

## The Mind of Somoza

*By Max Holland*

Ensnconced in his bunker in the heart of Managua, a tall, middle-aged man with a pencil-thin mustache and receding hairline is confounding his political opponents, the US government and the mass media. Every segment of Nicaraguan society – from dirt-poor *campesinos* to wealthy industrialists – is strongly opposed to *el hombre* (as Somoza is called by many Nicaraguans who won't say his name because they fear it brings bad luck). The US government would like nothing better than his resignation to forestall the possibility of “another Cuba,” yet Somoza shows no signs of obliging the North Americans, who have always been his greatest supporters.

His departure, imminent in the media's premature obituaries a month ago, is much less predictable now that he has opened negotiations with a broad opposition coalition that represents all but his armed opponents, the Sandinistas.

The president/dictator is negotiating with a three-man delegation representing fifteen opposition groups. The stated purpose is to reach a peaceful resolution of the crisis, a term which to the more conservative groups means Somoza's departure, and to his more radical opponents includes also the confiscation of his ill-gotten property and even some basic restructuring of the political system.

But Anastasio Somoza Debayle won't go. To understand why – and how – he keeps his stranglehold over Nicaragua, one must begin with the National Guard. Recent events showed that sheer force is all Somoza has left, but everyone agrees that as long as that force – meaning the *Guardia* – remains loyal, Somoza's presidency is relatively safe. But how can Somoza retain that loyalty? After all, Nicaragua is a small country of little more than 2 million people and therefore many of the soldiers have bombed, strafed, and shelled their own neighborhoods, if not their own relatives.

The technique for keeping the Guard loyal has been handed down from generation to generation in the Somoza dynasty: in return for security, the Guardsmen receive special privileges and upward mobility. That has always worked, but the problem of the present Somoza may lie in convincing the Guard that *only* a Somoza can deliver these benefits.

The National Guard is kept in line by manipulating historic divisions within the Nicaraguan elites. Four or five family names appear everywhere in the political and economic life of the country. Some call themselves Liberals and follow Somoza; others are in the Conservative Party. Throughout the Somoza dynasty, and for a long time

before, struggles for power and wealth have taken place among these factions. The poor majority has simply been ignored.

Moreover, the traditional oligarchs' disdain for the Somozas is visited on the Guard itself, and the Somozas have shrewdly capitalized on it. They have been godfathers to the Guard while insulating and alienating it from the general populace. As Somoza recently explained, "We are fighting a battle here, my friend [with] a well-to-do group that doesn't want people who are going up on the ladder. The Guard doesn't get admitted to the country clubs, or the better schools. They are trying to push the Guard down in the gutter. We are trying to uplift their status, socially, economically, intellectually."

Somoza "uplifts" the Guard by providing them with a standard of living far above that of the average Nicaraguan. They have separate schools, hospitals, stores and residential areas. And the higher a Guard officer rises, the more lucrative his profession becomes as he gets to partake of the many "business" opportunities that open up, from plain smuggling to mass transit monopolies.

Even with all these incentives to loyalty, Somoza is watchful of the actual military command in the Guard. According to Richard Millett, an American scholar who has written a book on the subject, only about 20 percent of the Guard are combat troops, and command of these forces is exercised directly by the Somoza family or by a very few trusted associates. As Millett points out, that is why the Guard dealt with the September uprisings one city at a time, rather than in a single coordinated attack.

It may also help to explain how Somoza retains control of a country in which all classes revolted against him in a national uprising. But it does not account for his staying and waging war against his country under conditions that have persuaded other dictators to take their millions and run.

The truth seems to be that Somoza sees no distinction between his own welfare and that of Nicaragua. And even before his serious heart attack last year many observers noted the difficulty many Nicaraguans had in imagining life without a Somoza in charge. The family has been in command for forty-two years, and about 75 percent of the population is below 40 years of age.

Somoza's attitude toward his vast holdings typifies his failure to distinguish between himself and Nicaragua. A US envoy once wrote of the previous Somoza that "he sees in democracy only a device for the easy domination of his country, with abundant opportunities for plunder to the strains of the national anthem." The same can be said about his son, whose fortune is estimated at \$400 million to \$500 million. His determination to profit from every kind of business has spawned an apparatus of graft that can hardly be called a government.

Yet Somoza sees it quite differently. He considers himself the prime mover behind Nicaragua's capitalistic development, an investor who takes the risks and therefore deserves the profits. There is a certain perverse logic to his view. While enumerating his

fortune, most stories neglect to point out that half of the seventy or so entities Somoza owns are nearly bankrupt, poorly managed and wasting money. Some are surviving only thanks to favored tax or tariff treatment, and it would be wiser to write them off as bad investments. But Somoza will insist on maintaining a losing venture on the undeveloped Atlantic Coast, for example, for what he considers “national” reasons. He believes, somehow, that he is performing the same function as a Rockefeller or Howard Hughes, and his admiration for such Americans and what they represent is unrestrained.

Anastasio Somoza’s warped nationalism and ego-centrism have been woven into his life ever since he began to be groomed for the presidency at the age of 7, forty-five years ago. It is said that he is the only West Point graduate to receive an entire army as a graduation present. Since then he has been surrounded by a legion of sycophants who strenuously avoid bearing bad tidings. This explains why Somoza still maintains, and believes, that the majority of Nicaraguans support him. If he ever has doubts, they are quickly stilled by his advisers.

Somoza’s self-deception, together with his still unchallenged power over the Guard, makes prediction easier than usual – at least as to what he will try to do. There have been threats to his family in the past, but the negotiations that followed them always left the dynasty intact after superficial concessions. He will try that game again. But if the opposition now dealing with him keeps this record in mind, it will reject his proposals and the talks will break down. Somoza will be trying to split the opposition front and persuade the more conservative elements to go along with his “reform” proposals and thus recreate a shaky consensus of the elites. But this time, after the city-busting brutality of his Guard’s military actions, the opposition to Somoza is angrier and more widespread than ever before. It may not be possible to patch things up.

The present negotiations are being watched over, to some degree, by a three-nation committee of observers including the United States, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic. Not outside power can be the arbiter of events in Nicaragua, least of all this country with its shameful record there. But the United States should implement a policy of positive non-involvement in Somoza’s tortured country by at least withdrawing our military mission and stopping any connection with the Guard. The policy of the United States and the OAS should be bent toward ending the violence and suffering that will last until the day when Somoza and Nicaragua are no longer inseparable.