This work will use Sandinista/Sandinistas and quotations will retain their original form of the word.

adversaries that has become a part of collective memory. However, an in-depth examination of the United States' national print media during the Contra War softens this East-West divide.

While the United States maintained a press outside of state control, there exists a pattern of newspapers acting to repeat and amplify the Reagan administration's Contra War messaging. Beginning very shortly after the Miskitu first became involved in the conflict at the end of 1981 newspapers ran story after story which echoed the claims of the Reagan administration against the Nicaraguan government. Accusing the Sandinista government of an ethnocidal campaign against the Miskitu was a central motif of the administration's messaging on Nicaragua.<sup>2</sup> Miskitu involvement was emphasized – the administration had an interest in presenting rebelling Miskitu as an indispensable part of anti-Sandinista resistance for their propaganda appeal. These two themes found their way into nationally distributed publications and news services such as *The New York Times*, the *Associated Press*, and the *United Press International*, among others. Throughout 1982 the articles published by these institutions parroted and gave credence to the narrative of ethnocide which the Reagan administration worked to create.

When reports of a Sandinista atrocity were corrected at the source, retractions and corrections frequently failed to materialize in the papers that had originally published the claims. Corrections, if they did appear, usually did not enjoy the same real estate on the page that accusations did, which indicates less weight was placed on accuracy than creating a narrative. Additionally, false claims about events transpiring in Nicaragua were republished both in news reports and opinion pieces even after evidence to the contrary had been presented publically.

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<sup>2</sup> Lest this be construed as a principled stance by President Reagan against human rights violations, one should remember his continued support for the Guatemalan government during its campaign of ethnocide against the Mayan people. See Eyal Mayroz's *Reluctant Interveners: America's Failed Responses to Genocide from Bosnia to Darfur*, chapter 3.

These aspects of the reporting on Nicaragua served to strengthen the Reagan narrative, but this representation of the conflict was not unchallenged. At first opinion pieces bore the burden of attempting to straighten the record, and later some news reports began to focus on correction of certain elements of the story as well.

The reality of Miskitu involvement in the conflict was often misrepresented in ways that damaged the Sandinista government, conflating the party and the polity as one and the same despite their lack of absolute political hegemony. The Miskitu cause was brought more closely in line with the controversial Contras, lending credibility to the latter. Leadership of and motivations attributed to the Miskitu in the news did not accurately reflect the situation, often in a manner which glossed over nuance or removed their agency. Some of this can be attributed to the very real difficulty of determining the truth in the confusing wartime atmosphere of Nicaragua, especially with regard to the leadership, but it bears mentioning that inaccuracies pervaded even this level of the issue.

Although important developments occurred almost every single month American media's coverage of the Miskitu in the Contra War, broadly speaking it can be divided into four periods. The first is the year 1982, during which time the dominant ethnocide narrative was created, repeated, and defended. The second period is early 1983 to early 1984, throughout which this narrative was largely unquestioned, defended when it was, and the weight given to coverage of the Miskitu began to dwindle. The third period is early 1984 until the beginning of 1986, when the Miskitu were dropping out of the conflict by choice. Credibility of the ethnocide narrative began to face serious criticism during this interval, and these doubts were combatted vociferously by editorials and direct attacks from the Reagan administration. By 1986 the Miskitu role in fighting was greatly diminished and so was their usefulness as a propaganda tool.

The lack of developments caused the Miskitu to largely drop out of media attention, although attempts were made by the administration to bring them back into the limelight. Analyzing all four of these periods with an appropriate measure of nuance would be a monumental endeavor, as such this work will focus primarily on 1982 and offer only a brief overview of the periods that followed. Exploring the latter periods is a task the author leaves for another time or another historian.

Given the sensitivity of the subjects of human rights, truth, and historical revision, disclaimers about what is to follow are important. Firstly, this work may seem like an effort to further the conception that the American media acts as a singular manipulative entity, one which provides as much fake news as truth. That is not the intent. Numerous editorials, opinion pieces, featured articles, and news reports ran that called into question the wisdom of backing Miskitu and Contra rebels. Others challenged the dominant Miskitu-abuse-centered narrative of Nicaragua's conflict by highlighting the Reagan administration's hypocrisy. Nor was all of what was written about the Miskitu condition entirely false. But for whatever pushback outlets occasionally gave the administration's policy, their record of what was printed, when it was printed, and how it was phrased points towards a pattern of mirroring and amplifying its messaging. This deserves to be pointed out, and serves as a reminder to think and read critically about the world around us. While media outlets might publicly oppose national leadership there is always the chance that the agendas of the two may be closely aligned. Secondly, this should not be interpreted as an attempt to entirely rehabilitate the actions of the Sandinista government. Nicaragua's government's well documented abuses against human rights and especially those of the Miskitu people during the Contra War cannot be denied. Rather, the intent is to demonstrate misrepresentation of the realities of the situation. It is difficult to dispute those criticizing a

regime that deserves a degree of censure without presenting oneself as too sympathetic to be trusted in presenting a fair case. But a respect for the truth means a willingness to accept that some things are not as bad as they are commonly perceived. The reader is encouraged to maintain a mind open to the idea that accuracy of accusation and condemnation is a cornerstone of fair assessment.

To grant myself as large a base of sources as possible I elected to use the easily and readily archived print media, much of which was available online through databases or publications' own websites. These sources are supplemented by documents available from larger organizations such as the Central Intelligence Agency and the United Nations. Although much secondary literature on the Miskitu conflict exists, the most recent scholarly work that focuses on the American media's role I could find is from 1987 – essentially a primary document in its own right!<sup>3</sup> As such I chose to focus on primary sources for the bulk of my argument, using secondary literature primarily for historical background and as an authority on contentious elements.

## Prelude to Conflict

“The Miskito Indians... will enjoy the right to govern themselves and all persons residing in their district, in accordance with their own customs and rules which they may adopt, not being incompatible with the sovereign rights of the Republic of Nicaragua.”

-Article 3, Treaty of Managua between Her British Majesty and the  
Republic of Nicaragua, January 28, 1860

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<sup>3</sup> Hans Petter Buvollen, “The Miskitu-Sandinista Conflict: International Concerns and Outside Actors,” *Bulleting of Peace Proposals* 18, no. 4 (1987): 591-601.

Nicaragua's Miskitu people had always lived almost entirely separate from the rest of the country, virtually in a world of their own. The country is divided by two mountain ranges, the Amerrisque and Cordillera Isabela, which span the country's length north to south. This separates the country into eastern and western sections, typically referred to by the terms Pacific Coast and Atlantic Coast.<sup>4</sup> This division of the country extends beyond the geographical into the ethnic and political spheres of Nicaragua. The Atlantic Coast comprises more than half of Nicaragua's land mass, but is comparatively sparsely populated. This is the home of the indigenous Miskitu people. The coast's hot, moist, and densely forested environment was impenetrable enough to make even the Spanish conquistadors pass it by.<sup>5</sup> Rather, the Spanish integrated the Pacific Coast into their empire, which led to the region developing into the center of power for Nicaraguans of Hispanic descent.<sup>6</sup>

Politically the two regions were distinct throughout the colonial era. Instead of being moved into the fold of Spanish colonial rule the Miskitu became more closely involved with the British, allowing them to create naval refitting stations in their territory in exchange for arms and trade goods.<sup>7</sup> The Miskitu utilized their newfound strength of arms to expand their territory, conquering their neighbors the Sumu who possessed the majority of the land on the Atlantic Coast and became the largest of the indigenous tribes in the country.<sup>8</sup> From the seventeenth

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<sup>4</sup> Although the Nicaraguan "Atlantic Coast" actually borders the Caribbean, describing Nicaragua in terms of Pacific/Atlantic is a trend in primary and secondary literature which will be reflected in this work.

<sup>5</sup> Hurst Hannum *Autonomy, Sovereignty, and Self-Determination: The Accommodation of Conflicting Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1996), 204.

<sup>6</sup> Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty*, 203.

<sup>7</sup> Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty*, 204.

<sup>8</sup> Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty*, 204.

century until the mid-eighteenth century the Miskitu in Nicaragua and western Honduras lived in an oligarchy divided into three regions with hereditary rulers. The northern division, made up of the Rio Aguan in northern Honduras and the Cabo Gracias a Dios on the present border between Nicaragua and Honduras, was controlled by a leader with the title of General. The central division stretched from Cabo Gracias a Dios southwards to the Nicaraguan region of Sandy Bay and was the domain of the Miskitu King. The southern division extended from the southern border the King's zone of control to Laguna de Perlas (Pearl Lagoon) and its ruler held the title of Governor. Although ostensibly a monarch, the Miskitu king held only slightly more power than the other leaders. Around 1760 the position of Admiral was created, and its holders controlled from Laguna de Perlas south to Punta Gorda. The King wielded more power from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, becoming the paramount executive of the Miskitu.<sup>9</sup> However, in 1847 British consul to the Atlantic Coast created a "Mosquito Council of State" to rule the region. Despite its name the council had only one Miskitu representative, the rest were local creoles and whites.<sup>10</sup> This significantly weakened the power of the Miskitu to govern their ancestral land.

Spanish authority failed to develop on the coast, while at the same time the British never strengthened their hold, leaving the Atlantic Coast and its people mostly autonomous and unused to answering to a singular central authority.<sup>11</sup> In 1860 the Treaty of Managua granted the Nicaraguan government control over all previously British territories on the Atlantic Coast, but it did include special concessions for the Miskitu people. The Miskitu king was still recognized,

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<sup>9</sup> Michael D. Olien, "General, Governor, and Admiral: Three Miskito Lines of Succession," *Ethnohistory* 45, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 278-280.

<sup>10</sup> Michael D. Olien, "General, Governor, and Admiral," 295.

<sup>11</sup> Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty*, 204-205.

although it was decided he must act under the sovereignty of Nicaragua, further weakening Miskitu authority over the region.<sup>12</sup> The majority of the Atlantic Coast was formally reincorporated into Nicaragua in 1894, and the British ceded the last of their claims in the country in 1905.<sup>13</sup> United States domination of the politics of Nicaragua, on the other hand, was just beginning. The level of United States meddling varied wildly, starting with the 1856 invasion of the country by a private army led by William Walker, a newspaper editor. Walker was swiftly deposed by a coalition of Central American armies and a lull fell on American intervention for the next fifty years. In 1909 two death sentences were carried out on citizens of the United States attempting invasions similar to Walker's. The United States government threatened an intervention into the country, leading to the resignation of the country's president José Zelaya. But after the election of his successor, José Madriz, the United States landed troops and installed Juan Estrada as a puppet leader. The American troops pulled out in 1910. Estrada proved unpopular and unable to manage tensions in the country and stepped down, but this led to civil disruptions. In response, President Taft authorized an invasion and occupation that lasted until the 1930s. After the removal of troops in 1933 a new president, Juan Sacasa, was elected. However, the true power of the government was held in the hands of the top general of the Guardia Nacional, Anastasio Somoza. In 1937 Somoza seized the reins of Nicaragua, ruling as a dictator and establishing a hereditary line of succession.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty*, 205.

<sup>13</sup> Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty*, 205.

<sup>14</sup> Adam Burns, *American Imperialism: The Territorial Expansion of the United States, 1783-2013* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 139-141.

The Somoza dynasty, largely friendly and compliant to the whims of the United States, lasted until 1979.<sup>15</sup> The separation of the Atlantic and Pacific Coast continued through the Somoza dynasty. While the Somoza dictatorship was harsh, repressive, and exploitative on the Pacific Coast, its policy towards the Atlantic was one of neglect.<sup>16</sup> In 1979 there was no road between Managua and the Atlantic Coast, nor even between the Atlantic coast's two largest towns, Bluefields and Puerto Cabezas. Transport between the two halves was managed through a combination of overland hiking and small boats. No telephone line connected the two halves of the country.<sup>17</sup> The Miskitu and other Atlantic Coast indigenous tribes had interpreted Somozan neglect as a tacit acceptance of autonomy. This historical pattern of autonomy set the stage for their conflict with the Sandinista government.

The final years of the Somoza regime saw movements for change developing on both coasts of the country. As the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) fought its class-based revolutionary battle against the Somoza government, Nicaragua's indigenous peoples were peacefully growing in their solidarity. Grassroots organizations were the primary vehicle of this growth, starting with the Alliance for the Progress of the Miskitu and Sumu in 1973. The Alliance's name was shortened to ALPROMISU – a motif of the indigenous organizations was lengthy names. ALPROMISU's leadership saw minor increases in government involvement on the Atlantic Coast from the 1950s to the 1970s as an avenue for indigenous advancement.<sup>18</sup> The organization felt that if they were bound to become part of the Pacific Coast-centered politics of

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<sup>15</sup> Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty*, 205.

<sup>16</sup> Jane Freeland, "Nationalist Revolution and Ethnic Rights: The Miskitu Indians of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast," *Third World Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (October 1989): 172.

<sup>17</sup> Freeland, "Nationalist Revolution and Ethnic Rights," 172.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Meringer, "The Local Politics of Indigenous Self-Representation: Intraethnic Political Division among Nicaragua's Miskito People during the Sandinista Era," *The Oral History Review* 37, no.1 (Winter/Spring 2010): 5.

Nicaragua, their smartest play would be to secure rights and benefits while they still held an unspoken autonomy. To that end, ALPROMISU promoted integrationist policies, advocating the teaching of Spanish in schools and the expansion of government projects on the Atlantic Coast.<sup>19</sup> The leadership promoted Spanish literacy in an effort to escape the “general condition of abandonment” that they felt was a result of mutual unintelligibility.<sup>20</sup> Access to non-seminary education, healthcare, and infrastructure projects were ALPROMISU’s objectives.<sup>21</sup> In these goals they were largely successful – educational opportunities for women expanded and new health clinics opened. ALPROMISU worked tirelessly and effectively to advance Miskitu representation in government, securing mayorships and a position in the national assembly. While the organization functioned in cooperation with the Somoza regime, they did not always act in a passive manner and actively exposed local regime officials for corruption.<sup>22</sup>

ALPROMISU’s most important contribution to Miskitu life was creating ethnic unity.

According to founding member Armando Rojas:

“Before ALPROMISU, we didn't know each other's problems . . . [Miskitus] of the littoral didn't know what [was] going on with the Miskitos of the Rio Coco, and the Rio Coco didn't know what was happening in Prinzapolka; nobody knew what was happening in Honduras . . . there was no communication ... We realized that the problems faced by Indians in this sector were all the same. They had the same common denominator-

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<sup>19</sup> Meringer, “The Local Politics of Indigenous Self-Representation,” 5.

<sup>20</sup> Meringer, “The Local Politics of Indigenous Self-Representation,” 5.

<sup>21</sup> Meringer, “The Local Politics of Indigenous Self-Representation,” 5.

<sup>22</sup> Meringer, “The Local Politics of Indigenous Self-Representation,” 6.

exclusion, discrimination, no access to basic services of the state . . . this allowed us to unite.”<sup>23</sup>

This ethnic unity formed the foundation of the next indigenous alliance – MISURASATA, which stands for Miskitu, Sumu, Rama, and Sandinista All Together. This group, in conjunction with the Sandinista government, eventually led to the downfall of ALPROMISU.

MISURASATA was founded in 1979, shortly after the Sandinista victory that summer. Headed by a younger, college-educated and more radical leadership, MISURASATA and the Sandinistas started off on good terms. Eager to bring the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua under central control, utilize its resources to rebuild the war-wracked country, and improve conditions on the coast, the Sandinistas saw MISURASATA as a “vehicle of their revolution.”<sup>24</sup> MISURASATA supplanted ALPROMISU in the fall of 1979 by playing up the latter’s cooperation with the Somoza regime.<sup>25</sup> Initially the Sandinistas and MISURASATA cooperated well. The demands of MISURASATA’s foundation manifesto were purely cultural, and the government assisted in meeting the leadership’s goals: “... ‘recovery of our history’; ‘diffusion of our language and culture’; collaboration in the literacy campaign, and ‘learning Spanish which is the official language of the country’ . These harmonised well with the conception of ethnic culture expressed [in] the *Historic Programme* and elicited a positive response.”<sup>26</sup> The lack of educational infrastructure on the Atlantic Coast meant illiteracy was widespread, an issue the Sandinistas and

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<sup>23</sup> Meringer, “The Local Politics of Indigenous Self-Representation,” 7.

<sup>24</sup> Hans Petter Buvollen, “Autonomy: Tactic and Self-Determination: The Sandinista Policy towards the Indigenous Peoples of Nicaragua,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 36, no. ½ (June 1990): 105.

<sup>25</sup> Meringer, “The Local Politics of Indigenous Self-Representation,” 8.

<sup>26</sup> The *Historic Programme* is a foundational document of the FSLN laying out the revolution’s aims for the country. First published in 1969 it was used to gather support from Nicaraguans against the Somoza regime.

MISURASATA worked together to improve. “By May 1980, mother-tongue adult literacy materials in Miskitu, Sumu and Creole were being prepared for a ‘literacy crusade in languages...’”<sup>27</sup> The government tasked MISURASATA with the organization and execution of the 1980 Literacy Crusade, an expensive and expansive program aiming to entrench the Miskitu language on the Atlantic Coast.<sup>28</sup> MISURASATA utilized this campaign to gather support in far-flung Atlantic Coast communities, to great success.

While the Sandinistas saw in MISURASATA what they hoped would be lasting allies, relations between the groups deteriorated within two years of the group’s foundation. Fundamentally the two groups held different views on the way forward for the Atlantic Coastal territory. More radical than ALPROMISU before, MISURASATA’s leadership saw themselves as conducting an ethnically-centered liberation project on the coast.<sup>29</sup> MISURASATA’s leaders believed that a guarantee of freedom from discrimination could only come with the establishment of an ethno-state on the coast for themselves. The Sandinista government, which viewed the world through a Marxist-Leninist lens emphasizing class struggle, seemed at once to brush away their concerns of discrimination and sympathize: “By eliminating social classes, the Revolutionary Government will also eliminate the fundamental cause of racism and ethnocentrism. Nevertheless, racist ideology has an independent existence as well, which must be attacked on the ideological level.”<sup>30</sup> The Sandinistas acknowledged the double-oppression of being an ethnic minority and laid out in broad strokes how they hoped to solve the issue, but failed to produce any immediate results towards that aim. MISURASATA lacked confidence in this

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<sup>27</sup> Freeland, “Nationalist Revolution and Ethnic Rights,” 175.

<sup>28</sup> Freeland, “Nationalist Revolution and Ethnic Rights,” 173.

<sup>29</sup> Buvollen, “Autonomy: Tactic and Self-Determination,” 105.

<sup>30</sup> Freeland, “Nationalist Revolution and Ethnic Rights,” 174.

approach, but protests were muted. Progress towards their cultural goals and cultivation of indigenous support mollified the group.

Tensions between the groups boiled over in late 1980 into early 1981. Land rights proved to be the point of irreconcilable difference between the Sandinistas and Miskitu. The Sandinista manifesto of 1979 nationalized all land with no title of private ownership – which included almost all Miskitu land as formal titles of ownership had simply never been created for the area.<sup>31</sup> This meant that Miskitus lost their access to the communally shared farming and logging land surrounding their homes, endangering their food supply and income. To their credit, the Sandinistas responded to criticism of this move, and in 1980 their manifesto included a passage “guarantee[ing] each indigenous community ownership of its territory.”<sup>32</sup> In August 1980 an agreement was met between MISURASATA and the government regarding logging – 80 per cent of all profits derived from areas both groups claimed would be given over to the Miskitu for village development projects.<sup>33</sup> MISURASATA had been tasked with articulating all communities’ claims to the Sandinistas and devised a map that was to be delivered to the government. However, shortly before this map was due to arrive in Manauga in February 1981 MISURASATA’s entire leadership was arrested.<sup>34</sup>

The grounds for this mass arrest was the Sandinistas’ interpretation of “Plan for Action 1981,” MISURASATA’s agenda for the year. The Sandinista government charged that this was in fact the beginnings of a separatist plot by the Miskitu leadership, as its land demands had

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<sup>31</sup> Freeland, “Nationalist Revolution and Ethnic Rights,” 176.

<sup>32</sup> Freeland, “Nationalist Revolution and Ethnic Rights,” 176.

<sup>33</sup> Klaudine Ohland and Robin Schneider, *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, 95.

<sup>34</sup> Ohland and Schneier, *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, 18.

radicalized. Almost a third of Nicaragua's total territory was to be designated as Miskitu property in this plan.<sup>35</sup> It bears noting that this plan made no accommodations for Creoles and mestizos who also lived on the coast.<sup>36</sup> This accusation of secessionism was further bolstered by the identification of a Miskitu leader as a former Somozan agent - Steadman Fagoth Muller.<sup>37</sup> Muller countered that he had been working undercover for the Sandinistas during his association with the Somocistas, but this did not keep him out of prison.<sup>38</sup> Young Miskitu activists responded to the arrests by arranging massive protests in the town of Waspán and the city of Puerto Cabezas with some ten thousand participants in attendance.<sup>39</sup> Most of MISURASATA's leadership was released in a matter of weeks, although Muller was held longer. In May, he was released on the condition that he travel to study in Bulgaria, but instead he fled to over the country's northern border to Honduras. With him, before him, or in short order after came 3,000 other Miskitus who made up the earliest of his rebel force – this is a topic of some debate. Reynaldo “Ráfaga” Reyes, another Miskitu rebel, states that young men began cross into Honduras in 1980 (before the arrests) as well as while Muller was still in jail.<sup>40</sup> Historians Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Jane Freeland agree that these Miskitu followed Muller over the border after his release.<sup>41</sup> Muller also established a radio station aimed at recruiting Miskitu against the government, which led to more Miskitus joining him that summer.<sup>42</sup> Muller was

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<sup>35</sup> Freeland, “Nationalist Revolution and Ethnic Rights,” 176.

<sup>36</sup> Meringer, “The Local Politics of Indigenous Self-Representation,” 12.

<sup>37</sup> Ohland and Schneider, *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Blood on the Border: A Memoir of the Contra War* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 75.

<sup>39</sup> Ohland and Schneider, *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Reynaldo Reyes and J.K Wilson, *Ráfaga: The Life Story of a Miskito Comandante* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1992), 42.

<sup>41</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, *Blood on the Border*, 74; Freeland, “Nationalist Revolution and Ethnic Rights”, 176.

<sup>42</sup> Ohland and Schneider, *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, 20.

followed to Honduras by another MISURASATA leader, Brooklyn Rivera, who would soon be waging his own campaign out of Costa Rica on Nicaragua's southern border.

This brings us to the summer of 1981. Miskitus under the command of Steadman Fagoth Muller and Brooklyn Rivera had moved across Nicaragua's borders, meeting up with Somocistas and other counter-revolutionaries who made up what came to be the largest of the Contra Factions - the Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense (Nicaraguan Democratic Force).<sup>43</sup> The Sandinista-Miskitu state of affairs was tense, but remained quiet until the end of the year. It was not until the New Year approached that the Miskitu situation exploded.

### The Red Christmas Debate

Rumblings of the trouble between the Miskitu and the Nicaraguan government hit *The New York Times* on June 18, 1981. Under the title "Nicaraguan Indians Clash With Regime" and printed on page two, the article was quite even-handed. Statements from Sandinista officials were included, offering the Nicaraguan government a chance to voice its side. However, it seems they did not have much constructive to say: "'It's a terrible mess,' Sergio Ramirez Mercado, a member of the three-man ruling junta, conceded. William Ramirez, the Sandinist minister in charge of the Atlantic coast, concurred. 'We've allowed small mistakes to turn into a big problem.'" This article was also notable for containing mention of the smaller Sumu and Rama tribes, who as we will see disappeared from coverage in just a few months. The article did contain some relatively minor inaccuracies which build towards the ethnocide narrative. For example, it misrepresented Muller's release and crossing into Honduras by claiming that he joined "some 3,000 Indian men" who had already fled, implying that the refugee crisis had

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<sup>43</sup> Freeland, "Nationalist Revolution and Ethnic Rights," 177.

beginning far earlier than it did. It concluded by stating that the “immediate fear of the Sandinists is that exiled Nicaraguan rightists who are threatening an invasion from camps inside Honduras will try to exploit the tensions.”<sup>44</sup> This was prescient.

After this article, the Miskitu disappeared from the *Times* for almost six months until after the New Year. On January 3, 1982 the *Associated Press* reported a massive incident had transpired on the Nicaraguan-Honduran border. Published in *The New York Times* under the title “Honduras Reports 2 Incursions by Nicaragua,” the events described in this article became a central point in conservative messaging on the Contra War. Based on a Honduran government report, on the twenty-sixth and thirty-first of December Nicaraguan troops had crossed over the northern border on the Atlantic coast (marked by the Rio Coco) to attack refugees sheltering on the other side. Reporting two separate attacks against four settlements, the article states that “at least 200 of the 3000 Nicaraguans classified as refugees in the area had been killed. Most of the Nicaraguan refugees were Indians from the Miskito, Sumo, or Rama tribes.” These refugees were camped at the towns of Mocoron, Auka, Tipia, and Leimus, having fled Nicaragua “because of their conservative, Protestant ways... many have been accused of being ‘counterrevolutionaries.’”<sup>45</sup> Bodies of the refugees were found floating in the Coco and Honduran soldiers had the grim duty to retrieve and bury them.<sup>46</sup> This event marked the beginning of Nicaragua’s ethnocidal campaign against its native populations. Or it would have – if it had happened.

The ghastly events this article described do have some basis in reality. Around Christmastime 1981 a series of attacks did in fact occur along the Rio Coco, but that is where the

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<sup>44</sup> Alan Riding, “Nicaraguan Indians Clash With Regime,” *The New York Times*, June 18, 1981, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Leimus is in fact in Nicaragua.

<sup>46</sup> Associated Press, “Honduras Reports 2 Incursions by Nicaragua,” *The New York Times*, January 3, 1982, 4.

similarities end. These attacks, which were dubbed *Navidad Roja* (Red Christmas), actually marked the beginning of the Miskitu rebels' violent campaign against Nicaragua. As Reynaldo "Ráfaga" Reyes recalls it, *Navidad Roja* began on Christmas Day when a band of Miskitus mostly armed with clubs and bows attacked a Sandinista garrison at San Carlos on the Rio Coco. They killed everyone there besides the radio operator, who they used to lure the area commander to the town and laid in ambush for his arrival. Lucho, the commander, was found "tied to a tree, disemboweled. His heart had been removed."<sup>47</sup> Historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, who was in Nicaragua at the time but not near the site of these attacks, recounted similar but slightly different details. Rather than Christmas Day, Dunbar-Ortiz says it took place on the December 21, 1981. Dunbar-Ortiz theorizes that there were dual purposes for carrying out these attacks on the border. First, to create a north-eastern front that would necessitate a large Sandinista presence to control, drawing forces away from other areas in the country. Secondly, she proposes that "the CIA's objective was to place civilians – Miskitus – in the crossfire, so that the US could accuse the Sandinistas of massacring the Indians."<sup>48</sup> Freeland concurs with this assessment of rebels and the Central Intelligence Agency sharing responsibility for Red Christmas, with the intent to create a "US-recognised liberated zone."<sup>49</sup>

Another source which questions Sandinistan culpability for the Red Christmas event is, surprisingly enough, the Central Intelligence Agency itself. Declassified documents from the Contra War publically available in their archives strongly suggest that the CIA were eager to utilize the fallout of Red Christmas for propaganda purposes, but the attacks themselves are notably absent. One such document, a four page report titled "Nicaragua Under the Sandinistas:

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<sup>47</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Ráfaga*, 43-44.

<sup>48</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, *Blood on the Border*, 109-110.

<sup>49</sup> Freeland, "Nationalist Revolution and Ethnic Rights," 177.

A Bill of Particulars” which listed various Sandinista malfeasances by month from July 1979 to April 1983, has no entry whatsoever for December 1981.<sup>50</sup> Another earlier document, this one from March 1982 called “Suggestions for the Unclassified Briefing on Nicaragua,” made a Sandinista attack on refugees conspicuously absent as well. “Late December 1981” is specifically mentioned for “Sandinista repression of the Indians in the northeastern part of the country, especially along the Rio Coco,” but declined to go into much greater detail or make accusations of a massacre.<sup>51</sup>

A third document containing two files from 1984 reveals the maintenance of two presentations of the Miskitu situation – one for public consumption, one for private coordination. The first, dated February 29, 1984, was a draft of a White House Digest being sent to the Departments of State and Defense as well as the CIA for comments and clearance review. On this document the heading “Nicaraguan Repression of Miskito Indians” preceded several pages of accusations of mistreatment of the Miskitu at the hands of the Sandinistas. The claims in this section are numerous, but most relevant are the allegations that “[starting in 1981] Nicaraguan troops attacked Miskito refugee camps in Honduras, where they had fled to escape Nicaraguan internal deportation; some Indians were buried alive, clergy and leaders were imprisoned; women and children were executed...”<sup>52</sup> This was the version of events that was distributed to Faith Ryan Whittlesey, director of the White House Office of Public Liaison. In this position she dedicated much of her time gathering and coordinating American public support for the Contras, thus it makes sense that a particularly anti-Sandinista version of events was put in her hands to

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<sup>50</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Nicaragua Under the Sandinistas: A Bill of Particulars,” c. May 1983, 2. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85M00363R000801790005-6.pdf>.

<sup>51</sup> CIA, “Suggestions for the Unclassified Briefing on Nicaragua”, March, 8, 1982, 2. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84B00049R000701990016-4.pdf>

<sup>52</sup> CIA, “Sandinista Violations of Human Rights,” February 29 and May 31 1984, 35. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP86M00886R001400140033-9.pdf>

propagate.<sup>53</sup> The second file of this document, dated May 31, 1984, was intended for the National Security Council as well as the Departments of State and Defense. Under the heading “Sandinista Violations of Human Rights” and the subheading “Persecutions of the Indians,” remarks on the events surrounding and following Red Christmas are made. It asserts “Some of the most severe examples of Sandinista repression have been committed against Managua’s large Indian population, especially the Miskito, Rama and Sumo... These Indians have been subjected to religious persecution, destruction of their crops, and forced relocation... Those unable or unwilling to leave their ancient homelands are subjected to heavy-handed attempts, occasionally including rape and murder, to bring Sandinista totalitarianism to the traditionally autonomous Indian population.”<sup>54</sup> While these were certainly harsh accusations, there are no allegations of attacks on refugees in Honduras. Absent from the recipients list this time was Whittlesey. Divulging the tamer, truer to life version of events in Nicaragua to the administration’s messaging czar would have been counterproductive to maintaining the administration’s narrative.

Historians writing years after the fact, the files of CIA agents coordinating their narratives, and even Miskitu fighting with Muller on the ground in Nicaragua all present evidence that from the very onset of the Miskitu involvement in the Contra War the story in national news did not line up with reality. But what started in December 1981 took on a life of its own, and the assertions of Sandinista massacres and ethnocide of the Miskitu recurred for years to come.

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<sup>53</sup> David W. Dent, *U.S.-Latin American Policymaking: A Reference Handbook* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 153.

<sup>54</sup> CIA, “Sandinista Violations of Human Rights,” 18.

## The Building of the Ethnocide Narrative

On the fourth of January 1982, one day after accusations of soldiers crossing into Honduras to slaughter Miskitu refugees ran in the *Associated Press* the situation in Nicaragua made its way to the front page of *The New York Times*. Printed on the bottom right of the page under a black and white picture of men and women cleaning rifles and entitled “Its Border Raided, Nicaragua Trains Civilians,” this article was largely unconcerned with the Miskito. Instead, the article focused on the Nicaraguan government’s new program of creating a large state-armed militia in response to “stepped-up attacks along the frontier by those presumed to be exiles bent on retaking Nicaragua.”<sup>55</sup> Attacks on Nicaraguan troops near the Honduran border and the December 12, 1981 bombing of a Nicaraguan Boeing 727 in Mexico City were cited as reasons for the agitated atmosphere. Absent was any mention of the attacks on refugees reported just the day before, but the indigenous tribes’ potential threat to the Sandinista government was a topic. The hypothetical scenario of “armed units comprising exiles and members of the Miskito, Sumo and Rama Indian tribes... who have objected to Sandinist efforts to integrate them into a culture dominated by Spanish-speaking majority on the Pacific Coast” is presented, with “the most influential Miskito leader, Steadman Fagoth Muller[’s]” confirmed presence in Honduras making this scenario seem all the more plausible.<sup>56</sup>

Briefly, indigenous involvement was brought to the front page before being dropped in the next paragraph. Yet even at this stage of reporting, just one day after the first reports of

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<sup>55</sup> Warren Hoge, “Its Border Raided, Nicaragua Trains Civilians,” *The New York Times*, January 4, 1982, 1.

<sup>56</sup> Warren Hoge, “Its Border Raided” *The New York Times*, 1.

violence involving the Miskitu, the presentation of their role in the Contra War began to be warped. The Miskitu are set apart from “exiles” despite the fact that their presence in Honduras at this point is largely men who followed Muller rather than refugees. It also overlaid the role of Miskitu resistance towards Sandinista integration policies. Integration efforts such as they were in Sandinista policy were largely focused on uniting Nicaragua as one polity and cultural concessions to the Miskitu were made from 1979 onwards. At the same time, Miskitu activism up until the cusp of the outbreak of conflict with the Nicaraguan government had encouraged integration to varying degrees, including Spanish literacy and expanding government-provided services in their territories. Presenting the Miskitu as resistance fighters against assimilation and cultural destruction was from this point onwards a recurring theme in coverage of the conflict.

For the next two weeks the Miskitu disappeared from *The New York Times*, reappearing on the seventeenth of January. During this time a critical development about the allegations of attacks on Miskitu refugees was made. The January 3 report credited to the Honduran government that served as the starting point for accusations of Miskitu ethnocide was called into question by what was purported to be the source. On January 4 the Honduran government issued a correction to the *InterPress Service* on the initial report in which it “denied making the statement and denied its accuracy as well.”<sup>57</sup> This retraction is conspicuously absent from the same newspapers which had popularized the initial claims – reading day-by-day through the corrections and retractions section of *The New York Times* reveals that it remained unpublished. Articles and editorials in the years to follow continued to cite a massacre of refugees in December 1981 as evidence of Sandinista ethnocide of the Miskitu. The existence of this retraction is perhaps why the CIA carefully maintained two versions of events in its records –

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<sup>57</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, *Blood on the Border*, 120.

one without a massacre for internal use, one with a massacre for coordination with public relations officials in the Reagan administration. Through this careful omission the narrative of ethnocide was allowed to propagate unchallenged.

In fact, the very next mention of the Miskitu in *The New York Times* perpetuated the ethnocidal Sandinista narrative. The article “Sandinists Court Indians but Effort Is Strained,” a *Reuters* report published on page six of the January 17 edition actually contained few details about the Nicaraguan government’s attempts to make amends with the Miskitu. Instead, the article repeated the claim that “last week neighboring Honduras charged that Nicaraguan troops had crossed its border around the New Year and killed 200 of the 3,000 Miskitos estimated to have fled there from Nicaragua.” Nicaragua’s dispute of this charge is mentioned but it in terms that minimized their credibility: “The Nicaraguan government has denied all knowledge of the incident but the accusation, in a protest note from the Honduran Foreign Ministry, once again highlights the strained relations between the Indians and the Government in Managua.” The phrasing and word choice of this sentence changed the Nicaraguan’s government’s denial of the incident occurring to a denial of knowing what occurred, while the existence of the accusation is considered evidence enough that there is a pattern of issues between the Miskitu and the government. Furthermore, the article misrepresented the history of the Miskitu-Sandinista conflict. It was claimed that the Miskitu “had high hopes that the left-wing revolution that ousted the regime of Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979 would restore some autonomy to their jungle region.” This assertion ignored the Somozan pattern of neglect towards the Atlantic Coast, and painted the Miskitu as a people whose tragic relationship with the Sandinistas began with the Miskitu greeting them as liberators and swiftly being betrayed. Mere paragraphs later the article claimed there is a “long history of resentment toward the central government,” contradicting the

previously established relationship. The article inaccurately labelled Muller a “former Sandinist commander,” lending him unearned credentials as a disillusioned revolutionary. The assertion of a massacre was restated towards the conclusion, stating “the attack on the Miskito refugees was said to have occurred in four small towns on Honduras’s Caribbean coast,” before concluding.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, it was with this article that the Sumu and Rama tribes all but disappear from coverage, focusing the narrative on a single group.

On January 23, 1982, a letter to the editor calling out the pattern of repeating assertions of ethnocide was published in *The New York Times*. Written by the Nicaraguan ambassador to the United Nations, Alejandro Bendana, this letter appeared in the third row of the opinion section on page 22 – poor real estate compared to the original assertion and reassertions that appeared on pages four and six. Bendana attacked the claim that “Nicaraguan troops had crossed over the border and attacked Indian refugee camps, killing at least 200” as an “absurd accusation.” He cited the Honduran government’s own retraction of the claim, which “stated the report on Nicaraguan attacks on refugee camps was ‘totally false’ and that ‘there has not been a single problem or a single death’” as well as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ account that “no evidence of violence, fighting or kidnapping” was found.<sup>59</sup> Although locating the results of this specific fact-finding mission proved impossible, later United Nations documentation verifies that the UNHCR found no indicators of attacks on the refugees in Honduras. The August 1982 Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees detailed the organization’s involvement in assisting refugees at two camps in Honduras and

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<sup>58</sup> Reuters, “Sandinists Court Indians but Effort is Strained,” *The New York Times*, January 17, 1982, 6.

<sup>59</sup> Alejandro Bendana, “False Honduran Claim Against Nicaragua,” 22.

includes no mention of attacks by Nicaraguan troops.<sup>60</sup> In his conclusion Bendana called on *The New York Times* “in the interest of journalist and political accuracy” to take steps so that “this rectification by Honduras’s own civil authorities can be brought to the attention of your readers.”<sup>61</sup> Bendana’s letter failed to accomplish his goals. The Honduran government’s retraction failed to appear in *The New York Times* and no correction was issued. Assertions of a Christmastime massacre continued to be made for years to come.

### Relocation Reinforces the Narrative

January 1982 saw the opening of another avenue by which the Nicaraguan government were lambasted for human rights abuses. Attacks into northeastern Nicaragua by Miskitu led by Muller as well as Contra forces were intensifying. Crossing the Rio Coco, these forces “attacked communities, kidnapping and killing Miskitu who had worked with the revolution,” continuing the work of militarizing the Atlantic Coast that had started on Red Christmas.<sup>62</sup> In response to these raids the Sandinista government implemented a policy of mandatory evacuation. Entire villages, thousands of people, were moved inland by Sandinista soldiers.<sup>63</sup> Primarily the Miskitu villagers were moved to a group of settlements known as Tasba Pri, fifty miles away from the border.<sup>64</sup> Abuses by soldiers tasked with carrying out the evacuation occurred, as many of them believed that all Miskitu supported Muller and his troops in Honduras. As “Ráfaga” Reyes recalls, “many who had not agreed with Fagoth earlier now fled to Honduras because they were

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<sup>60</sup> United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees A/37/12*, 18 August 1982, [https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/excom/unhcrannual/3ae68c880/report-united-nations-high-commissioner-refugees.html#\\_ftn6](https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/excom/unhcrannual/3ae68c880/report-united-nations-high-commissioner-refugees.html#_ftn6).

<sup>61</sup> Bendana, “False Honduran Claim Against Nicaragua,” *The New York Times*, January 23, 1982, 22.

<sup>62</sup> Freeland, “Nationalist Revolution and Ethnic Rights,” 177.

<sup>63</sup> Buvollen, “Autonomy: Tactic and Self-Determination,” 106.

<sup>64</sup> Freeland, “Nationalist Revolution and Ethnic Rights,” 177.

afraid of the Sandinistas... They were afraid they too would be jailed or killed.”<sup>65</sup> Thousands of Miskitu fled across the Honduran border, joining Muller’s forces or remaining in refugee camps.

The relocation to Tasba Pri, possibly justifiable from the perspective that it reduced the number of Miskitu in harm’s way as the Atlantic Coastal zone became a front for a protracted conflict, played directly into the hands of those painting the Contra War as resistance to an ethnocidal regime. Various members and appointees of the Reagan administration leapt at this opportunity and it became part of their telling of events by February 1982. On the fourth of February American ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick stated that Nicaraguan abuses had gotten to the point that “the Mestizo [sic] Indians are being so badly repressed that concentration camps have been built on the coast of Nicaragua in the effort to try to imprison them, eliminating their opposition.” Alexander Haig, the Secretary of State, on the nineteenth of February criticized the Sandinista government’s actions stating “atrocious and genocidal actions are being taken by Nicaragua against the Indians on their east coast.” On the twenty-fifth Assistant Secretary of State Elliot Abrams informed a Senate subcommittee that the “Miskitus are now subject to massive assaults by the Sandinistas.”<sup>66</sup> This manner of language regarding the relocation campaign, chiefly that it was the launch of a program of ethnocide, became a feature of media coverage.

By mid-February the ethnocide interpretation of events in Nicaragua cemented itself a place in the papers. On 12 February *The Baltimore Evening Sun* ran a lengthy article titled “Sandinistas snuffing out Nicaragua’s Indian culture.” From the first sentence the Nicaraguan government’s decision to relocate the Miskitu is framed as an unrepentant act and the product of

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<sup>65</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Ráfaga*, 44.

<sup>66</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, *Blood on the Border*, 121.

“two years of ideologically-motivated brutality.” The article was focused on Muller and an open letter he penned to the Reagan administration detailing the oppression of the Miskitu at the hands of the Sandinista government. Based on Muller’s account the arrival of the Sandinistas on the Atlantic Coast initiated “an entire people’s struggle to preserve their identity, their customs, their community-type lifestyle.” This disregarded the early cooperation between the Sandinistas and MISURASATA with regards to cultural concessions prior to 1981,<sup>67</sup> it presented to a contemporary reader that Nicaragua was the site of a concerted effort to wipe out an ethnic identity. The article contended that “Most disastrous of all in this first phase of the repression was the literacy campaign run by the Marxist priest from Managua, Fernando Cardenal... he imported hundreds of Cubans to teach the Indians to read and write in Spanish when most of them only knew English.” This insinuated that the Nicaraguan government attempted to destroy the Miskitus’ ability to read and write English (but for some reason leaves out their native tongue), despite the literacy campaign being conducted in conjunction with MISURASATA’s and promoting mother-tongue literacy as well as Spanish at the request of indigenous leaders. The claim Muller made that the Sandinista interior minister Tomas Borge was “prepared, if necessary, to eliminate the last Miskito in order to establish communism along the Atlantic Coast” leads the reader to the conclusion that the Miskitu were fighting not only against cultural destruction but to maintain a non-communist way of life on the coast. The Contra/CIA interpretation of Red Christmas was reprinted as well, this time with a teaser for added details: “In his profoundly-moving document, Fagoth describes a series of massacres committed by Sandinista troops last December in Miskito villages, listing by name many of those who were killed.” The massacre and ethnocide narrative

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<sup>67</sup> The reporter’s lack of intimate knowledge of indigenous Nicaraguan grassroots organizations can be forgiven on the grounds that the number of people who know anything about indigenous Nicaraguan grassroots organizations cannot be far from the number of fingers on the hands of a member of an indigenous Nicaraguan grassroots organization.

was maintained here, made more personal and tragic by Muller's connection to those the Sandinistas killed. The article's last two sentences were especially on the nose.

“Stedman [sic] Fagoth will be visiting Washington within the next two weeks to tell his story in person to the administration and the congressional committees. Here, at least, the media have a chance to give the coverage he so well deserves.”<sup>68</sup>

This call to arms for the media did not go unheard.

On 21 February, 1982, another report on the Nicaraguan situation appeared in *The New York Times*. Crammed into a thin column to make room for a nearly full-page Macy's advertisement, the article “Latin Border Area Becomes Volatile” offered a rather detailed look at the situation with an emphasis on the Miskitu. The evacuation of the Miskitu along the border further inland in response to raids from Honduras found its way to the *Times* in this article, but few details were provided. While the article was generally correct on details that previous coverage failed to accurately reflect, such as Muller's exile force in Honduras being made up of self-exiles who came with him rather than refugees who fled before him and the town of Leimus being located in Nicaragua rather than Honduras, the article maintained the ethnocide narrative through insinuation. For example, the Christmas attack at Leimus was presented once again as lending credibility to Honduras and the United States accusing of Nicaragua a “reign of terror.” This was done in a circuitous manner. First,

“Honduras later said a “massacre” had taken place near the border village of Leimus inside Nicaragua. Managua denied any such incident, but missionaries said several

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<sup>68</sup> Cord Meyer, “Sandinistas snuffing out Nicaragua's Indian culture,” *The Baltimore Evening Sun*, 12 February, 1982. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84B00049R000200400042-5.pdf>

villages across the Coco River, which marks the border, had been burned as part of the Nicaraguan effort to clear the zone.”<sup>69</sup>

While the inclusion of the Nicaraguan government’s refutation of attacking the Miskitu at Leimus showed that Nicaraguan Ambassador Alejandro Bendana’s letter to the *Times* at least convinced the paper to change Nicaragua’s stance from “denied all knowledge of the incident” to refusal that it occurred, it showed his other objective in the letter remained unmet.<sup>70</sup> Honduras’ own retraction of the accusation, which would outright destroy the credibility of the Red Christmas allegation, was not factored into this article. The massacre accusation, which was lent more credibility than deserved, was then conflated with the conduct of the mandatory evacuation of the Miskitu. Despite the anachronism of the massacre being part of the “effort to clear the zone,” the attribution of the claim to missionaries lends such moral authority that arguing was difficult. In all, this paragraph lends credence to the “reign of terror” accusation leveled by the United States and Honduras paragraphs earlier. The article’s conclusion included the sentence “The United States has been eager to use the conflict to accuse the Nicaraguans of rights violations,” but did nothing to evaluate this statement. Whereas the Nicaraguan government’s statements in the article are evaluated and measured against other sources with the effect of lowering their credibility in the eyes of the reader, this statement on the American government’s hunger for ammunition against Nicaragua was left out in the open, unexplored. The article’s author did not reflect on his own work aiding the Reagan administration’s goals.<sup>71</sup>

The beginning of March 1982 saw the undermining of one of the Reagan administration’s claims against the Nicaraguan government. On 6 February 1982 the French conservative

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<sup>69</sup> Alan Riding, “Latin Border Area Becomes Volatile,” *The New York Times*, 21 February, 1982, 21.

<sup>70</sup> Reuters, “Sandinists Court Indians,” 6.

<sup>71</sup> Alan Riding, “Latin Border Area Becomes Volatile,” *The New York Times*, 21 February, 1982, 21.

newspaper *Le Figaro* published an issue featuring a photograph of burning corpses purported to be Miskitu killed in a massacre the preceding December. This photograph and the accompanying article were picked up by Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. as the perfect demonstrative aid. At a February press conference in a Washington D.C. hotel Haig spoke in front a massively enlarged version of the photograph to condemn “widespread massacres” by Sandinista soldiers. This conference was widely reported on, but a few days later corrections began to appear. Rather than capturing Sandinist abuse of the Miskitu, the photograph was evidence of Somozan attacks on civilians in Managua.<sup>72</sup> One such correction, penned for *Reuters* and republished in *The New York Times*, appeared on page five of the 3 March 1982 edition. According the article, the senior editor of *Figaro* admitted that the photograph had been misattributed “erroneously” after being publicly accused of intentionally misusing the picture by another French publication. The reality of the picture’s creation in 1978 during the Sandinista revolution, details of the accusation made by *Le Canard Enchaîné*, and *Le Figaro*’s statement that the use of the picture was “a deplorable mistake” make up the bulk of the article. Secretary Haig’s use of the picture to demonstrate the “atrocious genocidal actions that are being taken by the Nicaraguan Government” forms the conclusion to the article.<sup>73</sup> This case constituted a prime and visible example of how the administration’s repeated accusations of a Nicaraguan ethnocide were based on evidence from potentially untrustworthy sources. Despite this correction’s existence and visibility, little changed in coverage of the Miskitu situation. American national media continued to publish news reports which served to further the administration’s claims.

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<sup>72</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, *Blood on the Border*, 122.

<sup>73</sup> Reuters, “Around the World; French Rightist Paper Admits Misuse of Picture,” *The New York Times*, 3 March, 1982, 5.

In the early spring of 1982 the Sandinista program of Miskitu relocation was expanded upon in the pages of *The New York Times*. The article, entitled “Nicaraguans Say Incursions Prompted Indians’ Eviction” was published on 22 March and continued the trend of implications pointing towards ethnocide. The settlements further inland that became the temporary home of the Miskitus are referred to as “‘settlements,’” utilizing scare quotes to imply that this title hid the truth. Elsewhere the settlements were referred to as “Miskito camps,” drawing a parallel to concentration camps. Under the subheading “‘Systematic Violence’ Charged” United States delegate to the United Nations Jeane J. Kirkpatrick was quoted accusing the Sandinistas “with carrying out ‘a campaign of systematic violence’ against the Miskitos.” While a statement from “one top Sandinist commander, who asked not to be quoted by name” included earlier in the article speaking to the necessity of the eviction indicates the ability of the author to contact someone in Nicaragua for statements, no rebuttal was offered to Kirkpatrick.<sup>74</sup> That February Kirkpatrick claimed “concentration camps have been built on the coast of Nicaragua in the effort to try to imprison them [the Miskito], to eliminate their opposition.”<sup>75</sup>

The December 1981 violence on the Rio Coco appeared again in this article, and the manner in which it is presented muddies the water.

“Mr. Fagoth had allied himself with exiled members of the Somoza regime's National Guard who were launching regular attacks into Nicaragua from Honduras.

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<sup>74</sup> Alan Riding, “Nicaraguans Say Incursions Prompted Indians’ Eviction,” *The New York Times*, 22 March, 1982, 8.

<sup>75</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, *Blood on the Border*, 121.

Last December, the first raids into the Miskito territory of northern Zelaya took place and, in a number of still-unclarified incidents, at least 60 Sandinists and more than 40 Miskitos were killed.”

This phrasing carefully dodged around the issue of the raids since being explained as an act targeting Miskitus carried out by exile forces. Even though it set up that exile forces under Muller were in fact launching raids across the river, by presenting the events as “still-unclarified incidents” the article perpetuated the possibility that Sandinista soldiers initiated or carried out the killings, or, if they were exile forces, that they may not have been Muller’s followers. Additionally, the conclusion of the article undercut the ability of the Nicaraguan government to protest the allegations against it.

“Since then, Nicaragua feels its worst fears have been confirmed... by what it sees as the Reagan Administration's use of the Miskito problem as a propaganda weapon against the Sandinist regime.”

Rhetorically this sentence placed the administration’s ethnocide messaging in an unassailable position. It transformed any attempt by the Nicaraguan government to clarify the events of Red Christmas or the decision to move the Miskitu into refugee settlements into part of a propaganda war. Additionally, by setting up the possibility that the administration would use the Miskitu for propaganda as the “worst fear” of an untrustworthy government it primed the reader to dismiss the plausibility of that concern.<sup>76</sup> The Reagan administration’s strategy of making claims of ethnocide to damage the Nicaraguan government was aided by the national press’ reluctance to

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<sup>76</sup> Riding, “Nicaraguans Say Incursions,” 8.

issue corrections of inaccurate reports they had published earlier and by the press' uncritical printing of statements made by officials who were known to use untrustworthy sources.

## The Use and Abuse of the Miskitu

As 1982 changed from winter to spring the attention paid to the Miskitu situation in national print media declined. Although news reports on the Contra War remained a staple of *The New York Times* throughout the spring of 1982 and the Miskitu role as Contra cobelligerents and as refugees were largely unchanged, they rarely earned more than a passing mention.<sup>77</sup> This pattern continued into the summer of 1982.<sup>78</sup> However, this did not mean the narrative surrounding Miskitu involvement ceased to be tightly controlled. Rather, the established narrative began to be utilized. A prime example can be found in mid-April 1982, when two articles appeared in two days describing the fledgling Democratic Revolutionary Alliance headed by ex-Sandinista commander Eden Pastora. Although Pastora was not Miskitu himself, the articles detailing the launch of his anti-Sandinista campaign associated him with their cause.

The first, dated 16 April 1982, quoted Pastora condemning the Sandinistas for "spreading a 'climate of terror that extends over all of Nicaragua' and of 'terrorizing' the Miskito Indians."<sup>79</sup> The second, published the next day, said Pastora "attacked the Sandinists for 'jailing and killing' Miskito Indians on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast."<sup>80</sup> Pastora's concern for the Miskitu expressed in

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<sup>77</sup> "Nicaraguan Leader Who Quit Last Year Denounces Ex-Allies," *The New York Times*, 16 April, 1982, 7; Barbara Crossette, "For Sandinists, An Ex-Ally's Challenge," *The New York Times*, 17 April, 1982, 3; Alan Riding, "Disenchanted Hero of Sandinists Emerges as Leader of Their Foes," *The New York Times*, 2 July, 1982, 1.

<sup>78</sup> Alan Riding, "Disenchanted Hero of Sandinists Emerges as Leader of Their Foes," *The New York Times*, 2 July, 1982, 1.

<sup>79</sup> "Nicaraguan Leader Who Quit," 7.

<sup>80</sup> Crossette, "For Sandinists, An Ex-Ally's Challenge," 3.

these articles had the effect of giving his nascent anti-Sandinista movement a share of the credibility and sympathy generated by earlier reporting on the Miskitu situation. Yet in only a brief time *The New York Times*' reluctance to employ the Miskitu as a method of backing unfavored parties was shown. After its formation the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance developed a political platform that was as anti-Soviet as it was anti-United States of America, echoing the anti-imperialist stances of the Sandinistas.<sup>81</sup> Pastora also became a personal stumbling block for the Central Intelligence Agency's coordination with the Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense, the largest of the Contra factions as he blamed their cohort of former National Guardsmen for the death of his father.<sup>82</sup> On 2 July 1982 Pastora and the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance reappeared in the *Times* but in a different light. The author demonstrated knowledge of the anti-American-imperialist stance Pastora adopted, stating that he "has criticized the United States policy in Central America and has made no attempt to meet any Reagan Administration officials." Pastora's qualms with Sandinista treatment of the Miskitu are absent from the page one article "Disenchanted Hero of Sandinists Emerges as Leader of their Foes," leaving behind his disdain for the "Marxist-Leninists' in the National Directorate" as his *casus belli*. Indeed, the article asserted that Pastora "has sought no association" with the Miskitu fighting the same enemy as the Alliance.<sup>83</sup> Thus while the author did not attempt to discredit Pastora and his forces altogether and indeed does refer to them in rather positive terms at many points in the article, it seems that between April and July the *Times* cooled considerably towards

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<sup>81</sup> Geoffrey R. Martin, "The Immorality of the Contras' Resort to War: The Case of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force," *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 13, no. 25 (1988): 78-79.

<sup>82</sup> Moonis Ahmar, "The Politics of Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Nicaragua," *Pakistan Horizon* 37, no. 2 (Second Quarter 1984), 119; <sup>82</sup> Christopher Dickey, "Central America: From Quagmire to Cauldron?" *Foreign Affairs* 62, no. 3 (1983): 672.

<sup>83</sup> Riding, "Disenchanted Hero," 1.

Pastora. Their claim to the propaganda power of fighting for the Miskitu was revoked after the faction demonstrated their unwillingness to function as the Reagan administration wanted.

The attention paid to Eden Pastora during the spring of 1982 casts into sharp relief the lack of regard paid to a key Miskitu leader of anti-Sandinista forces, Brooklyn Rivera.<sup>84</sup> While most articles discussing the Miskitu involvement in the Contra War included mentions of Steadman Fagoth Muller few covered his counterpart. In fact *The New York Times* published no articles referring to Rivera until the 30 March 1982 and the *United Press International's* first article with reference to Rivera was published on in mid-April of 1983 – this despite the fact that Rivera had as legitimate a claim to Miskitu leadership as Muller.<sup>85</sup> He had held the position of MISURASATA's coastal coordinator at the same time Muller had served as its representative to the Nicaraguan Council of State.<sup>86</sup> Just a month after Muller he left to Honduras and took up arms against the Sandinistas. Rivera did not remain in Honduras long, rather he departed for Costa Rica after being jailed for two weeks as the result of a power struggle between him and Muller and began operations on Nicaragua's southern border.<sup>87</sup> Despite the importance of Rivera's part in the anti-Sandinista struggle he was largely absent from print media coverage, affecting the narrative communicated to newspaper readers.

Rivera's absence from the American media coverage altered the narrative of Miskitu resistance. First, it created the conception that Miskitu rebels were united under the singular direction of Muller. This granted Muller's version of events and pleas for support from the

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<sup>84</sup> "Ah! I'd forgotten about him!" says the clever reader. "Indeed I nearly did as well," says the absent-minded writer.

<sup>85</sup> Theodore MacDonald, "On Nicaraguan Indians," *The New York Times*, 30 March 1982, 19; Frederick Kiel, "The Mexican government Friday expelled top Nicaraguan rebel Alfonso..." *United Press International*, 15 April 1983; Dunbar-Ortiz, *Blood on the Border*, 86..

<sup>86</sup> Freeland, "Nationalist Revolution and Ethnic Rights," 173.

<sup>87</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Ráfaga*, 44.

United States greater legitimacy, such as the open letter he sent to the Reagan administration in early 1982. Secondly, by ignoring Rivera and focusing attention on Muller the media overemphasized the connection between the Miskitu and the Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense. Muller, according to Miskitu rebel commander Reynaldo “Ráfaga” Reyes, began his campaign against the Sandinistas with assurance of backing by the Central Intelligence Agency which also favored the FDN.<sup>88</sup> Both Muller’s forces and the FDN operated out of Honduras and the media attention the northern rebel forces received created the illusion that the FDN was the faction the Miskitu saw as best for their interests. In doing so the motivations of the rebelling Miskitu were papered over and conflated with the right-wing FDN. As later developments demonstrated, notably the cease-fire agreements in which Miskitus retained their arms to defend themselves against the FDN, there was certainly little love between the two groups.<sup>89</sup> “Ráfaga” Reyes, who fought for years alongside the FDN explained “[i]t is very important for all to know that our Indian people in Nicaragua do not want to have any participation with the Somocista National Guard.<sup>90</sup> We are separate from that group... For more than forty-five years the Somocistas had us under their feet, keeping us down, and we will never allow that to be the way of our country again.”<sup>91</sup> The disdain between many of the Miskitu and the FDN was erased by the media’s focus on Muller and his association with them.

When *The New York Times* explicitly stated that Eden Pastora and his Democratic Revolutionary Alliance “sought no association” with the Miskitu they were redoubling their

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<sup>88</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Ráfaga*, 37; Peter Kornbluh, “Test Case for the Reagan Doctrine: The Covert Contra War,” *Third World Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (October 1987): 1120-1121.

<sup>89</sup> Buvollen, “Autonomy: Tactic and Self-Determination,” 107.

<sup>90</sup> The FDN was largely comprised of ex-Somozan National Guardsmen seeking to retake power, which is why Ráfaga and others often referred to them as Somocistas.

<sup>91</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Ráfaga*, 175.

alignment of the rhetorically valuable Miskitu with right-wing forces.<sup>92</sup> In fact, *The Times* ignored the alliance between Pastora and Rivera that was formed when the latter arrived in Costa Rica two months after the Miskitu.<sup>93</sup> Acknowledging this alliance would have endangered the narrative that the Miskitu preferred to work with right-wing rebels and undercut the Reagan administration's efforts to garner American sympathies towards the FDN. Thus by leaving this gap in its reporting *The New York Times* furthered the administration's propaganda efforts. Notably this alliance was absent in other outlets as well – the *United Press International* and *Wall Street Journal* also made no mention of the Pastora-Rivera entente.<sup>94</sup>

## 1983 and Beyond

Thus we can see that in 1982 a narrative of the Miskitu situation in Sandinistan Nicaragua was created in American print news that bolstered the Reagan administration's propaganda aims. Publications with massive circulation perpetuated allegations of massacres and ethnocide, blurred the details of the Miskitu rebellion's *casus belli*, and used this interpretation of events to attack the Nicaraguan government and garner support for the same factions the Reagan administration favored. This was accomplished by putting forth and failing to retract false claims, republication of those claims, taking administration officials demonstrated to be untrustworthy at their word, and ignoring elements of the situation. This pattern continued through 1983 to the end of large-scale Miskitu involvement in 1986, though the methods and

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<sup>92</sup> Riding, "Disenchanted Hero," 1.

<sup>93</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, "Indigenous Rights and Regional Autonomy in Revolutionary Nicaragua," *Latin American Perspectives* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 64. This alliance of anti-imperialist centrists and an autonomy-seeking indigenous people is perhaps one of the more interesting in history, and deserves its own study.

<sup>94</sup> It is devilishly hard to provide a citation for the absence of something. Rest assured that no small amount of effort was expended ensuring that these outlets ran no articles on this entente, at least during 1982. However, you have my sympathies if you were relying on this for your own work.

objectives evolved in response to changing circumstances. Each year from 1983 to 1986 is as rich with sources, details, twists, and intriguing possibilities as 1982, and any given year or the period itself deserve an in-depth study. Below are very brief overviews of each year's major developments within print media coverage and/or circumstances in Nicaragua.

Print news of the Miskitu in 1983 carried many of the hallmarks of the narrative created in 1982. In January a page one article in *The New York Times* shifted the blame for the Red Christmas attack by Miskitu rebels, claiming “an incident in which government forces were reported to have killed 20 to 40 Miskitos in the mining town of Leimus in December 1981 has yet to be explained.”<sup>95</sup> In February a *United Press International* article which also ran in *The New York Times* altered the timeline of Miskitu opposition, claiming that “Miskito Indians... have resisted the authorities in Managua since the Sandinists came to power in a 1979 civil war,” thereby erasing the MISURASATA-Sandinista cooperation from 1979 to 1981.<sup>96</sup> April saw a fresh accusation of attacks on the Miskitu by the Sandinistas. A brief report produced by the *United Press International* claimed that Nicaragua's air force had attacked “at least one Indian village” on March 28, citing the Miskitu village of Santa Clara as a definite site of attack.<sup>97</sup> Interestingly, this attack was not frequently re-publicized in the same manner as Red Christmas, for reasons unknown. It turned out to be a hoax anyway – an evacuation carried out by Miskitu rebels painted as a bombing.<sup>98</sup> Throughout the summer attention paid to the Miskitu dwindled. Their rebellion against the Sandinistas was mentioned on occasion, but in the context of articles largely

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<sup>95</sup> Richard J. Meislin, “Rights and Central America: For Many, Situation is Grim,” *The New York Times*, 1 January, 1983, 1.

<sup>96</sup> United Press International, “Managua Reports 73 Rebels Slain,” *The New York Times*, 5 February, 1983, 2.

<sup>97</sup> United Press International, “Nicaragua's Air Force Said to Bomb Indians,” *The New York Times*, 6 April, 1983, 9.

<sup>98</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Ráfaga*, 121.

about the FDN.<sup>99</sup> In early December 1983 the Sandinistas announced a sweeping amnesty for Miskitus who had taken up arms against them. This proved effective and many self-exiling rebels as well as refugees returned to the Atlantic Coast.<sup>100</sup> Articles ran in *The New York Times* and the *United Press International* celebrating this, though the latter did not mention that the amnesty had a large effect on Miskitu rebels until the end of the month.<sup>101</sup>

Winter into spring of 1984 was particularly slow for news of the Miskitu rebels, and those articles which did mention them did so rather briefly. Instead the focus was placed on the Sandinistas and FDN who continued to fight as Miskitu fighters returned home.<sup>102</sup> In the absence of fresh reports, a number of editorials appeared with much to say on the situation. Two such editorials on the front page of the 7 February and 10 April issues of the *Wall Street Journal* expressed pity for “Miskito Indians, who rebelled after being savaged by the Sandinistas” and attacked “the lawless Sandinistas, who run concentration camps for Miskito Indians” respectively.<sup>103</sup> In the absence of new news to reinforce the ethnocide narrative of the Miskitu, editorials would have to do. By the late spring fresh news of the Miskitu arose which was reported in a way that demonstrates the differing weights placed on news that endangered and news that supported the narrative of Miskitu ethnocide. On 27 May 1984 a group of Miskitu testified before Congress that they were subject to raids and kidnappings perpetrated by

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<sup>99</sup> Raymond Bonner, “Foe of Sandinistas Faults U.S. Policy,” *The New York Times*, April 5, 1983, 3; Barbara Crossette, “Nicaraguan Exiles Resuming Fighting,” *The New York Times*, 15 July, 1983, 1; Stephen Kinzer, “Nicaragua Rebels Said to Step Up Combat Activity,” 26 August, 1983, 1.

<sup>100</sup> Freeland, “Nationalist Revolution and Ethnic Rights,” 178-180.

<sup>101</sup> Stephen Kinzer, “Nicaraguan Regime Planning Amnesty,” *The New York Times*, 1 December, 1983, 13; Anthony R. Harrup, “Nicaragua announces sweeping amnesty offer,” *United Press International*, 5 December, 1983; John Lantigua, “Some 1,500 Indian refugees currently in Costa Rica will...” *United Press International*, 30 December, 1983.

<sup>102</sup> Stephen Kinzer, “Nicaragua, Citing Raids, Says Rebels Have New Skills,” *The New York Times*, 7 March, 1984, 3.

<sup>103</sup> “Review and Outlook (Editorial): Zero Minus Zero,” *Wall Street Journal*, 7 February, 1984, 1; “Review and Outlook (Editorial): Having It Out,” *Wall Street Journal*, 10 April, 1984, 1.

American-backed rebels. This article appeared on page twelve of *The New York Times*.<sup>104</sup> Two weeks later, an article titled “Report Says Nicaragua Killed Some Indians” appeared on page five of the *Times*.<sup>105</sup> The article amounted to three sentences quoted from a one hundred forty-two page report and not much more, but apparently carried more weight than a Congressional testimony. News slowed until the fall, when reports of Brooklyn Rivera’s first peace talks with the Sandinistas made *The New York Times*. The article “Miskito Rebel, Back in Managua, Seeks Self-Rule” was rather level and even rightly identifies autonomy rather than anti-Sandinista sentiment as the cause many Miskitu identify with. Notably, it is one of the longest articles focused on Brooklyn Rivera of the era.<sup>106</sup> The year ended with few other noteworthy developments.

1985 saw a number of news reports which challenged the conception of a united Miskitu front fighting the Sandinistas on ideological ground. For example, in April an article in *The New York Times* detailed the dissatisfaction Miskitu troops following Muller had with their leadership, which they said forced them to commit kidnappings and assault civilians. Several were quoted wishing to return home to Nicaragua, stating they never wished to fight under Muller but were forced to.<sup>107</sup> Another from mid-July cited the human rights group Americas Watch criticizing the Reagan administration for “manipulating and distorting information on human rights abuses in Nicaragua to justify United States support for rebels.”<sup>108</sup> These breaks with the narrative were met with opinion pieces making up for not being news reports by their

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<sup>104</sup> “Nicaraguan Indians Tell Congress of a Rebel Raid,” *The New York Times*, 27 May, 1984, 12.

<sup>105</sup> Reuters, “Around the World; Report Says Nicaragua Killed Some Indians,” *The New York Times*, 8 June, 1984, 5.

<sup>106</sup> Stephen Kinzer, “Miskito Rebel, Back in Managua, Seeks Self-Rule,” *The New York Times*, 21 October, 1984, 12.

<sup>107</sup> James Lemoyne, “Anti-Sandinista Indians Reported Quitting Battle,” *The New York Times*, 9 April, 1985, 9.

<sup>108</sup> Susan F. Rasky, “Rights Group Says U.S. Distorts Nicaragua Reports,” *The New York Times*, 16 July, 1985, 6.

ferocity. One such that appeared on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* attempted to reinforce the narrative created in 1982 by claiming that “the Sandinistas chose to violate the Indians’ human and civil rights by invading Miskito territories to burn down their towns, kill their animals and her the villagers into concentration camps ‘for their own protection.’”<sup>109</sup> Even in 1985 the original misrepresentation of Red Christmas appeared in opinion pieces hoping to shore up the ethnocide narrative, with one dated 13 September calling the event at Leimus “a well-documented massacre of civilians.”<sup>110</sup>

In 1986 news from the Atlantic Coast slowed tremendously. Articles which did appear concerning the Miskitu strayed away from propping up the ailing ethnocide narrative. Even in the case of an actual attack on a village inhabited by Miskitu events were not exaggerated to fit the bill of ethnocide – rather a clear military target of the strike was given.<sup>111</sup> In early April a new rush of refugees to the Honduran border was reported, presented in *The New York Times* as the result of “renewed fighting in Nicaragua.”<sup>112</sup> A week later the cause of this run to the Honduran border was questioned by the human rights organization Americas Watch, which claimed that a United States-backed Miskitu group had intentionally triggered the flight of civilians. To this criticism Elliott Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State, replied that the refugees “say they were driven out by shelling and bombing of their villages by the Sandinistas” and that “the Sandinistas initially entered the villages disguised as Red Cross workers,” and is quoted in closing as saying Americas Watch had adopted “the Borge line.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Marc Rangel, “Letters to the Editor: The Sandinistas vs. the Miskitos,” *Wall Street Journal*, 12 August 1985, 1.

<sup>110</sup> Gary Moore, “The Americas: Sandinista PR Lost on Long-Suffering Nicaraguan Indians,” *Wall Street Journal*, 13 September, 1985, 1.

<sup>111</sup> Stephen Kinzer, “In Nicaraguan Town, the War Intrudes,” *The New York Times*, 8 February, 1986, 2.

<sup>112</sup> James Lemoine, “Exodus of Indians From Nicaragua Feared as Fighting Is Reported,” *The New York Times*, 2 April, 1986, 4.

<sup>113</sup> Matthew C. Quinn, “State Department criticized human rights group’s report,” *United Press International*, 6 May, 1986. Tomas Borge was the Nicaraguan Interior Minister.

After 1986 news of the Miskitu continued to trickle in to American newspapers, although far more slowly than in the years before. Miskitu resistance to the Sandinistas declined after the December 1983 amnesty and continued to do so as government-sponsored autonomy commissions made headway in 1984 and 1985.<sup>114</sup> A smaller Miskitu continuation effort known as KISAN to continued function after 1986, but by then efforts to direct American public sentiment towards the anti-Sandinista forces were severely hampered by the breaking of the Iran-Contra Affair in late 1986.<sup>115</sup> Most that know of the Contra War recognize Oliver North but not Lucía Cardenal Salazar or Edgar Chamorro, and certainly very few recognize the names Steadman Fagoth Muller or Brooklyn Rivera. After their moment in the spotlight as a tool of anti-communist propaganda during the Cold War, the Miskitu people vanished from the American media's eye and in time from the American memory.

In a larger view of Cold War history the Reagan administration's focus on the Miskitu highlights an infuriating hypocrisy. At the same time the Reagan administration was continuously attacking the Sandinista government on the grounds of an ethnocide against an indigenous people it directly supported one four hundred miles away in Guatemala. Marxist guerrillas had established close relations with Mayan villagers in the country's highlands during the 1970s, leading the right-wing junta to initiate a massive scorched-earth campaign. Beyond just making the land unable to sustain guerrillas the Guatemalan army committed a number of massacres specifically targeting the Maya.<sup>116</sup> Reports of the bloodshed reached the United States prompting then-president Jimmy Carter to suspend military aid to Guatemala, specifically citing the widespread human rights abuses. Upon taking office in 1981 Reagan lifted the ban almost

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<sup>114</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, "Indigenous Rights and Regional Autonomy," 51-52.

<sup>115</sup> Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 379.

<sup>116</sup> Michael Reid, *Forgotten Continent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 85.

immediately, claiming Guatemala's genocidal dictator Efraín Ríos Montt had been given "a bum rap."<sup>117</sup> The results were catastrophic for the Maya. According to the Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification – a truth commission established through joint cooperation between the government and guerrillas in 1994 – over 600 massacres had been perpetrated during the civil war. Eighty-three percent of the victims were Mayan, most were innocent victims of a genocide.<sup>118</sup> At the same time this was occurring Reagan praised Montt as "a man of great personal integrity... totally dedicated to democracy."<sup>119</sup> The administration's support for a genocide by a right-wing dictatorship demonstrates how little it truly cared about indigenous rights. It only cared to use indigenous peoples as tools for fighting its war against poorly-defined communist enemies, in arms or on the battlefield of public relations.

The inspiration for this work came from events in late October and November of 2019. As the Trump administration announced its decision to pull American troops out of Syria, internet and cable media exploded with proliferating opinions. While the primary foci of debates were the impact this power vacuum would have on regional factions, the global geopolitical ramifications, and legality and ethicality of prolonged military deployments overseas, a number of commentators expressed their concern for our Kurdish allies. But it was not long until attacks on the Kurds' role in the Syrian Civil War and their history were mounted by certain groups in the national media, supported by right-wing elected officials in the federal government. This attempt to manipulate public perception of an indigenous group which had been our ally in a dangerous time and place inspired me to analyze a past example. It is my hope that this work will

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<sup>117</sup> Valerie M. Hudson and Patricia Leidl, *The Hillary Doctrine: Sex and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 119.

<sup>118</sup> Beatriz Mans, *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 292-294.

<sup>119</sup> Valerie M. Hudson and Patricia Leidl, *The Hilary Doctrine*, 119.

play a part in highlighting the pattern of misrepresenting the truth surrounding indigenous peoples for rhetorical ends which pervades American discourse.