

AGGRAVATIONS

A Critical Look at How the Grand Rapids Press Reports on Central America

Written and Researched by Jeff Smith and Richa

Published by Loveforce Press
448 Pleasant St. SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49503

Acknowledgements

Particular acknowledgement is made to the Institute for Global ^{Education}, which provided critical support for this project. Also to the Grand Rapids Public Library, main branch, and numerous staff members there, for their crucial assistance.

Our apologies, to those who have been waiting, for the delay in completing this report. It seems that other activities kept interfering. Better late than never, we feel, and we acknowledge ourselves for sticking with it and finally getting it done!

We also acknowledge assistance and support provided by various other individuals and institutions. We thank you all.

- Jeff Smith

Richa

Introduction

We are concerned about the suffering in Central America. We have read and heard from many sources a good deal about the suffering, and the reasons for it. Jeff has witnessed a little of it. Our understanding of the situation is at variance with much of what we have read in the Grand Rapids Press (here after usually abbreviated "Press"). We wanted to find out more precisely where and how such variance exists, and quantify and document it, where possible, for others. Therefore this report.

We are not "dispassionate observers". We are social activists who have long been outraged by injustices done to the majority of people in Central America by the USA government. We have worked, in many different ways, to fight those injustices.

Our outrage, however, serves to deepen our commitment to search for truth in this area of concern. In fact, we believe that "dispassionate" observation is itself, in an important sense, a serious bias. It is natural for us, as human beings, to care for each other. To "dispassionately" watch a group of men brutally assault someone is to go most of the way to becoming an uncaring person, and that is not natural. In the same way, so-called "neutral" reporting that would attempt to remove all feeling

in reporting a child dying an agonizing death from napalm manufactured by and sent from the USA is, in our view, a harmful and extreme bias.

Contrary to the beliefs of at least some people, the public does mostly believe what the mass media say. 1 We are very concerned that bias in that media will serve to harm, indirectly yet substantially, many people in Central America and elsewhere.

We chose to focus on the Grand Rapids Press partly because we are both more oriented to print than other types of media, and partly for the simple reason that it is the only daily paper that is published specifically for our area.

Methodology

We have chosen one year to focus on: 1986g. 2 That is the latest year for which we have been able to obtain fairly comprehensive independent information on Central America that we can use to check against what the Press reports. We have drawn our information from various sources, with heavy emphasis upon primary material gathered by various independent groups.

We have looked carefully at terminology, especially at "loaded" words, and how they are used. We counted the number of times such words were used in particular contexts. For instance, we listed the times that "leftist" occurred with "Nicaragua", and how often "rightist" occurred with "Guatemala". We included any terms we encountered that were used to describe the four countries we chose to focus on: Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

We looked for information on the structure and ownership of the paper, and how that affects the paper's content.

We interviewed most of the local reporters who wrote stories on Central America issues in 1986g. A few were no longer there or otherwise unavailable, and one would not agree to an interview without specific approval from the editor. Despite repeated calls, the editor never connected back with us to arrange an interview. We also attempted, with little success, to obtain information from the owners; Booth Newspapers, a chain of Michigan papers including the Press, and Newhouse, which bought out Booth in 1976g.

The focus here is on politics, broadly, including social and economic factors, and on USA relations with Central America. We generally ignored stories that touched upon any of the four Central American countries peripherally in some other context.

We made an attempt to determine the frequency of various viewpoints presented in the news stories. We first looked to the frequency of various sources of news reports, and then to the frequency of various viewpoints, regardless of the sources.

Basic Data

We found a number of terms, often loaded terms, applied both to governments and to some opposition forces. Nicaragua was the country most frequently mentioned by far, 1913 instances, followed by Honduras with 491, El Salvador with 331, and Guatemala was last with 72.

Following are listings showing how often we found each term applied to each country and to each country's opposition forces. Almost all opposition forces referred to were armed forces and their support organizations. Unarmed opposition was given relatively little coverage. The listings are drawn from all sources—editorials and letters to the editor, as well as news stories.

Nicaraguan Government References

Sandinista	503	repressive	2
leftist, left-wing	114	right-wing (Somoza gov, t)	1
communist	61	red tide	1

marxist	52
regime	13
dictator(ial)	8
Soviet-backed(or similar)	6
terrorist	3
totalitarian	3

Nicaraguan Opposition References

contras	1620
rebels	671
guerrillas	87
US-backed	74
freedom fighters(sometimes in quotes)	52
anti-Sandinista	23
resistance	19
insurgents	17
anti-communist	9
counterrevolutionaries	8
terrorists	7
mercenaries	6
anti-government	4
opposition	4
Marxist Kisan	4
democratic	3
CIA-backed	3
thugs	3

Stalinist	1
unpopular	1
military	1
ruling	1
sorry experiment	1

FARN	2
M-3	2
fascists	2
murderers	2
irregulars	1
pro-US	1
UDN	1
ragtag	1
imperfect	1
killers	1
cut-throat	1
anti-Nicaraguan	1
rightist	1
those fighting for freedom and democracy	1
those fighting the forces of subversion,backed by the Soviet Union,Cuba,Libya, East Germany,and the Palestine Liberation Organization	1

El Salvadoran Government References

US-backed (or similar)	12
repressive	1
centrist	1

El Salvadoran Opposition References

guerrillas	72
leftist (or similar)	41
rebels	22

Guatemalan Government References

right-wing	2
dictatorship	1

El Salvadoran Opposition References(cont)

terrorists	7
insurgency (or similar)	5
FMLN	3
revolutionary	2
saboteurs	1

Guatemalan Opposition References

guerrilla	9
leftist	7

Honduras was consistently referred to without qualifying terms.

Following is a breakdown of the number of column inches given to various sources of news on Central America. Where a source could not be clearly determined, it was not counted. We listed non-government,USA sources only where a viewpoint could clearly be determined,so the total non-government,USA sources is certainly higher than the 417 total listed.

Source

Column Inches

USA Government Executive Branch

522

USA Congress	380
Unidentified USA Government	314
non-government,USA(oppose admin. policy)	210
non-government,USA(support admin. policy)	207
third world	110
USA-supported govt. forces	69
ex-government (USA)	17

We found 22 Central American related stories in 1986g that were written, at least in part, by Press reporters. There were 39 stories from "Press Wire Services". There were nine stories from Press ownership connected organizations: two from Booth News Service, and seven from Newhouse News Service. The other 214 Central American related stories of 1986g were all from other news sources, mostly various wire services. Of those, 169 were from a single wire service: AP (Associated Press). Thus, AP accounted for well over half of the total number of stories on Central America issues.

Emotionally loaded terms were noticeably absent in stories from a few sources, including Newhouse News Service. They were noticeably present in most AP reports, however. Such terms were found in approximately half of Press and Press Wire Service stories.

We were able to find very little info on the ownership of the Press, or how that ownership affects Press reporting. The Press is one of eight Michigan newspapers that is part of the Booth chain. The Booth chain was bought in 1976g by the Newhouse brothers, both of whom are now multibillionaires. We found a few articles about the Newhouse empire, but virtually nothing on Booth. Letters and calls were not answered or returned, except for one letter to Don Newhouse that was answered by Mike Lloyd, the Press editor. That letter provided precious little information. It did state: "We have no 'agenda' in news coverage regarding Central America or any other part of the world except to present a complete and accurate picture of what is going on."

In the majority of the news reports, issues were framed in terms of official US Government policy. Opposition to that policy was given considerable space. Assumptions underlying US Government policy, however, were rarely criticized or questioned. Such basic questioning most often occurred in letters-to-the-editor, despite the fact that both of us, and others we know personally, had had such critical letters rejected for publication.

Viewpoints are impossible to accurately measure, and we found it too difficult to attempt to objectively do so beyond the above generalities.

Of the several reporters interviewed, all said that their stories on Central America issues had not been changed or deleted other than in ways that are a normal part of the editorial process. Responses varied widely as to whether or not the Press generally reports accurately on Central America issues.

We compared Press reports with human rights reports published by the independent human rights organization, Americas Watch, covering each of the four countries for 1986g. 3

If reporters used Americas Watch as a source of information, it was not acknowledged, except once, peripherally. The only direct reference to any human rights report was reference to a US State Dept. report, which was quoted. No independent human rights report was ever quoted. One reference was made to the "Non-governmental Human Rights Commission of El Salvador", which was described as "a left-wing human rights group".

Several references were made to human rights violations by the Nicaraguan government. In some cases, such abuses were highlighted. One article dealt with human rights abuses in El Salvador, mostly centering on allegations by someone alleged to be a guerrilla defector. Passing references were made to contra rights violations, and even less to Guatemalan government violations. None were made regarding human rights violations in Honduras.

The Americas Watch reports for 1986g concluded that human rights violations in 1986g were significantly down in El Salvador and Guatemala, though still very serious.

Human rights abuses by both contras and the FMLN (Salvadoran guerrilla organization) are listed as serious. Human rights abuses by the Nicaraguan and Honduran governments are listed as far less serious - the only major forces not engaging in "systematic violations" of the most basic human rights. The reports said that instances of such abuses do occur, and that that is certainly a matter of concern but as opposed to other governments and groups listed above, at least in the case of Nicaragua, "they do not reflect a governmental policy to commit them or to tolerate them". 4

Advertising takes up more than half the space in the Press. The Press certainly obtains much of its revenue from advertising, which means that major advertisers have great potential to affect the content of the paper. Advertising is known to affect the content of other news media, (4a) and possibly does so for the Press as well. We did not explore this relationship, however. We hope that others will do so at some future time.

ANALYSIS

Of the four Central American countries we concerned ourselves with, the great attention by far was given to Nicaragua. This was true to an even greater degree than indicated by the number of times the various countries were mentioned, as other particularly Honduras, were frequently mentioned in a context in which Nicaragua was the focus.

What made Nicaragua so particularly newsworthy in 1986? Especially as major human rights abuses by the Nicaraguan government did not compare with those of either Guatemala or El Salvador during that year, which happened to be a period of relatively few human rights abuses committed by those governments. One might reasonably consider it newsworthy that a small nation under military attack by a much larger nation still managed to respect human rights more than many of its neighbors whose governments were not under such attack, and that in fact was able to give comparable human rights protection to what the USA government afforded its citizens during World War II. But we found no story that made any such comparisons.

In fact, human rights violations in Nicaragua received more coverage than in any of the other three countries. Only one news story gave significant coverage of some of the context of those violations. 5 The only reported instances of comparisons between human rights violations by the Nicaraguan government and the other three governments were those made or implied by USA government officials. Such comparisons mostly criticized Nicaragua's human rights record or intentions while referring to "democratic" governments elsewhere in the region.

Human rights in El Salvador were given some coverage. But that coverage was cast in such a way as to call into question that human rights abuses were a serious problem in that country. One article gave significant coverage to alleged testimony of control by guerrilla forces of a non-governmental human rights group in that country. 6 The person testifying suddenly had plenty of money. Some of the charges were so extreme as to have little credibility from the outset. None of the charges were proven. But the USA embassy issued a news release, the same day as the initial press conference by the alleged informer, that clearly and specifically in some cases supported the charges. 7 This is in marked contrast to typical responses from embassies and the State Dept. when they have been questioned about disappearances, killings, etc. from El Salvador or Guatemala. The more usual response is that they do not have knowledge, that the problems are an "internal matter" to be resolved by the "democratic process" of the government in question. The Press story did not report any of this context. It is understandable that a paper the size of the Press cannot independently check such reports, but it is far less understandable why agencies such as Americas Watch's independent assessments were not reported - any competent reporter should be able to track down such sources of information.

Many stories tended to reinforce the idea that Nicaragua is a threat to its alleged "communist" leanings. Fewer stories, but a significant number, did the same

in regard to the Salvadorans, whether armed or not, ^{or who} oppose the government. Terms are used uncritically in news reports describing the Nicaraguan government or Salvadoran opposition as "leftist", "marxist", etc. Comparable terms hardly ever used in describing the USA government or governments backed by the USA government. Never did we see an instance of the USA government being described as "right-wing", "fascist", "terrorist", etc., though independent analysis justifies such terms more easily than many similarly loaded terms actually applied to those opposing USA government control. 8

The Nicaraguan government was never described in the Press as "centrist". In fact, only a small minority of people in the country are communist or similarly "left-wing". 9 Land remained mostly in private hands, despite strong appeals for more aggressive land redistribution. 10 Opposition in Nicaragua comes from the socialist and communist parties to the left, as well as various groups to the right. The communist party claims that "the Sandinista government has bent over backward to appease the business interests to keep them from leaving for Miami, and the result has been continued high living by the wealthy and continued poverty for the working class peasantry..." It has little power, gaining less than 2% of the vote in the 1984g elections. 11

Much coverage was given to statements by USA government officials and others denouncing the Nicaraguan government. An example are some statements by USA president Ronald Reagan in one article:

"History will soon record whether the United States Congress, faced with a powerful Soviet-bloc challenge to capture Nicaragua and spread communism throughout Central America, stood by and watched or had the courage to stand up for freedom and American security."

"Reagan asked, 'How can Congress, ignore this storm, gathering so close to our homeland? Nicaragua today rivals Cuba as the principal communist warehouse and exporter of violence in our Western Hemisphere.'" 12

No effort was made to independently assess these and similar statements. News articles focused mostly on the USA government, especially the administration, which ranked first in amount of space given to particular sources/viewpoints. Second place went to non-government USA viewpoints (both pro and anti-administration). Third place went to Congress. Fourth was unidentified government sources, mostly administration officials. USA government sources accounted for more than all other sources that expressed some clear viewpoint. Third world sources accounted for less than 5% of the total coverage, and the majority of that was government and military officials. Very little coverage was given to children, homemakers, peasants, other working people and poor people, or people who oppose USA government intervention in Central America.

Of Congressional sources, some supported the generally reported administration viewpoint, and some opposed it. But even those who opposed it almost universally supported USA intervention in Central America; they simply disagreed on how, i.e. the most effective means to intervene. A more illuminating but fairly typical example is this quote from a Democrat Congressperson responding to Reagan, saying Democrats "agree that the Sandinista government has betrayed the promise of its revolution, has suppressed the freedom of its own people, and has supported subversion in El Salvador. Our concern is that the president is seizing military options before he has exhausted the hope of a peaceful solution." 13

Editorials tended to be more critical of how the USA government administration relates to Central America, but still usually accept basic assumptions. Some examples: An editorial on Soviet intervention in Afghanistan stated:

"Afghanistan is no Nicaragua, beset by civil strife. Afghanistan was brutally invaded by the Soviets when it refused to submit to a puppet regime. The rebels fight is not for power but for survival." 14

This implies that people in Nicaragua were not fighting for survival, which is contradicted by an overwhelming body of evidence, (15) which seems to have been totally ignored by the Press.

Another editorial states: "...government and international groups have already concluded that returning refugees are not persecuted in El Salvador." 16 This assertion is stated as fact, with no attribution.

Though technically true, it is so misleading as to amount to a lie. It is most likely based on statements by the USA State Dept. that drew on an international study to claim that refugees returning to El Salvador did not suffer persecution. That was only even technically possible because that study used a method in which they listed cases of political persecution, of which there were in fact hundreds reported, under the heading of "personal security" cases! In addition, there were a very substantial number of refugees in the study who were not counted because they did not report back. 17

The above editorial also stated:

"What awaits refugees sent back to El Salvador - and what is at bottom of the overall refugee dilemma - is a war environment, an atmosphere of constant violence and fear and an absence of work... Terrorist violence has escalated on both sides; torture remains a common tactic at low levels of the military, reflecting President Jose Napoleon Duarte's shaky hold on his government." 18

That and many other statements in editorials and news articles attempt to put the USA government in a mediating role between violent forces of "the left and the right." Nowhere in the Press is the history and present reality of USA government dominance of El Salvador described, (19) much less are such statements shown for the propaganda effect they have, and are meant to have, on the USA public. 20

Generally critical views expressed in the letters-to-the-editor, with a distinctly wider range of criticism than was generally found in news reports or editorials, gives one indication that the viewpoint of the general public differed substantially from the views generally portrayed by the Press. Independent polls confirm that indication. 21

The vast majority of news stories came from wire services and a few large newspaper syndicates. AP is one of several major media that was revealed in Congressional hearings in the mid-1970s to have been infiltrated by the CIA. 22 This news source, more than most others, regularly used loaded terms that reflected USA government officials statements.

As to USA government "news" generally, in January 1983g Reagan signed a directive authorizing a "domestic propaganda bureaucracy." "A CIA specialist in clandestine overseas media operations, Walter Raymond Jr., was detailed to the NSC staff to apply his trade domestically." Raymond, "successfully recommended the establishment of an inter-governmental network to promote and manage a public diplomacy plan

designed to create support for Reagan's administration policies at home and abroad.. The need to increase the focus on management of public opinion specifically concerning Central America led to the creation of the office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean (S/LPD) funded through the department of State..

"After five years of covert domestic propaganda, on September 30, 1987, the Government Accounting Office... released a Legal Opinion stating that the S/LPD had engaged in illegal 'covert propaganda activities' to influence the media and the public. The report detailed a number of documented cases of media manipulation." 23a

Interviews with some Press employees underscored this problem. News editor Ray Kwapi said the Press is "dependent largely on AP now", and has to decide what will best supplement AP. The Press is limited by a few major wire services, which is "a bit of a problem." Asked if that limitation made for bias, co(23) said there is "a lot to that", as those stories come largely from government.

Several reporters commented that much or most news on Central America come from wire services. Most had no more to say than that. One, Evette Burns, commented that co had "learned a lot from speaking to people who have been there". Co did not comment on learning a lot from wire service reports, for whatever significance that may have. Another, Jim Moncarelli, is, according to at least some of the other reporters, considered the papers resident "expert" on Central America. Jim called the

wire service reports "managed news", and said they are "totally inaccurate". Referring to wire service stories on El Salvador, co said they were "generated from the State Dept. which got its information from the Salvadoran government." Jim then said: "I would not have known the difference if I had not interviewed a whole lot of refugees, who told a much different story than what the Press was getting from the wire services...and TV for that matter."

As to the bias in the Press local stories, Press policy is that Central America related stories must have a local angle. Every reporter interviewed said that cos(24) stories were not censored; they were edited as other stories are edited, for reasons of space, clarity, ect. However, Central America related stories with local reporters bylines accounted for a little less than 10% of all such stories in the Press in 1986g.

Ray KwapiI stated: "The Grand Rapids Press is generally a local paper; local stories take priority. We feel less under obligation to report world news, because other papers do more of that". Co said that, in any case, "we can't afford to do it ourselves". Co recommended that people subscribe to the New York Times for better international coverage. The New York Times certainly provides more international coverage, but we seriously question whether its international coverage is, in fact, better. 25

Comments of Press employees reinforced what we saw for ourselves - the local stories brought out a wide range of viewpoints and a good deal of information about Central America that was not otherwise reported, whereas wire service reports, despite the much greater facilities for gathering information, tended to have a narrower perspective, taken as a whole.

There seemed to be less use of loaded language in local reports, though there was some, perhaps reflecting the systematic use of such language in some wire service reports. Similarly, assumptions seemed to be made less quickly by local reporters than in most of the wire service reports. AP, in particular, was almost predictable in its use of terms such as "leftist Sandinistas". If the terms had not been given a certain legitimacy by wire service reports, we doubt that local reporters would have referred to supplies sent to a group of terrorist mercenaries (the Contras) as "humanitarian aid", (26) or to a non-aligned, nationalistic government (the Nicaraguan government) as "leftist", (27), or to contras as "freedom fighters". 28

Some language is more subtle in its effect. The description of El Salvador as a "strife-torn land" (29) subtly implies that El Salvador's problems have no particular cause, or at least that they are beyond USA control. This, of course, is highly questionable at best. 30

Not being able to interview the Press' editor or owners, we were able to gain little information about their editorial policies and the extent of their control. What information we did find indicates that they do not, at least overtly, direct the paper's policy as to reporting on Central America. To a substantial degree, it seems that they have let the USA government do that for them!

A disturbing pattern we found is the use of unnamed sources for information. The unnamed sources are almost always government "officials". How can stories be checked when they originate from people who refuse to identify themselves? This is not just an occasional straying from insistence on someone being publicly accountable for government information - over 10% of the total column inches *information or views given by unidentified government "officials"* were

Almost no column inches were given to statements of poor people in Central America. The exceptions were notable for their rarity. Various public and third world viewpoints got occasional coverage.

If one reads the Press carefully over a long period of time, one can get a good deal of information, though by no means all the relevant information that should be available to get a balanced picture. But the reader is almost bombarded with USA government administration views, which are often proclaimed in headlines, usually in the first few pages. Such repetition is likely to sink in, even sometimes with the careful and critical reader. Terminology used by some of the Press

reporters, albeit only occasionally, is one evidence of that.

Press reporting was by no means entirely one-sided, even considering just the wire services. One article told of USA government pressure to make an issue of a "routine border clash" in order to put pressure on Congress. 31 Another left a negative impression of Nicaragua if one read only the headline, but went into unusually good detail as to why Nicaragua, at that time, would not sign a peace pact. 32 Another gives a good description of the union situation in El Salvador (33), though there is virtually nothing else that even begins to do so.

These and other good articles, however, tended to stand in isolation, and to require careful reading. More important, they were almost always kept separate from the framework of the USA government being responsible for most of the problems in Central America, due to its long and continuing history of exercising near-total control over the destiny of that region. 34 In addition, propaganda is not likely to be very effective if it does not give the appearance of objectivity. The many crucial articles within the narrowly defined framework of debate, the few that extend beyond that framework, effectively serve to provide that appearance to those with little or no independent knowledge of the issues.

Another subtle misuse of terminology is use of the term "U.S." in a manner so as to subtly give the impression that people in the USA as a whole agree with or support whatever is being quoted. An example: "Reagan is prepared to register U.S. displeasure with Mexico's policies in Central America." 35 It is really Reagan registering the displeasure, but the sentence implies that Reagan speaks for the people of the USA. Another such use is the phrase "Honduras, a U.S. ally in Central America." 36 The implication is that the Honduran governmental system is good as far as USA people are concerned, an implication that is highly questionable at best. 37

A few of the local protests against USA government policies toward Central America received press coverage. There were several pictures of protests elsewhere, but generally with very little if any statements of the protestors. On the other hand, one rightwing protest in El Salvador against ex-USA president Jimmy Carter gave about six column inches to the views of the protestors, (38) which is probably more than the far more numerous USA citizens' protests against USA government policy received all year. Nor was that protest put in context of similar protests that have been known to have been staged by the CIA, though it had the earmarks of such protests. 39

Some instances of what would seem to be good reporting did not provoke the response one might expect, if any at all. Perhaps it was because items were too well buried, combined with a generally ill-informed public. One such instance was buried in a typical story headline "Reagan's Hard Sell On Contra Aid Angers Democrats." It told of the USA government-funded National Endowment for Democracy channeling money to a group called Prodemca, which "has placed full-page advertisements in the Washington Post, The New York Times, and The Washington Times urging Congress to support President Reagan's request for \$100 million in military and non-lethal aid to the Nicaraguans...contras..." 40 In connection with this story, the Press might have explored local businessperson Richard Devos's connection with the National Endowment for Democracy - that is certainly a "local angle". But no such story ever appeared.

Another article quoted a USA Senator, in referring to a group of priests and ministers who opposed aid to the contras, as saying "the administration's argument doesn't seem to be getting through." Then Secretary of State George Schultz was quoted as asking "why the senators couldn't handle their own constituents." 41 Such statements ought reasonably to provoke outrage in a country whose government is supposed to be of, by, and for the people. Only one problem: where was the outrage?

There were numerous articles about attempts to convince Congress to fund the Contras - a difficult fight, despite the passive acquiescence by most citizens whose money was involved in those decisions. Yet there was only one article on Quest for Peace, (42) a private effort of USA citizens that succeeded in sending supplies to Nicaragua surpassing value the amounts voted by Congress for the contras.

It is unfortunate that the majority of the public does not have access to or knowledge of alternative news sources. The following information was taken from several 1986g issues of the Central American Historical Institutes' Update, an information bulletin published out of Georgetown University. In our opinion this news bulletin is by no means just the opposite of the Press in regards to its coverage of Central America. They also have critical statements to make in regards to Nicaragua. In other words, this is not a "leftwing" news source, but a news source which seeks to present facts in as non-biased an approach as possible.

It is interesting that nowhere in the 1986g Press coverage of Nicaragua do they have any articles that present the government there in a positive light. This type of information is not lacking in several of the 1986g Update bulletins. Update has articles that discuss the progress of prison reform in Nicaragua(44), development of civil liberties in regards to the Nicaraguan constitution(45), education(46), literacy programs(47), land reform(48), and, despite a 1985 economic embargo by the USA government on Nicaragua, other USA allied countries continue trade relations with Nicaragua.49

Another issue deals with at length the result of the World Courts ruling on some aspects of USA policy towards Nicaragua.50 The World Court ruled that the embargo on Nicaragua and aid to the contras are in violation of International Law. The USA government has ignored these violations by continuing the embargo and sending aid. It is quite possible that if Nicaragua had been ruled in violation of International Law it would be on the front page of every major USA paper for days, and yet the Press reported the USA violation of such laws twice, with little detail and with no expression of disgust or outrage against these violations.

These are only a few examples to illustrate the lack of real information provided by the Press in regards to Central America. We did not deal with any of the other three countries only because this comparison would become quite lengthy and our hopes would be that the readers of this report would earnestly seek out other news sources for information. Though many Update issues deal with Nicaragua at least as many dealt at length with Honduras, Guatemala and/or El Salvador. The ratio in the Press notably favors articles on Nicaragua. Let us simply conclude, in regards to El Salvador and Guatemala, that they are, "...the only two governments in the hemisphere that abducted, killed, and tortured political opponents on a systematic and widespread basis," 1986-87g being the sixth successive year that they achieved this honor.51

Conclusions

The Grand Rapids Press severely distorts news on Central America and related issues. This distortion is caused largely by the papers use of wire services, particularly AP, as sources of information.

The paper relies much too heavily upon the USA government as a source of information. In doing so, through wire services and other sources, it is aiding in a USA government orchestrated propaganda effort. Stories are rarely checked with independent non-governmental sources, even though many such sources are really available, even to a paper with the relatively modest resources of the Press.

We were only able to draw minimal conclusions about how those at higher levels of control influence how the Press reports on Central America issues. This is due to lack of easily accessible information, our own limited resources, and lack of cooperation from those at the higher levels. As to that lack of cooperation, we can only ask: Why?

It was a far different story at the base of the pyramid - reporters, with one exception, readily agreed to interviews. The openness to interviews reflected the reporters' openness to present whatever facts and views they uncovered. There were still some problems at the repertorial level, mainly acceptance of certain assumptions and use of loaded terms in some instances. But local reporters covered a wide range of material, providing a good deal of information that otherwise would not have been available to Press readers in 1986g.

In reporting on Central America issues, the Grand Rapids Press is not meeting

its own standards, not to mention those of the public that it ought to be serving. The Canons of Journalism of the American Society of Newspaper Editors state: "News reports should be free from opinion or bias of any kind." And further: "By every consideration of good faith a newspaper is constrained to be truthful. It is not to be excused for lack of thoroughness or accuracy within its control, or failure to obtain command of these essential qualities."

Recommendations

Because the Press's major source of Central America "news"-AP- is so clearly biased, we recommend that it not be used. A "wire service" that serves largely as a propaganda conduit cannot be considered a legitimate news source.

Use other wire service stories with care. Reject loaded language generally, and reject stories that make unsubstantiated assumptions.

The objection that this may leave a gap in reporting, especially reporting on international news, may be met in several ways. First, eliminating propaganda will only leave a "propaganda gap", which is a healthy step toward a propaganda void, which should be the ideal. Second, selective use of some of the more credible news services should be able to do much to fill that gap. Third, independent news information sources not now being utilized should be, and can not only fill the gap, but provide much more balanced coverage in the process. Among the many that can provide reliable information on Central America issues, we recommend the following: Central America Historical Institute, Americas Watch, Amnesty International, Witness for Peace.

We have to question the competence and/or honesty of an editor who allows a paper to be so blatantly used for propaganda purposes while claiming to strive only for accuracy. We suggest some remedial journalism courses, or perhaps replacement with a new editor.

The Press and its owners should publically disclose their structure, salaries, profits, and other information that might bear on how the news is reported. The poor of Central America have almost no voice in the Press, we believe that such skewed reporting is related to the Press's ownership and structure.

We could suggest that S1 and Don Newhouse give the Press 1% of their wealth for the purpose of hiring reporters to visit Central America (and elsewhere) to report firsthand on the news. If they agreed to give an equal amount to each of their other 21 newspapers, that will still leave them with 78% of their wealth, i.e. about \$6 billion, which we think is enough to live on. And with 75 million dollars for international reporting, the Press should be able to do a credible job.

But we won't make that suggestion. The Press might just become another New York Times, which has money to send people all over the world, yet is still plenty biased. Besides it would hardly be ethical to suggest a redistribution of wealth among already well-off Americans, when that wealth really should be returned to third world poor people.

Finally, there should be a substantial measure of public control over the Press, including its content. The Press is a monopoly paper in the Grand Rapids area, and has a major effect upon those of us who live here. We, the public, should work to bring about such control.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1) "Public Opinion Quarterly", Summer 1988g, p.174
- 2) The "g" in the date stands for "Gregorian", and indicates that the Gregorian calendar is being used. This symbol is used to indicate that there are other calendars besides the one most of us normally use.
- 3) "Human Rights in Guatemala", Feb. 1987g; "Human Rights in Honduras", May 1987g; "Human Rights in Nicaragua, 1986", Feb. 1987g and "The Civilian Toll, 1986-1987", Aug. 30, 1987g, all published by Americas Watch.
- 4) "Human Rights in Nicaragua, 1986", op. cit. supra. p.7.

- 4a) see "Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media", by Michael Parenti, 1986g, pp. 48-50.
- 5) "In the Line of Fire", article in Grand Rapids Press, Sept. 27, 1986g, p. D1.
- 6) "Charges Split Church, State in El Salvador", article in Grand Rapids Press, Aug. 9, 1986g, p. D5.
- 7) "The Civilian Toll, 1986-1987", op. cit. supra, p. 300.
- 8) See, e.g., "The Managua Lectures", 1987g, and "The Culture of Terrorism", 1988g, both by Noam Chomsky, and "The Central America Fact Book" by Deb Preusch and Tom Barry, 1986g.
- 9) "Update", Central America Historical Institute, Apr. 2, 1986g.
- 10) Ibid., Feb. 7, 1986g.
- 11) Ibid., Apr. 2, 1986g.
- 12) "Reagan Warns Against Failure To Arm Contras", Grand Rapids Press, March 9, p. A3.
- 13) "Reagan Links Drug Fight to Contra Plea", Grand Rapids Press, March 17, p. A1.
- 14) "Afghan Horror In 7th Year", editorial in Grand Rapids Press, Jan. 2, 1986g, p. A14.
- 15) See note 8.
- 16) "Refugees From The Other War", editorial in Grand Rapids Press, March 7, p. A10.
- 17) "The Civilian Toll, 1986-1987", op. cit. supra, pp. 291-295.
- 18) See note 16.
- 19) "The Civilian Toll, 1986-1987", op. cit. supra, p. 213. See also, generally, "El Salvador: The Face of Revolution" by Janet Schenk and Robert Armstrong 1982g, and "Witness to War" by Charles Clements, 1984g.
- 20) "The Sword and the Dollar", by Michael Parenti, 1989g, p. 74. Note that independent polls are becoming an endangered species. An article in The Nation, May 7, 1988g, p. 635, says: "Gallups international affiliates regularly conduct secret public opinion research on behalf of the U.S. government. Most of the studies, including the Central America polls, are commissioned by the U.S. Information Agency, the governments propaganda arm.... The USA routinely classifies poll results..."
- 22) Reported in "Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media" by Michael Parenti, p. 233.
- 23) "Co" is a non-gendered personal pronoun that substitutes for "she", "he", "him", "her", or sometimes "it".
- 25) See article "Lemoynespeak" by Edward S. Herman, in Zeta, May 1988g, pp. 39-42. See "The Culture of Terrorism" by Noam Chomsky, 1988g, p. 203.
- 26) See Grand Rapids Press articles: "Professor Says U.S. is Pursuing A 'Selfish' Policy in Nicaragua", Feb. 1, 1986g, p. D1, and "24-Hour Latin Tour Reinforces Henry's Backing of Contra Aid", March 16, 1986g, p. A1.
- 27) See Grand Rapids Press articles: "Petitioners Find Rep. Henry 'Not Home'", March 15, 1986g, p. A3, and "Contra Setback Just Temporary, Henry Contends", March 21, 1986g, p. A1.
- 28) "Military Advisor Speaks for U.S. Policy in Central America", article in Grand Rapids Press, October 6, 1986g, p. C3.
- 29) "Trip to El Salvador Ended Three-Year Wait for Adoption", article in Grand Rapids Press, Jan. 6, 1986g, p. D3.
- 30) See note 19.
- 31) "U.S. Sought to 'Create' Major Crisis, Honduras Aide Says", article in Grand Rapids Press, Apr. 30, 1986g, p. A5.
- 32) "Nicaragua Won't Sign Peace Pact, Ortega Maintains", article in Grand Rapids Press, May 12, 1986g, p. E1.
- 33) "Touring Salvadoran Seek Local Labor Union Support", article in Grand Rapids Press, Aug. 17, 1986g, p. A17.
- 34) See note 8.
- 35) "Reagan to Meet Mexican President, Crack the Whip", article in Grand Rapids Press, Jan. 2, 1986g, p. A3.
- 36) "U.S. to give Honduras as many as 24 fighter jets", article in Grand Rapids Press, Nov. 3, 1986g, p. B1.
- 37) See, e.g., introduction to "Human Rights in Honduras", op. cit. supra, pp. 1-6.

- 38) "Carter Visit Draws Fiery Protest in El Salvador", article in Grand Rapids Press, Feb. 11, 1986g, p. C8.
- 39) See, e.g., Philip Agee's 1975g book "CIA Diary".
- 40) "Reagan's Hard Sell On Contra Aid Angers Democrats", article in Grand Rapids Press, March 19, 1986g, p. A3.
- 41) "Angry Schultz Pushes Congress On Contra Aid", article in Grand Rapids Press, Feb. 28, 1986g, p. A12.
- 42) "Religious Opponents of contra aid hope to counter U.S. funds", article in Grand Rapids Press, Nov. 25, 1986g, p. A6.
- 43) See note 25.
- 44) "Update", vol. 5, No. 31, July 24, 1986g.
- 45) "Update", vol. 5, no. 39, Oct. 27, 1986g.
- 46) "Update", vol. 5, no. 21, May 23, 1986g.
- 47) "Update", vol. 5, no. 2, Jan. 24, 1986g.
- 48) "Update", vol. 5, no. 4, Feb. 7, 1986g.
- 49) "Update", vol. 5, no. 7, Feb. 27, 1986g.
- 50) "Update", vol. 5, no. 44, Dec. 12, 1986g.
- 51) "The Culture of Terrorism", by Noam Chomsky, 1988g, p. 252.

*** For further examples of media bias and control of information in regards to Central America, we suggest the following:

- "Manufacturing Consent; The Political Economy of the Mass Media", by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman.
- "Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media", by Micheal Parenti.
- "Reagan's 'Public Diplomacy'", by Robin Anderson, Covert Action Information Bulletin, November 31 (Winter 1989g), pp. 20-24.
- Envio and Update, newsletters published by the Central America Historical Institute.
- The Central America Fact Book, by Deb Preusch and Tom Barry.
- On Power and Ideology: The Managua Lectures, by Noam Chomsky.

**** There is no copyright on this material, anyone should feel free to reproduce any portion of this material for their use, in fact we encourage it!!!!!!

BASTA !!!!!!!

P.S.: We don't believe the liberal media!