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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the support of Congressman Charles Wilson, D-TX, for the Nicaraguan government of Anastasio Somoza Debayle from March 1977 to July 1979. A narrative of Wilson's actions and motivations it relies heavily on his congressional papers for primary sources. This work argues that Wilson was motivated by his personal anti-Communist beliefs to challenge the perceived biased application of the Carter Administration's human rights policy against the Somoza regime. He saw the administration's abandonment of Nicaragua, a traditional Cold War ally after four decades of loyal support, as directly contributing to the rise of a Communist regime following Somoza's fall. It also explores the role of Congress in influencing American foreign policy. Furthermore, it proves that Wilson was a committed anti-Communist with an interest in foreign policy before his adventures in the mountains of Afghanistan during the 1980s for which he has become famous

Degree Type

Thesis

Degree Name

Master of Arts - History

Department

History

First Advisor

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Keywords

Rep. Charlie Wilson, anti-communism, human rights, Anastasio Somoa Debayle, Nicaragua

Subject Categories

Diplomatic History | Latin American History | Political History | United States History

Charlie Wilson's First War: Challenging Carter's Human Rights Policy through his
Support for Anastasio Somoza Debayle, 1977-79.

By

Sherman J. Sadler, Bachelor of History

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Masters of History

Stephen F. Austin State University

August, 2019

Charlie Wilson's First War: Challenging Carter's Human Rights Policy through his Support for
Anastasio Somoza Debayle, 1977-79.

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The purpose of this thesis is to examine the support of Congressman Charles Wilson, D-TX, for the Nicaraguan government of Anastasio Somoza Debayle from March 1977 to July 1979. A narrative of Wilson's actions and motivations it relies heavily on his congressional papers for primary sources. This work argues that Wilson was motivated by his personal anti-Communist beliefs to challenge the perceived biased application of the Carter Administration's human rights policy against the Somoza regime. He saw the administration's abandonment of Nicaragua, a traditional Cold War ally after four decades of loyal support, as directly contributing to the rise of a Communist regime following Somoza's fall. It also explores the role of Congress in influencing American foreign policy. Furthermore, it proves that Wilson was a committed anti-Communist with an interest in foreign policy before his adventures in the mountains of Afghanistan during the 1980s for which he has become famous

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Introduction

The election of Democrat Jimmy Carter as President in 1977 created political and ideological concerns for hawkish members of his own party who felt that the president's policies put them at risk. The party's shift towards the progressive left, reflected in the introduction of human rights into American foreign policy and the State Department's attempts to distance the United States from regimes deemed to have violated human rights, deepened divisions between moderate and conservative Democrats. For Texas Congressman Charles "Charlie" Wilson, Carter's shift away from what had long been an established U.S. foreign policy of opposing Communism at every turn represented a danger to national security and reeked of appeasement. He also saw the administration's weak stance on Communist aggression as a potential liability for his and other Southern Democrats' political futures, because it could leave them exposed to a challenge from a more conservative Democrat, especially in conservative districts like East Texas.¹ It was a desire to push back against the Carter administration's foreign policy and prevent an American ally from falling to a Communist insurgency that led Wilson to support continued U.S. aid to the Nicaraguan government of Anastasio Somoza Debayle, despite the regime being labeled a violator of human rights by the administration.

¹ Robert A. Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua, Revised and Updated* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Westview Press, 2002), 45, 314 note 11.

Wilson's actions were driven by his own anti-Communist beliefs and his realpolitik view of foreign policy. He was looking for a way to challenge the Carter Administration's human rights policy which he viewed as biased against conservative regimes and dangerous to America's interests; Nicaragua simply became the place this fight took place.² Somoza, however, was motivated by his family's personal history which viewed continued American support as vital to the regime's survival. Throughout the Somoza dynasty's four decades in power it cultivated and maintained a powerful network of lobbyists in the United States to preserve Nicaragua's relationship with Washington. It was through this network, which Somoza inherited, that Wilson was recruited to campaign in Congress on Nicaragua's behalf. Somoza's actions throughout the final two and a half years of his presidency, during which Wilson supported him, followed the same path that had worked for his family during seven American presidencies.³

Charles "Charlie" Wilson was elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1973 to represent Texas's 2nd Congressional district. By the time he arrived in Washington, his reputation as a hard-drinking womanizer was already well established. This reputation earned him the nickname of "good time Charlie", an image

² Washington Bureau, "Wilson: Nicaragua or E-Tex?," *Lufkin News*, May 17, 1978, in Charlie Wilson Congressional Papers (G-1), Federal Paper, Foreign Operations, Nicaragua, Box 2 Folder 6, at East Texas Research Center at Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches TX, from here on referred to as C.W. Collection.

³ Robert David Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War* (New York; Cambridge University Press, 2006), 247-48; Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 44; Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy towards Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 62-63.

that rather than denying he embraced fully. Here was a politician who flew a revolving door of girlfriends, most much younger than him, around the world at taxpayer expense. This included taking his dates to warzones and on trips to meet dictators including Somoza. Despite a lifestyle and chauvinistic statements that would be political suicide for most politicians, he maintained his seat in Congress. He later claimed that it was his willingness to admit his faults and not hide his flamboyant lifestyle that allowed him to maintain the support of his constituents in the piney woods of East Texas, who re-elected him twelve times from 1973 to his resignation in 1996. As he explained, Christianity was a religion built on forgiveness which allowed churchgoers to tolerate a confessed, if unrepentant, sinner. At the same time the country boys and rednecks could live vicariously through him, while secretly wishing they were able to have as much fun. Throughout his time in Congress Wilson never forgot to take care of his constituents, "the home folks", and at times would personally call both state and federal agencies on their behalf to resolve issues. His ability to use his position in Congress to secure lucrative government contracts and federal money for the district also reinforced popular support. Wilson was a liberal when it came to domestic issues such as civil rights or the economy.⁴

These liberal domestic politics were combined with a hawkish foreign policy stance, especially when it came to opposing Communism. Wilson's reputation created the

⁴ John Spong, "The Rehabilitation of Charlie Wilson," *Texas Monthly*, (June 2004), <https://www.texasmonthly.com/politics/the-rehabilitation-of-charlie-wilson/> (accessed January 5, 2019); George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003), 33-35.

image of him as a Congressional joke, but beneath the facade was a formidable politician and fervent anti-Communist with deep personal ambition and a sense of obligation to oppose any perceived Communist threat. As Gus Avrakotos, the C.I.A. operative who would become vital to Wilson's covert campaign in Afghanistan during the 1980s, said, "As I saw it, the tie that bound us together was chasing pussy and killing Communists." Wilson's hatred of Communism dated to at least the Vietnam War during which he blamed the deaths of men from his district on Soviet support for the North Vietnamese. Furthermore, Wilson came of age during the 1950s when the Cold War was raging. He graduated from the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, in 1956 and served in the navy from 1956 to 1960. Both his childhood and time in the navy reinforced his anti-Communist beliefs. He truly believed that the ultimate goal of the Communists was to take over the world and that it was the duty of the United States to protect the free world from the red menace. Wilson's anti-Communist beliefs in defending other nations from Communist aggression connected with his desire to root for an underdog. Seeing smaller nations bullied by bigger neighbors, especially if the aggressors had links to Communism, motivated his foreign policy direction. This desire to assist underdogs governed Wilson's first foray into foreign policy as a Congressman, not in Nicaragua but in support of Israel.⁵

⁵ Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War*, 30-32; Spong, "The Rehabilitation of Charlie Wilson," *Texas Monthly*, (June 2004); Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War*, 247-48; Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 44; Schoultz, *Human Rights*, 62-63.

Foreign policy was the side of Congress that got Wilson excited, especially if there was a chance to oppose Communist expansion or defend an ally of the United States. Desiring to do both led Wilson to first support Israel and would later fuel his desire to preserve the Somoza regime in Nicaragua. Beginning with his first term in 1973, Wilson's personal desire to support an underdog led him to champion the beleaguered state of Israel. This tiny American ally surrounded by Soviet-backed enemies provided Wilson with a cause that suited his own desires to oppose Communist aggression. He described his passionate support for Israel, "I bought the whole thing - the beleaguered democracy surrounded by Soviet-armed barbarians - survivors of Nazi concentration camps - David versus Goliath." Israel was a country filled with underdogs who did not need or desire America to do their fighting for them, only seeking the material and financial support to balance the scales with the Soviet aid given to their enemies.⁶ For Wilson a similar image could be drawn between Israel and Nicaragua. Like Israel Nicaragua was a small nation traditionally allied with the United States that appeared to be surrounded by enemies who were trying to overthrow its government in order to facilitate a Communist takeover. The support provided to the Marxist-affiliated Sandinista movement opposed to the Somoza regime by Venezuela, Panama, and Costa Rica stressed to Wilson the need to preserve American support for their long-standing ally in Central America.⁷ Israel played a role in stressing to Wilson the dangers the Carter

⁶ Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War*, 30-32.

⁷ "Transcript of Somoza interview", *Face the Nation*, April 15, 1979, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 32.

Administration's seemingly soft stance on Communism could have on ties between the U.S. and Nicaragua.⁸

The connections between the Somoza dynasty and the United States began with Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza, the patriarch of the dynasty, who used his position as commander of the U.S.-created Guardia Nacional to take power in 1936 with American backing. President Franklin D. Roosevelt recognized Somoza as the legitimate leader of Nicaragua despite the coup. Allegedly his comments on the Nicaraguan leader included "Somoza may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch."⁹ This statement epitomized the position that Wilson would take decades later that the Somoza dynasty deserved American support despite its flaws because any Somoza usually was America's typical ally in Central America.¹⁰ The key feature of this relationship was Nicaragua's willingness to vote in lock step with the United States in both the United Nations and the Organization of American States. This included joining the U.S. to support the creation of the State of Israel.¹¹ The Somoza family maintained a network of paid lobbyists in the U.S., who allowed the regime to exert considerable influence on American policy. Luiz Somoza, the older brother of Anastasio Somoza Debayle, was investigated by the Justice Department in the early 1960s for suspected influence peddling in Congress through this

⁸ Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War*, 30-32.

⁹ Laura Richardson, "Wilson and the Dictator: The Congressman from Nicaragua", *Texas Observer*, September 23, 1977, 6.

¹⁰ Knut Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza, 1936-1956* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 18, 51-52, 62-64; Richard Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty: A History of the U.S Created Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua and the Somoza Family* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1977), 201-205.

¹¹ Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War*, 30-32, 36; Charles A. Krause, "PLO, Israel Compete for Latin Allies", *Washington Post*, August 20th, 1979.

network of lobbyists, illustrating the effort that the Somoza family placed on maintaining its favorable status with the American government.¹²

The dynasty was also staunchly anti-Communist and, following the 1959 Cuban Revolution, anti-Fidel Castro. Nicaragua was used as a staging point for the Bay of Pigs operation, further demonstrating the dynasty's opposition to any expansion of Communism in Latin America, mirroring U.S. policy before the election of Jimmy Carter. Being vocal anti-Communists and strong supporters of American policy allowed the regime's corruption and brutality to be ignored by many in the United States. America looked the other way, as it did in numerous countries including Egypt and Israel, in order to maintain relations and preserve an ally that was seen as vital to regional security.¹³ It was through the continuation of the Somoza Lobby that Wilson was recruited to protect American support for the dynasty. his position on the House Appropriations Committee made him a valuable ally in the fight to keep U.S. aid flowing to Nicaragua.¹⁴

Anastasio Somoza Debayle maintained his own sense of agency throughout his time in power. He continued the policy of courting the good will of the United States that was used by both his father and older brother during their own times in power because it was valuable to him. The image of American support provided legitimacy to his regime both at home and abroad, undermining the ability of the Nicaraguan opposition to

¹²Schoultz, *Human Rights*, 62-63.

¹³ Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War*, 30-32, 36; William LeoGrande, *Our own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 18-20; Richardson, "Wilson and the Dictator", *The Texas Observer*, September 23, 1977, 7.

¹⁴ Bill Choyke, "Nicaraguan military aid based on skimpy details," *Star-Telegram*, (Fort Worth), July 29, 1977, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 34.

threaten the regime.¹⁵ American aid, both military and civilian, pumped millions of dollars into the Nicaraguan economy, which he and his family dominated. In turn, Somoza spent millions of dollars cultivating and maintaining a network of lobbyists in Washington, D.C.¹⁶ This lobby included prominent law firms with direct access to the floor of Congress as well as Rep. John Murphy, D-NY, who was a childhood friend of Somoza. They also included Raymond Molina, a Cuban exile who took part in the Bay of Pigs. It was through this network and particularly Fred Korth, a Texas businessman and former Secretary of the Navy, that Wilson would be brought on board.¹⁷ The desire to maintain U.S. support led Nicaragua to be a guaranteed vote in both the United Nations and the Organization of American States for the United States.¹⁸

His direct access to the floor of Congress set Somoza apart from other Latin American governments that lobbied the U.S.¹⁹ When the Sandinistas became a real threat to his government Somoza sent numerous witnesses to testify before Congress regarding their links to Cuba. Under previous administrations any connection between an opposition group and Cuba would have ensured U.S. support for the government. However, Carter had changed the rules with his insistence on human rights. In response to these changes Somoza allowed the opposition newspaper *La Prensa* to remain open in order to create the image that he was not a dictator. The presence of a seemingly free

¹⁵Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza, 1936-1956*, 166-68; LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 18-20.

¹⁶Richardson, "Wilson and the Dictator", *Texas Observer*, September 23, 1977, 8.

¹⁷LeoGrande, *Our own Backyard*, 18-20; Schoultz, *Human Rights*, 62-63.

¹⁸ Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War*, 30-32, 36.

¹⁹Schoultz, *Human Rights*, 58.

press was used by his supporters, including Wilson, as proof that Nicaragua was not a repressive society.²⁰ Under previous administrations this campaign would have succeeded in maintaining U.S. support. Despite State Department pressure Somoza refused to accept an American-backed peace deal between his government and the opposition. He eventually fled Nicaragua in 1979 only after the military situation had become hopeless.²¹

Both Wilson and Somoza acted in accordance with their own agendas, and both of their political views were shaped by the worlds they came from. Wilson was a traditional anti-Communist who sought to oppose Communism whenever possible. This included preserving regimes, like Somoza's, allied with America who opposed Communism despite any flaws they might have. Wilson's anti-Communist beliefs pre-dated his support for Somoza and continued after Somoza's fall. The efforts of Somoza's lobby convinced Wilson to aid Somoza's cause in Congress. Without the influence of this lobby it is likely that Wilson would have chosen another area of foreign policy to focus on. Possibly this could have meant additional efforts in support of Israel, who Wilson would support throughout his time in Congress. At the same time Somoza was following the tried and tested path laid down by his father and older brother to maintain U.S. support for over forty years. Stressing the Communist and especially Cuban ties of opposition groups attempting to oust them from power had proven to be a useful tool for keeping Washington on the regime's side. However, both men found themselves fighting an uphill

²⁰ "Transcript of Appropriations Sub-Committee Meeting", *House of Representatives Records*, June 22-23. C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 6; Anastasio Somoza as told to Jack Cox, *Nicaragua Betrayed* (Boston: Western Islands Publishers, 1980), 68.

²¹ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 21-24.

battle in a changing American political climate. The election of Carter and the backlash from both the Vietnam War and Watergate had weakened U.S. public support for traditional military strongmen like Somoza. The corruption and brutality associated with these regimes was seen as weakening America's moral standing abroad and as a relic of a misguided past, especially among the left-wing of the Democratic Party. Despite these obstacles Wilson and Somoza soldiered on trying to hold the line against a supposed Communist takeover in the hope that American opinion and policy would swing back in their favor.

Chapter One

Wilson and Somoza, 1977: Confronting Policy Bias and Legislative Success

The U.S. Presidential election of 1977 revealed a split within American politics over how foreign policy should be conducted. President Jimmy Carter incorporated human rights into American foreign policy in an attempt to break with the militancy of the Vietnam War era by using American financial aid, including military assistance, as leverage to force regimes to make political reforms. This was a shift away from decades of established U.S. support for dictatorial and totalitarian regimes regardless of their brutality, as long as they supported American interests.²² However, the administration's focus on the Middle East left the crafting of foreign policy towards Latin America to, as Wilson described them, "adolescent anarchists" running the State Department.²³ It was this group and the lack of attention paid to other regions, including Nicaragua, by the administration that he sought to challenge through his support for Somoza.

Carter's shift towards human rights reflected his own belief in the policy and that American support for totalitarian regimes undermined national security by encouraging Communism. Many of his political appointments were shaped ideologically by their disenchantment following both the Vietnam War and Watergate. Carter and his administration did not share the fervent anti-Communist zeal of past administrations and

²² LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 21-24.

²³ Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling: A Case Study of Washington at Work* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 206-207.

sought to build a dialogue with both Castro's Cuba and the Soviet Union. The refusal to ignore the human rights abuses committed by its allies directly undermined U.S. support for Nicaragua. This unwillingness to oppose any potential Communist expansion left the administration vulnerable to attacks from hawks in both parties. To traditional anti-Communists like Wilson, Carter's shift on foreign policy went against their fundamental belief that Communism had to be opposed at every turn.²⁴

The ideological split between Carter and Wilson on foreign policy went beyond the question of human rights. It illustrates the different reactions both men had following the Vietnam War and its impact on American foreign policy. Furthermore, it highlighted the different image of America both men sought to build through foreign policy. Carter sought to use human rights to craft a new image and moral high ground for U.S. foreign policy. He wanted to pull away from the traditional view of military might providing the foundation for international relations between the United States and the rest of the world. The traditional support of totalitarian regimes was seen as fueling both anti-American sentiment and encouraging support for Communism. Carter's policy of pulling away from regimes like Somoza's through human rights was driven by a desire to reverse both this anti-Americanism and support for Communism.

Wilson took the opposite approach to foreign policy, believing that the U.S. had to maintain its traditional support for allied regimes who opposed Communism. His opinions don't form out of a lack of concern for human rights, but from viewing these

²⁴ "Carter's Foreign Policy", *Office of the Historian*, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/carter>, [accessed May 19th, 2019].

concerns as secondary to his opposition to Communism. He adhered to the traditional pre-Vietnam view of the Cold War in which containing any expansion of Communism was vital to American national security. The ability and willingness of the U.S. to oppose Communism was the foundation of its geopolitical status as a super power. Defeat in Vietnam made it appear as though America was losing the Cold War in the late 1970s. Wilson's support for Somoza and his attempts to pressure Carter to return the U.S. to its traditional anti-Communist foreign policy, was a means of restoring America's image of strength in the face of Communist aggression.

Wilson came from the same school of Cold War anti-Communism that had been embraced by Presidents Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson. His political views combined policy a liberal domestic agenda with a hawkish foreign policy centered on opposing any expansion of Communism. Domestically Wilson supported civil rights, the Equal Rights Amendment, and sponsored a government land seizure to establish the Big Thicket National Preserve in East Texas. He compensated for this with a hawkish foreign policy built on opposing Communism. Wilson's political views shared similarities with those of Senator William Fulbright and other Vietnam War doves. Fulbright had compensated for his dovish views on Vietnam by staunchly opposing civil rights at home. In the same way, Wilson's aggressive anti-Communist stance on foreign policy compensated for any push back he could receive from conservatives on the domestic front.

For Wilson and like-minded politicians, Communism had to be confronted, rolled back if possible, but at the very least contained. Any sign of weakness on the part of the United States would encourage the Communist bloc to expand its influence. It was accepted that in order to carry out this anti-Communist agenda, the United States would be required to support regimes whose policies were not democratic. Military dictatorships such as Egypt or autocratic monarchies like Saudi Arabia were embraced or at least tolerated because they served a purpose. As long as it served the strategic interests of America or its allies in their global struggle against Communism, flaws in potential allies were to be ignored for the perceived greater good. To a politician like Wilson, the Somoza dynasty had to be protected despite its flaws because it was an ally in the struggle against Communism. His attack on the application of human rights was that Nicaragua was singled out for punishment because it was seen as less strategically valuable than oil rich countries in the Middle East. Carter's desire to connect human rights to U.S. foreign policy represented a danger to the system of alliances that had been cultivated over decades by multiple American administrations.²⁵ Opposition to the biased application of this new human rights agenda lay at the heart of Wilson's eventual support for Somoza.

Wilson first attacked the new human rights agenda used by the Carter State Department to cut aid for Somoza and Nicaragua from multiple angles. He and other critics challenged what they viewed as the double standard present in the application of

²⁵Lake, *Somoza Falling*, 75-76, 205-206.

human rights in U.S. foreign policy by which smaller nations who lacked the ability to resist were used as scapegoats while more powerful countries with similar records were ignored. The Somoza government faced the loss of American aid for its human rights record, while Middle Eastern regimes with equally bad or worse records, such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia, continued to receive assistance.²⁶ Personal anger over this double standard led Wilson to become the leading advocate for the Somoza government in 1977. For Wilson, not only was Nicaragua a small Latin American nation that lacked oil, it was also a staunch U.S. ally being thrown under the bus after decades of loyal support to the United States. The administration's willingness to sacrifice Somoza, a U.S. ally, by removing continued support in the face of a growing threat from the Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua, a group Wilson viewed as Marxist, reeked of appeasement. The White House was failing to support its friends while attempting to build bridges with its Communist enemies in Cuba and Vietnam. The refusal of the State Department to assist Somoza against a Communist insurgency in Wilson's mind invited and encouraged additional Communist aggression by Cuba into Central America. He believed that the administration was risking another Cuba forming in the region.²⁷ Wilson's support for Somoza was based on his own anti-Communist views and a belief that the United States should support its allies and not from any personal affection for the man himself.

²⁶ Karen DeYoung, "Nicaragua denied economic aid, get's military." [sic] *Washington Post*, October 5, 1977.

²⁷Lake, *Somoza Falling*, 75-76, 205-206.

Wilson is Recruited by the Somoza Lobby

By March 1977 Wilson and a small group of likeminded northern and southern Democrats, as well as Republicans, had become increasingly outraged at what they perceived to be the appeasement policy of Jimmy Carter. Carter's fundamental shift away from America's established Cold War policy of opposition and distrust of Communist regimes and revolutions, towards a desire to negotiate and tolerate leftist regimes and revolutions, was viewed as a direct threat to American national security. The exact person that got Wilson involved with supporting Somoza is debated by writers on the subject, when they mention him at all. George Crile credits the combination of Wilson's own anti-Communist beliefs with the Israeli government's concerns over the Carter administration's weakness on opposing Communism.²⁸ However, Lars Shoultz and Wilson himself credits Fred Korth, a former Secretary of the Navy and Texas banker, for bringing Nicaragua to his attention. Korth was a registered lobbyist and part of a sophisticated network paid to maintain American support and financial aid to Nicaragua by peddling influence in the halls of Congress. Wilson claims that prior to meeting Korth, he knew little about Nicaragua or Somoza.²⁹ Regardless of who turned him on to Nicaragua, Wilson's primary motivations were personal.

The timing of Korth's approach was crucial. By 1977 Wilson was looking for a place to pick a fight with the Carter administration on foreign policy. He sought to

²⁸ Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War*, 33-34.

²⁹ Schoultz, *Human Rights*, 62-63; Bill Choyke, "Nicaraguan military aid based on 'skimpy details'", *Star-Telegram*, (Fort Worth), September 29, 1977, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 34.

challenge the "flaming radical left" he believed had taken control of the State Department following Carter's election.³⁰ Wilson repeatedly railed against what he believed was a lack of attention paid to Latin America by the Carter administration. Carter's foreign policy was focused on the Middle East and trying to improve relations with the Soviet Union. This left policy towards Latin America in the hands of lesser officials and bureaucrats within the State Department, whom Wilson referred to as "incompetent, leftist ideologues". In his opinion there was no one voicing a centrist view in foreign policy. It was with this group of leftists that he would clash in his efforts to maintain American support to Somoza.³¹ To Wilson the Democratic Party's shift to the left placed the United States and the rest of the free world at risk, because it encouraged Communist aggression. America's withdrawal of support for traditional right-wing allies because of human rights abuses was viewed as an invitation for leftist guerrillas and revolutionaries, sponsored by the Soviet Union and Cuba, to seize power. Wilson and other likeminded members of Congress saw their resistance to the administration's policy as a holding action, keeping the line against Communism until the executive branch came to its senses.³² Defending continued support for the Somoza regime in Nicaragua simply became the place Wilson decided to make his stand.

The influence of the Somoza Lobby in gaining Wilson as an ally was crucial.

Wilson stated that prior to meeting Korth he had no knowledge of Nicaragua. This lack of

³⁰ Schoultz, *Human Rights*, 62-63.

³¹ "Transcript of Wilson press conference", June 12, 1979, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 18.

³² Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War*, 33-34.

knowledge makes it highly unlikely that without the lobby Wilson would have become involved in Nicaragua. The success in recruiting him to aid Somoza rested on the combination of the lobbyists efforts and Wilson's on anti-Communist ideals. He was a fervent anti-Communist, and so when Korth brought the withdrawal of U.S. support for Somoza to his attention, Wilson found a battle that suited his own beliefs. Had he not been persuaded to make his stand in Nicaragua, Wilson would have chosen another country to feed his desire to oppose Communism. The lobby also supplied him with information/propaganda that supported the regime's claims that Nicaragua was being unfairly singled out by the State Department for human rights abuses. Wilson's views began to mirror those expressed in the information supplied by the lobby. His congressional papers on Nicaragua are filled with this pro-Somoza propaganda. How much this information campaign influenced Wilson's opinions on U.S. policy towards Nicaragua, or simply provided support for his own pre-defined beliefs is debatable. However, the amount of propaganda compared to the amount of State Department supplied information in his papers provides evidence for which sources he chose to rely on.

At the heart of Wilson's opposition to Carter's foreign policy shift was the administration's willingness to publicly abandon traditional allies, such as Somoza, in the face of Communist aggression and the clear double standard present in how human rights was applied globally. Unless the policy was applied equally towards every nation with

similar records, it would lack credibility.³³ Nicaragua under the Somoza dynasty had been a close American ally since 1936 when Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza, the patriarch of the regime, took power. Nicaragua had continuously voted in lock-step with the United States in both the United Nations and the Organization of American States. Every President from Franklin Roosevelt to Gerald Ford had maintained some level of U.S. support for the dynasty despite any claims of human rights violations or corruption. Supporting the Somozas and similar regimes was deemed vital to American national security for decades prior to the election of Jimmy Carter.³⁴

The push by the new administration, especially the human rights bureau within the State Department, to significantly cut foreign aid to Somoza alarmed and angered Wilson. Foreign aid was not simply a means of rewarding allied governments, but also a public show of support for those regimes. The administration's push to cut aid for Nicaragua, including military assistance, beginning in 1977 was out of a desire to punish Somoza and his government for alleged human rights violations. For Wilson this attack on the Nicaraguan regime was a slap in the face of an established U.S. ally in the fight against global Communism. In his mind this betrayal of the Somoza family following decades of support for U.S. policy, including permitting the Bay of Pigs to be staged in Nicaragua, was a violation of American duty to support friendly governments. To Wilson, Nicaragua was being used to test the implementation of human rights into

³³ *ADA Newsletter*, July 1, 1977, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 2.

³⁴ Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War*, 33-35.

American foreign policy and to appease the far left of the Democratic Party whose foot soldiers had flooded the State Department.³⁵

The presence of the Sandinistas, a leftist revolutionary group backed by Cuba attempting to overthrow Somoza, added fuel to Wilson's opposition to cuts in American support. The Sandinistas had existed for years, but began to gain momentum at the same time Carter's State Department moved to restrict military aid to Somoza. For anti-Communist Cold Warriors such as Wilson, the greatest geopolitical fear in the Western Hemisphere was the creation of a second Cuba. This fear was stoked by the Castro government's public desire to spread its anti-American Communist revolution throughout Latin America. Preventing a second Cuba went hand-in-hand with the traditional U.S. policy of containing the spread of Communism.³⁶ The presence of an active Marxist revolutionary group, linked to Cuba, inside Nicaragua made withdrawal of American support galling to Wilson. In his eyes the United States was not only betraying an anti-Communist ally, but also encouraging a Communist takeover. The failure of the leftist appointees, placed into the State Department by Carter, to understand the delicate geopolitical situation placed not only American national security but all of Latin America at risk.³⁷ Wilson's clash with the Carter administration was a reflection of the continuing

³⁵ Richardson, "Wilson and the Dictator", *Texas Observer*, September 23, 1977, 22; Washington Bureau, "Wilson: Nicaragua or E-Tex", *Lufkin News*, May 17, 1978, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 6.

³⁶ LeoGrande, "The Revolution in Nicaragua: Another Cuba?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.58. No. 1, (Fall 1979), 28-31.

³⁷ Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War*, 30-32.

battle between politicians seeking to attain a moral high ground in foreign policy and those like Wilson who favored realpolitik.

Human Rights Battle in Congress: Wilson Secures Aid

In Congress, members from the Carter human rights faction, as well as those like Wilson who believed in continued U.S. support for the Somoza government, held hearings to present evidence of their claims. The most significant of these occurred before the House Appropriations Sub-Committee, which Wilson was a member of, on April 5th, 1977. Rep. Ed Koch invited a group of Nicaraguans who opposed the Somoza government, organized by the anti-Somoza organization the Washington Office for Latin America or W.O.L.A., to testify before the committee. The group was led by Cardinal Miguel D'Ecosta, a leading figure inside the Catholic Church in Nicaragua, an outspoken critic of the Somoza government and a Sandinista sympathizer. The primary purpose of this group was to provide evidence of the ongoing violence and brutality of the regime, especially the Nicaraguan National Guard. The National Guard, or Guardia Nacional, was 7,500 men strong and was the primary ally of the Somoza family. The dynasty had retained control of the military throughout its reign, and Somoza continued to hold the position as commander of the army as well as the presidency. Most of the officers were trained by the United States either in the Panama Canal Zone or in America itself. With his position as a cardinal giving his testimony additional weight and an appearance of legitimacy, D'Ecosta and his fellow opposition leaders painted a picture of corruption

and brutal repression directed by and carried out to benefit Somoza, his family, and inner circle. Their ultimate goal was to undermine the relationship between the United States and Nicaragua through the use of human rights allegations. Throughout their testimony they downplayed the violence of the Sandinistas and their links to Fidel Castro's Cuba.³⁸ Minimizing any links to Communism was critical, because traditionally many State Department officials would have used those links to justify continued support for any government opposing Communism, as they had with Nicaragua for decades. Eliminating American support for Somoza was crucial if the Sandinistas were to remove him from power. Their lobbying of Congress illustrated an understanding of American domestic politics and the hegemonic power wielded by the United States in the Western Hemisphere.

Pushing back against this damaging testimony, Wilson sought to discredit both the opposition witnesses and claims of human rights abuses. Supporters of Somoza used D'Ecosta's established ties to the Sandinistas, a group backed by Communist Cuba, as evidence of his own Communist beliefs.³⁹ D'Ecosta's own declared desire for a new revolutionary, non-capitalist system in Nicaragua provided evidence to support claims that he was a Communist.⁴⁰ In Wilson's opinion these claims of human rights abuses were the creation of "radical preachers", like D'Ecosta, who sought to stir anti-Somoza sentiment both in Nicaragua and the United States. These radicals sought to undermine

³⁸ Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, 55,410; U.S Foreign Operations Subcommittee, *House Documents April 5th, 1977*, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 7; Lake, *Somoza Falling*, 195.

³⁹ Lake, *Somoza Falling*, 195.

⁴⁰ Millet, *Guardians*, 12-13.

American support for Somoza in order to hand the country over to a Communist revolution.⁴¹ In the eyes of traditional Cold Warriors, like Wilson, any personal connections or support to Communist-linked groups by critics was seen as proof of their personal Communist beliefs. Wilson's attempts to paint critics such as D'Ecosta as Communist were reflection of his adherence to the traditional American Cold War ideology in which naming someone a Communist robbed them of legitimacy and nullified their message.⁴² Under any previous administration this argument would have been enough to discredit critics of Somoza and push the human rights issue to the background. However, Vietnam and Watergate had shifted American public opinion towards the left, frustrating Wilson's attempts to employ traditional anti-Communist rhetoric to undermine the credibility of Somoza's critics.

In May and early June of 1977, Wilson had personal meetings with several registered lobbyists for the Somoza government. Among these were meetings on May 6th and May 18th with Raymond Molina, a Cuban exile and veteran of the Bay of Pigs, who was the chairman of "Citizens for the Truth about Nicaragua". He was also the president of "Concreto Permezclade de Nicaragua", the only concrete company in Nicaragua and owned by Somoza.⁴³ Molina also sent Wilson a letter which included fact sheets to demonstrate how the violence plaguing Nicaragua was orchestrated by the Marxist-

⁴¹ *House of Representatives Congressional Records*, June 23, 1977, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 2, also printed in *Nicaragua Betrayed*, 68; *ADA Newsletter*, July 1, 1977, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 2.

⁴² Lake, *Somoza Falling*, 195.

⁴³ "Minutes of Trip to Florida Submitted to Justice Department", hand written, [June 1977], C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 2.

dominated Sandinistas.⁴⁴ Wilson also met on June 6th with Charles Lipson, an American lawyer who worked for a firm hired by Somoza. The hiring of American lawyers and recruiting lobbyists in America derived from Somoza's understanding of U.S. politics and also indicated the seriousness with which he viewed any threat to his relationship with Washington. The opposition to Somoza also sought out Wilson with Valerie Miller of W.O.L.A. meeting with him on May 17th.⁴⁵ The exact content of these meetings may be unknown, but their timing was vital because during May and June of 1977 U.S. military aid to Nicaragua was under threat on Capitol Hill, and Wilson was to play a leading role in this fight.

Wilson's first major victory on behalf of Somoza was his ability to restore roughly three million dollars of military aid credits for Nicaragua in June of 1977. Supporters of Carter's human rights agenda on the House Appropriations Committee, led by Rep. Ed Koch, had removed the money from the U.S. Military Assistance Bill for the 1978 fiscal year. This withdrawal of funds was a direct attempt to pressure Somoza to address the human rights violations his government was repeatedly accused of committing. Nicaragua was included along with Brazil, El Salvador, Argentina, Guatemala, and Chile in a list of Latin American countries prohibited from receiving military aid, all of which were governed by right-wing governments. Wilson initially attempted to restore the funds during debates on the Appropriations Committee on June

⁴⁴ Letter, "Raymond Molina to Rep. Charles Wilson", May 6th, 1977, fact sheets linking violence to FSLN attached, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 2.

⁴⁵ "Minutes of Trip to Florida submitted to Justice Department", hand written [June 1977], C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 2.

12th and 13th. However, efforts failed to secure the desired result with his motion being defeated at both the sub-committee and full committee levels. His second attempt to restore the military aid credits was before the full Appropriations Committee, but it failed to pass by a single vote. This left Wilson with only a last-ditch effort to restore the funds during the final debates of the bill before the entire House of Representatives. On June 23rd, 1977, Wilson offered one of the shortest amendments in history saying simply, "On page 20, line 21, of the bill in section 505, delete 'Nicaragua'." The bill passed with his changes intact by a vote of 225 to 180. By taking out a single word and removing Nicaragua from the list of countries prohibited from receiving aid, Wilson secured millions of American dollars for Somoza.⁴⁶

Wilson's success in changing the foreign aid bill was proof of his political skill. Despite his "good time Charlie" reputation, which was fully justified, Wilson was a natural politician. The fact that he had secured a position on the Appropriation Committee while still a junior member of Congress demonstrated his skill as a legislator. His power in Congress was built on his ability to horse trade votes with fellow members, allowing him to secure support for pet projects including aid to Somoza. This horse trading was a reflection of Congress during the late 1970s when party lines were not rigidly set in stone. During his time aiding Somoza, Wilson had both bi-partisan support and opposition.

⁴⁶ *House of Representatives Congressional Record of June 23rd, 1977, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 2; Somoza, Nicaragua Betrayed, 67-68.*

Wilson's comments following the vote on the June 23rd clearly illustrated his opinion of Nicaragua and the entire issue of human rights in American foreign policy. In his opinion the only crime of which Somoza and Nicaragua could be found guilty was being friendly towards the United States.⁴⁷ *La Prensa*, the largest newspaper in the country, was allowed to operate despite the fact that Pedro Joaquin Chamorro Cardenal was a vocal critic of the Somoza regime. The presence of an apparently free press, even one hostile to the government, became a central tool for Wilson in his efforts to disprove claims of human rights violations in Nicaragua. If Somoza was the cruel dictator the left painted him to be, Wilson questioned why he would permit an opposition paper to operate within his country. Wilson also used the testimony of the regime's critics as evidence for his claims that Somoza was not the tyrant the left painted him as. Opponents of the regime were even allowed to travel to the United States and testify before Congress about the abuses carried out by the Somoza government and then allowed to return home.⁴⁸ The ability for Nicaraguans who opposed the regime to operate with apparent freedom provided Wilson with ammunition to attack claims of Somoza violating human rights.

At the same time, he took the opportunity to rail against what he saw as the unequal application of the new human rights agenda being pushed by the left. All of the Latin American countries singled out to be stripped of military assistance were right-wing

⁴⁷ Richardson, "Wilson and the Dictator", *Texas Observer*, September 23, 1977, 22.

⁴⁸ *House of Representatives Congressional Record of June 23rd, 1977*, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 2; Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, 67-69.

governments. At the same time other nations with equal or worse claims of human rights violations were still allowed to receive American aid. Israel, whom Wilson vehemently defended as not being a violator of human rights regardless of claims made by leftist media outlets, was not targeted for aid cuts. This was despite claims that Israel was violating human rights through its occupation of the West Bank and the torture of Arab prisoners. Wilson argued that journalists looking for a story or a few dissidents making accusations of human rights violations did not make them true. He also pointed out that roughly one third of the money in the bill was going to countries that had been accused of similar actions as Nicaragua. In fact, even the United States had been accused of violating human rights by Amnesty International, the primary international organization that campaigned for human rights. Wilson argued that if the Carter administration was going to push a foreign policy based on human rights the policy had to be administered equally around the world. It could not be used as a weapon to single out right-wing regimes or a single country. Furthermore, if it was going to be used to single out a particular country it should not be one of America's closest friends in the Western Hemisphere.⁴⁹

The State Department Sends Mixed Signals on Human Rights

During Wilson's attempts to restore U.S. military assistance to the Somoza regime, the State Department sent a series of confusing signals regarding its preferred outcome. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs Charles Bray and Deputy

⁴⁹ *House of Representatives Congressional Record of June 23rd, 1977, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 2; Somoza, Nicaragua Betrayed, 67-69.*

Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations Lawrence Pezzullo both sought Wilson's support in convincing Koch not to introduce his amendment cutting military aid to Nicaragua in exchange for the State Department's pledge not to renew the military assistance agreement with Nicaragua unless the human rights issues were addressed. This renewal was required by the end of the 1977 fiscal year to authorize continued military assistance.⁵⁰ Seeking Wilson's help, and the request to Koch not to introduce his legislation, caused confusion among the human rights faction which thought that Carter and the State Department were pushing for additional pressure on Somoza to correct human rights abuses. Rep. Koch wrote a letter to Carter in which he accused the State Department of undermining the entire human rights agenda, and potentially jeopardizing any hope for improvements.⁵¹

However, at the same time the State Department was pushing to keep aid to Nicaragua, it withheld information that could have helped make its case. On May 27th, the American embassy in Nicaragua sent a cable showing improvements in human rights and evidence contradicting the testimony of Cardinal D'Ecosta and other critics who had testified before Congress. This information was not shared with Wilson or other members of Congress prior to the votes on military assistance.⁵² The State Department's withholding of this information was either clear evidence that it was attempting to aid Koch and anti-Somoza figures or a serious error within the bureaucracy. The lack of a

⁵⁰ "Action Taken on the Military Assistance to Nicaragua for FY 78", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 39.

⁵¹ Letter, "Rep. Ed Koch to President Carter" July 1, 1977, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 33.

⁵² "Action Taken on the Military Assistance to Nicaragua for FY 78", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 39; Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, 410.

clear policy and united front on human rights within the State Department created a lane for Wilson to exploit in his efforts to aid Somoza though sending mixed signals on the human rights agenda.

This bureaucratic confusion, alongside the fact that Nicaragua was not a priority for the Carter Administration, played into Wilson's hands during 1977. Members of Congress who joined with him and supported aid to Somoza faced few questions from voters in their districts.⁵³ This made them willing to follow Wilson's lead or trade votes with him for their own pet projects because they faced little personal risk. The lack of direct involvement in Nicaraguan policy by top officials in the Carter Administration prevented the formation of a firm anti-Somoza view taking hold in Congress. Wilson railed against what he saw as the preoccupation with the Middle East and U.S.-Soviet relations that left policy towards Nicaragua in the hands of leftist political appointees.⁵⁴ However, this lack of focus on the Somoza regime enabled him to rally the support he needed in Congress to keep aid flowing. In many ways his efforts to bring Nicaragua to the attention of senior White House and State Department officials eventually weakened his ability to aid Somoza. Wilson never appears to have realized this fact.

The mixed signals sent by the State Department and the failure to craft a clear policy towards human rights was influenced by the big tent nature of the Democratic Party. The Carter Administration had to keep support from both conservative members like Wilson, and more liberal Democrats such as Koch. This necessity combined with

⁵³ Lake, *Somoza Falling*, 194.

⁵⁴ "Transcript of Wilson press conference, June 12, 1979", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 18, 1-4.

pressure from Wilson and the Somoza Lobby forced State Department officials to compromise on aid to Somoza. The administration was unwilling to fully commit to either side because doing so would risk party support for more important issues. Nicaragua was not a priority for top officials in either the White House or State Department and it was not worth risking their wider agenda to alienate one wing of the party or the other. Wilson benefits from this pressure because it forces his opponents in the State department to give in to his demands or at least water down their policy towards Somoza.

During the debates surrounding the foreign aid bill for 1978 and military assistance to Nicaragua, Wilson also sought additional means to secure funds for Somoza. The primary source for this aid would come from military aid credits that Congress had already approved but had yet to allocate to Nicaragua.⁵⁵ Because these funds had already been approved by Congress, they would not require a vote. This presented Wilson with the possibility for generating aid for Nicaragua while avoiding a protracted battle with the human rights faction in Congress. However, his success in restoring military aid for Nicaragua to the bill made this method unnecessary.

Wilson's victory in June made him a figurehead of the Somoza Lobby and brought him to the attention of the Nicaraguan ruler. Following his success in restoring the \$3.1 million in military aid, Wilson received a personal letter of thanks from Somoza. The letter celebrated Wilson for his continued support and stressed his commitment to

⁵⁵ Wilson, "hand written notes for FY78", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 39.

fighting Communists. Somoza blamed leftists and Communists for using human rights as a tool to undermine his government.⁵⁶ Wilson took the July 4th recess as an opportunity to travel to Nicaragua with Rep. John Murphy and other likeminded colleagues as part of a fact-finding mission to Central America. Travelling to foreign countries and hot zones being debated in Congress was a useful method for Wilson to increase the power of his arguments. Most members of Congress were not foreign policy experts, although some attempted to become experts on one or two countries. This lack of personal information led them to follow the lead of fellow members who appeared more knowledgeable. The fact that Nicaragua was not a major issue in 1977 contributed to this lack of understanding. Being able to claim personal firsthand knowledge of the regions and persons of interests gave Wilson's criticism or support added weight compared to his colleagues who relied solely on secondhand or thirdhand evidence.⁵⁷

During his visit Wilson met and dined with Somoza, the first face-to-face meeting between them. According to Crile, during this meeting after dinner, Somoza offered Wilson \$50,000 dollars as payment for his support on the aid bill. Wilson claimed that he "didn't take the fucking money". He told Somoza he didn't need any money at that time, but he didn't turn it down completely, telling Somoza he might need some at a later date. Despite the awkwardness that followed his refusal of the money, Wilson came to like Somoza. Somoza's connections to America through his time at West Point appealed to Wilson, who was formerly in the Navy. The strongest connection between Wilson and

⁵⁶ Letter, "Somoza to Rep. Charles Wilson," C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 2.

⁵⁷ Lake, *Somoza Falling*, 194.

Somoza was their shared support of Israel and a mutual fear of what would happen if Carter's human rights agenda was allowed to progress unchecked. Strengthened by both his personal meeting and information from his friends in Israel, Wilson became even more convinced that Somoza was far less dangerous than what might follow if the Communist Sandinistas were allowed to take over.⁵⁸

Wilson also launched a series of personal attacks against supporters of the human rights policy who criticized his support of aid to Somoza. He labeled them "real kooky leftwingers," "flaky," "spacey priests," and "weird professors." He also claimed that Rep. Ed Koch had only tried to cut military aid because he hoped to use the legislation to garner support for his bid to become mayor of New York City.⁵⁹ Essentially Wilson was arguing that anyone who opposed his efforts on behalf of Nicaragua were either crazy or had personal ulterior motives. Furthermore, to traditional Cold Warriors, like Wilson, such leftists translated to Communists or at least Communist sympathizers. Hinting that his critics could have connections to Communism was a useful method for undermining their credibility and weakening the effects of their criticism.

The next major clash over funding to Nicaragua came in September of 1977. On September 17th, President Somoza lifted the "State of Siege" that had been in place since 1974 and restored most constitutional rights. Wilson and fellow supporters of Somoza pointed to this as evidence of Somoza making positive changes in Nicaragua. September

⁵⁸ Letter, "Somoza to Rep. Charles Wilson", C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 2; Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War*, 35-36.

⁵⁹ Richardson, "Wilson and the Dictator", *Texas Observer*, September 23, 1977, 22.

marked the end of the 1977 fiscal year, and the renewal of the military assistance agreement between the United States and Nicaragua was required or aid payments would lapse. Also at stake was \$2.5 million in military assistance and an additional \$12 million in humanitarian and economic aid.⁶⁰ The battle lines in the House of Representatives remained the same as in June, with Wilson leading the Somoza lobby. Human rights supporters demanded a suspension in all military aid in response to claims of continued abuses by the Nicaraguan National Guard.

The State Department felt a need to demonstrate its commitment to human rights following its about-face on the Military Assistance Bill in June. However, cutting military aid required multiple agencies to sign off on the decision. National security and defense concerns had to be weighed before any military aid could be given or removed. Cutting humanitarian aid required less red tape, making it easier to remove from the bill. Warren Christopher, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights, had the unofficial final word on human rights issues and aid. Christopher decided to sign the renewal agreement and allow the \$2.5 million in military aid to be released as a signal to Somoza recognizing the lifting of the state of siege. However, the two loans equaling \$12 million in humanitarian and economic aid were suspended indefinitely until long term progress was shown on human rights in Nicaragua.⁶¹ Once again the lack of a defined policy led the administration to send mixed signals on its human rights agenda.

⁶⁰ Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 46-47.

⁶¹ Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 46-47.

Both supporters and critics of human rights-based foreign policy blasted the decision. Granting military aid while withdrawing loans earmarked for educational and nutritional programs aimed at helping the poorest Nicaraguan peasants provided further evidence of the lack of a policy that matched the rhetoric. Nicaragua was being used as a laboratory to test the implementation of human rights, and the administration appeared to be bumbling along with no clear direction.⁶² This decision to grant military aid to Somoza, while withholding humanitarian aid on human rights grounds, further undermined the credibility of the policy. Wilson seized the opportunity presented by this additional policy blunder to launch renewed attacks against the lack of State Department support for Somoza.

Wilson attacked the decision as another example of the State Department's double standard in applying human rights and singling out Nicaragua. Other African and Latin American countries had their aid suspended for human rights reasons, but by September Nicaragua was the only country whose aid had not been restored by the end of the 1977 fiscal year. Even State Department officials on the ground in Nicaragua did not understand why the aid had been cut. They claimed that the human rights situation had improved since the state of siege had been lifted.⁶³ Once again the willingness of the State Department to ignore evidence from Nicaragua that refuted claims of human rights abuses meant that either it was bumbling the policy or actively trying to help push the

⁶² John M. Goshko and Karen DeYoung, "U. S Decisions Send Nicaragua 'Garbled' Rights Message", *Washington Post*, October 24th, 1977, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 14.

⁶³ DeYoung, "Nicaragua Denied Economic Aid gets Military", *Washington Post*, October 5th, 1977, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 14.

human rights agenda. For Wilson the State Department had withheld aid for the poor until renewed violence in Nicaragua provided a convenient technical reason to permanently suspend the loans, while in reality this suspension was done for domestic American political reasons.⁶⁴ Somoza was being punished despite proof that the situation in Nicaragua had improved allegedly because the State Department felt compelled to prove to the far left of the Democratic Party that it was committed to the idea of human rights. Wilson's stated belief that the State Department itself was an infected nest of members of the "flaming radical left" reinforced his frustrations with this biased covert political agenda against Somoza.⁶⁵

Media Coverage: Bias and Conspiracy against Somoza

Wilson and Somoza also believed that this bias against the Nicaraguan government extended to how the regime was portrayed in the American media. Wilson became convinced that the same bias against Somoza that he fought in Congress was also present in American media coverage of the regime. Stories about the corruption and violence of the Somoza dynasty were given front-page coverage. At the same time stories that covered the Communist links of the Sandinistas or violence committed by them against the regime were buried in later section of newspapers if they were covered at

⁶⁴ Rep. Charlie Wilson, "Military and Economic aid to Nicaragua" {January 1979?}, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 14.

⁶⁵ Schoultz, *Human Rights*, 62.

all.⁶⁶ This represented a willingness among left-wing publications to accept that not all revolutions were evil even if they had ties to Communism. It also illustrated the shift away from the traditional view of the Cold War in which revolution had equaled Communism and any government opposing revolution was to be supported. This was a reflection of the position of the Carter Administration and provided the White House with apparent support for its desire to distance the United States from rulers like Somoza. It was this shift away from the traditional Cold War view, that anything linked to Communism was bad and had to be opposed, that Wilson was fighting in his support for Somoza.

Supporters of the Somoza regime, including Wilson, and even Somoza himself viewed this biased coverage as evidence of a conspiracy by the left-wing media against Nicaragua. Through his American-based propaganda arm the Nicaraguan Government Information Office, directed by Ian R. Mackenzie, Somoza sent various news articles directly to Wilson that stressed this bias. These articles even alleged that the left-wing American media supposedly ignored the support given to the Sandinistas by the Nicaraguan church, which also helped spread anti-Somoza propaganda.⁶⁷ This biased picture painted by the mainstream media was viewed as a conspiracy against Somoza. It was seen as a coordinated effort between left-wing American politicians and media sources to use human rights to undermine U.S. support for Nicaragua. The *Washington*

⁶⁶ Wilson, "Letter to the Editor of the *Washington Post*," {July 1978?}, never sent, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 22; Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, 204-206.

⁶⁷ Ian R. Mackenzie, "A Distorted Media View of Somoza's Nicaragua", *Washington Post*, November 22, 1977, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 45.

Post and particularly columnist Jack Anderson's articles that portrayed Somoza as a violent and corrupt dictator were placed on the front page. However, reports on terrorist attacks carried out by the Sandinistas were buried deeper in the paper making them less likely to be widely read.⁶⁸ For Somoza and Wilson, the newspapers' image of not giving equal coverage to violence committed by the Somoza regime and that carried out by Sandinistas created an unbalanced view of the situation in Nicaragua among the American public. This skewed picture had the potential to alter public support for the Somoza government and threaten U.S. support as a result.⁶⁹

Somoza was aware of this biased view of his regime among American media outlets and made an effort to address it both through his lobbying network and by giving personal interviews to American journalists.⁷⁰ In one of these interviews, carried in the *Washington Star*, he described the attacks on his government as an international Communist conspiracy. The goal of this conspiracy was to destroy the elected government of Nicaragua and the close alliance between it and the United States. He reinforced the connections between the Sandinistas and both Communist Cuba and the Soviet Union. Somoza also discussed the ability of the Sandinistas to operate out of border regions in Honduras and Costa Rica. However, he did not directly blame the governments of Honduras or Costa Rica for these bases. He also claimed that U.S. loans to Nicaragua were withheld for political reasons despite the long-standing support given

⁶⁸ Paul Scott, "Destroying a Friendly Government", *The Wanderer*, (Saint Paul), November 18, 1977, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 45.

⁶⁹ Both of these articles were sent to Wilson by Ian R. Mackenzie.

⁷⁰ Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, 204-206.

to America.⁷¹ Somoza's efforts to link his critics to Communism followed the same school of thought of traditional Cold Warriors that doing so undermined their credibility. It was also an attempt to create the idea that Nicaragua and the United States shared common enemies. His willingness to speak directly to American journalists, and through them to the American public, demonstrated his understanding of the importance of public opinion and the media in shaping State Department policy.

The Congressional struggle over aid to Somoza continued into 1978 along similar lines. Wilson would continue to stress the double standard present in the application of the State Department's human rights agenda. However, as conditions in Nicaragua worsened and the Sandinista insurgency grew into civil war, the Somoza Lobby found itself waging an increasingly uphill fight. This would become increasingly desperate as the Carter Administration gradually hardened its stance towards Somoza. As Nicaragua's importance to the administration increased in 1978-1979 and top ranked officials got involved, Wilson's ability to support Somoza through direct legislation weakened.

Media coverage and scrutiny of Wilson and his support for Somoza intensified in 1978 when events in Nicaragua made the crisis a priority issue for the State Department and eventually led Carter to become directly involved. The additional coverage of Wilson's actions on Somoza's behalf led to heated exchanges between the congressional officials and supporters of the human rights policy in the press.

⁷¹ "Gen. Somoza on Freedom in Nicaragua", *Washington Star*, November 3, 1977, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 45.

Chapter Two

January-September 1978: The Beginning of the End

The year 1978 represented a turning point in American policy towards Nicaragua and the tactics employed by Wilson to maintain support for Somoza. The assassination of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro unleashed a wave of social unrest within Nicaragua that by August raised doubts about the stability of Somoza's regime. The Sandinistas capitalized on the anger against Somoza to rally additional support and launch a renewed offensive to topple the government. The lack of direct evidence linking Somoza to the murder allowed both him and Wilson to avoid hard questions in America, although Somoza took steps to further distance himself from blame.⁷² In January 1978, Wilson was focused on trying to connect aid to Nicaragua with the ratification of the Panama Canal Treaty. The Treaty was Carter's primary foreign policy issue for Latin America. By attaching continued aid to Somoza to this legislation, Wilson brought Carter directly into the Nicaraguan question.

Wilson's threats against the treaty, along with the growing unrest temporarily, changed U.S. policy towards Nicaragua from a human rights issue to a national and regional security concern. Furthermore it made Nicaragua a priority for both the White House and the State Department

⁷² LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 18-19, 593 n.28; Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, 111-116.

for the first time.⁷³ It also changed Wilson's tactics from legislation to coercion; he would attempt to threaten the administration into supporting Somoza. Chamorro's death, coupled with Carter's refusal to intervene and force Somoza out, eventually unified the opposition behind the Sandinistas, as the moderates lost influence.⁷⁴ Wilson used the unrest and lack of a moderate alternative to paint the issue of U.S. support for Somoza as a stark choice between a pro-American dictator and a Communist government that would follow if he fell.

Murder of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro Cardenal

The new year 1978, began with a scandal that threatened to undermine Wilson's entire campaign to protect support to Somoza. On January 10th three gunmen ambushed Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, the outspoken critic of the regime and the publisher of Nicaragua's only opposition newspaper *La Prensa*. The attack happened in Managua in broad daylight when Chamorro's car was forced to the side of the road and he was shot eighteen times. He died while en route to the hospital. Almost immediately his death was blamed in some way on Somoza and the regime. Chamorro had been the most public critic of the Somoza dynasty for decades, and he was also the recognized leader of the moderate, nonviolent opposition to the regime.⁷⁵ This position made Chamorro a viable

⁷³ Lake, *Somoza Falling*, 1, 6-7.

⁷⁴ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 18-19.

⁷⁵ Marlise Simons, "Nicaraguan Publisher, Critic of Somoza, Killed by Gunmen", *Washington Post*, January 11, 1978.

third option between Somoza and the Sandinistas. His opposition to the regime labeled Somoza a prime suspect in his death, especially given the regime's clear motivation after years of vocal opposition and his position as a viable moderate alternative.⁷⁶ However, Somoza had tolerated Chamorro for decades because his presence kept the opposition divided. Chamorro's death became the moment that many observers would date as the beginning of the end for the Somoza dynasty.⁷⁷

Opposition to Somoza was divided between the Marxist-affiliated Sandinistas, who advocated the violent overthrow of the regime, and the nonviolent opposition headed by Chamorro.⁷⁸ Chamorro led a coalition of opposition parties, some of them banned from participating in elections. He also had close ties to the business sector and the labor unions, providing him with a broad base of support.⁷⁹ To the Sandinistas, Chamorro was a product of the bourgeoisie and could not be trusted. His apparent support of capitalism conflicted with their Marxist ideology. This mistrust was based on the financial success of *La Prensa* which was the largest newspaper in Nicaragua.⁸⁰ However, Somoza claimed that Chamorro had ties to the Sandinistas and was directly involved in all of their operations against his government. Regardless of Chamorro's connections to the Sandinistas, prior to his death the Nicaraguan opposition to Somoza was not unified

⁷⁶ Eduardo Crawley, *Dictators Never Die: A Portrait of Nicaragua and the Somoza Dynasty* (New York: ST. Melvin's Press, 1979), 155, 162.

⁷⁷ Lake, *Somoza Falling*, xiii-xiv.

⁷⁸ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 18-20.

⁷⁹ Crawley, *Dictators Never Die*, 155, 162-163.

⁸⁰ Simons, "Nicaraguan Publisher, Critic of Somoza, Killed by Gunmen", *Washington Post*, January 11, 1978.

under a single organization.⁸¹ Attempts to create a united front were underway in the final months of 1977, most notably with the creation of The Group of Twelve. The Group of Twelve were opposition leaders from a cross section of Nicaraguan society. They included members of the Catholic clergy, middle class businessmen, and various professionals. The group met in Guatemala and released a communication which in part praised the Sandinistas for their struggle against the Somoza government and called on all opposition groups to put aside their differences and unite. However, prior to the assassination of Chamorro these attempts to unify the opposition remained mostly theoretical. As long as critics of the regime remained divided, Somoza's hold on power was relatively safe. It meant that the Sandinistas lacked adequate support from the labor and business sectors that would allow them to gain a foothold in the towns. This situation isolated them in the countryside and preserved Somoza's hold on the economy.⁸²

Chamorro's death changed this equation by providing a lightning rod to unite opposition groups against the regime. Anger from the assassination reverberated throughout Nicaraguan society and was directed towards Somoza whom many blamed for the murder. It also provided the catalyst for turning the business sector from passive resistance into active revolt against Somoza, weakening the regime's base of support. At the same time Chamorro's death led Nicaragua's neighbors, especially Venezuela, to

⁸¹ Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 49.

⁸²Crawley, *Dictator Never Die*, 155, 162-163.

advocate for Somoza's resignation and eventually to support the Sandinistas against him.⁸³

Wilson never considered the possibility of replacing Somoza with Chamorro. Arguably, this is due to the influence of the Somoza Lobby and the propaganda pushed by the regime that linked Chamorro to the Sandinistas. However, there was no attempt by the State Department to consider replacing Somoza prior to the summer of 1978. The failure of both Wilson and the state Department to cultivate a third choice between Somoza and the Sandinistas, led directly to the eventual Sandinista victory in 1979. Anger against Somoza following Chamorro's death provided the Marxist-led group with the support needed to truly threaten the regime. Without a leader to rally around, the moderate opposition saw the Sandinistas as the only alternative to Somoza and began to support their efforts. Wilson's actions in maintaining U.S. support to Somoza, rather than finding a third option, contributed to the very outcome he sought to prevent.

Somoza recognized the potential danger to his relationship with the United States in being blamed for the murder of Chamorro. His response to the crisis was to announce a new package of reforms aimed at undermining support for the opposition and its potential unification against him. Somoza did not respond to the crisis with a violent crackdown, demonstrating an understanding that his government was under intense scrutiny.⁸⁴ His

⁸³ Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 49-50; Pastor, *Exiting the Whirlpool: U.S. Foreign Policy Towards Latin America and the Caribbean* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2001), 163.

⁸⁴ "President Somoza Announces Unprecedented Package of Political and Social Reforms", *Nicaragua News*, April 3, 1978, produced by the Nicaraguan Government Information Service, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 29.

security forces quickly arrested suspects who confessed during a televised trial, and he put out a story that Chamorro was killed because of a business dispute.⁸⁵ The anger against Somoza did not disappear and continued to feed resistance to the regime throughout 1978, but the lack of direct evidence linking the crime to Somoza allowed both him and Wilson to avoid harsh questions from the American press. Somoza also used interviews with American journalists to create doubt regarding his involvement. His defense was that he could have had Chamorro killed many times when he was arrested, but had never done so.⁸⁶ Somoza personally acknowledged Chamorro's value in maintaining the image of a free press in Nicaragua. Somoza described Chamorro as both an enemy and an ally. His opposition and attacks on the regime through *La Prensa* made him an enemy. At the same time allowing this opposition paper to continue to operate created valuable evidence of a free press in Nicaragua, weakening claims that Somoza was a dictator and making Chamorro an ally.⁸⁷

In fact Chamorro's murder was not widely covered in the American media and blew over quickly in the United States. In May when Wilson received extensive media coverage for his support of Somoza,⁸⁸ Chamorro was not mentioned. Wilson did lose a valuable tool in his defense of Somoza. He had repeatedly pointed to Chamorro and his newspaper as proof that Somoza was not a tyrannical dictator, because he allowed critics

⁸⁵ Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, 111-116.

⁸⁶ Laurie Johnston, "Prize-Wining Editor is Shot Dead in Nicaragua", *New York Times*, January 11, 1978.

⁸⁷ Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, 110.

⁸⁸ This is covered later in this chapter

of the regime to spread their message in print.⁸⁹ The murder was primarily important in terms of Wilson's support of Somoza because of the unrest it caused in Nicaragua. This instability made Somoza a greater priority to both the State Department and the White House. It also changed Nicaragua from a human rights issue to a security concern once the unrest morphed into an escalation of violence between the government and the Sandinistas. The shift of Nicaragua from human rights to security concern led Wilson to shift his tactics and paint support for Somoza not simply as a response to biased human rights policy, but as necessary to prevent a Communist takeover.

Jan-May 1978: Wilson Threatens the Panama Canal Treaty and Secures Aid

The increasing instability in Nicaragua in 1978 demonstrated for Wilson the necessity of continued U.S. support for Somoza. In an effort to pressure the State Department to reverse course on the human rights agenda and restore American support to the Nicaraguan government in the face of growing threats, Wilson took aim at Carter's primary foreign policy plank for Latin America, the Panama Canal Treaty. The Somoza Lobby in Congress, led by Wilson, attempted to trade votes for the Treaty ratification in exchange for increased American support for Somoza.⁹⁰ When it came time to ratify the newly negotiated Treaty in Congress, Wilson saw it as an opportunity to press the administration for concessions to Somoza, a clear example of Wilson having his own agenda apart from that laid out by his party. He supported Carter's right to shape foreign

⁸⁹ *House of Representatives Congressional Record of June 23rd, 1977*, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder2.

⁹⁰ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 181.

policy up until it conflicted with his own desire to protect America's traditional allies in the fight against Communism. The Canal Treaty represented another opportunity to pick a fight with the White House and its shift towards human rights.⁹¹

The unique nature of the Panama Canal Treaty offered Wilson and his allies the ability to threaten its survival in Congress. Under the United States Constitution, treaties have to be ratified by the Senate, but because the Canal was U.S. territory any handover to Panama had to be approved by the full Congress. This provided Wilson with the ability to threaten the legislation in the House of Representatives.⁹² The Panama Canal had been a vital strategic asset for the United States for decades since it was constructed in 1914. The United States maintained control over both the Canal itself and a strip of adjacent territory along both sides referred to as the Canal Zone. Arguably no region had a rockier relationship with the United States than Latin America. Decades of hegemonic domination had witnessed numerous American military intervention and occupations, including Nicaragua. However, by the time President Carter was elected in 1977 the Canal had lost most of its value to the United States. It was no longer able to accommodate the largest cargo ships or American aircraft carriers. At the same time the presence of a permanent U.S. military occupation in Panama created a diplomatic sticking point between the State Department and the region. The Carter Administration sought to improve its relations with Panama and with Latin America in general by

⁹¹ Goshko, "Nicaraguan Human Rights situation Caught in a Crossfire," *Washington Post*, February 17, 1978, 22; Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 181.

⁹² Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 181.

negotiating a Treaty that would hand both the Canal and Canal Zone over to the Panamanian government. Such diplomacy would undermine claims of continued American imperialism, used by revolutionaries to stoke anti-American sentiment. The Panama Canal Treaty represented Carter's attempt to push the reset button on U.S. relations with Latin America.⁹³

The Canal Treaty was a very publicly debated piece of foreign policy for the Carter Administration which Wilson saw as a useful asset to assist Somoza's regime. The idea that the United States would willingly give away the Canal which it had paid for and built divided public opinion in America, evident in Wilson having received several anti-Treaty letters from his constituents.⁹⁴ The Canal had been presented as a strategic asset since it was constructed, and this image didn't fade from the public imagination overnight. Most importantly the Panama Canal was seen both as a prestige project and a symbol of the national strength of the United States. It was a physical projection of American power into Latin America, and here was an American president offering to hand it over to the government of Panama. The Treaty divided opinion both in the American public and within the halls of Congress.⁹⁵ These debates and divisions provided an opportunity for Wilson to use the Treaty as leverage in his struggle to aid Somoza.

⁹³ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 184-85.

⁹⁴ Debi Pomeroy, "Texas and the Canal Treaty", *Texas Observer*, September 23, 1977, 3-4.

⁹⁵ Pomeroy, "Texas and the Canal Treaty", *Texas Observer*, September 23, 1977, 3-4.

Originally, Wilson acknowledged that the Canal no longer held vital strategic interests for the United States and had publicly supported Carter's position in 1977. Despite the anti-Treaty letters he had received, most of which he believed were from "rigidly conservative organizations," Wilson initially supported handing over the Canal. He had even voted in favor of the Canal Treaty in the House of Representatives and also expressed his acceptance of the Executive Branch's prerogative in shaping foreign policy.⁹⁶ Despite his support for the Treaty, which would not change until 1979, Wilson saw threatening it as a useful tool for gaining additional support for Nicaragua.⁹⁷ The debates surrounding the Treaty meant that the vote for ratification would be tight and the administration could ill afford any loss of support. The White House's need for every vote gave power to the Somoza Lobby's efforts to trade votes for the Treaty in exchange for aid to Somoza.⁹⁸

Wilson's primary demand was the restoration of millions of dollars in aid that had been held up by the State Department for human rights violations. He threatened that if the administration did not reverse course and restore the aid to Nicaragua then he would torpedo the entire Foreign Aid bill for 1978. This would include aid to Panama and potentially threaten the Panama Canal Treaty.⁹⁹ Wilson's attack hinged on his threat to introduce legislation in Congress that would restrict American aid to any country with a

⁹⁶ Pomeroy, "Texas and the Canal Treaty", *Texas Observer*, September 23, 1977, 3-4.

⁹⁷ "Transcript of Wilson press conference, June 12, 1979", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 18, 4.

⁹⁸ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 181.

⁹⁹ Goshko, "Nicaraguan Human Rights situation Caught in a Crossfire," *Washington Post*, February 17, 1978, 22.

similar rating for human rights as Nicaragua. The restrictions on aid in this legislation would have included Panama, along with several countries in Africa and the Middle East. Such legislation, if passed, would have tied a relatively minor foreign policy concern in Nicaragua to policy with global implications. The countries that would have been affected by this legislation included several with vital strategic value to the United States, such as oil-rich nations like Iran or Egypt with its control of the Suez Canal. On the surface this legislation appeared to address the double standard in the application of human rights in foreign policy Wilson repeatedly complained about by establishing an equal rating system for all countries receiving U.S. aid.¹⁰⁰ For the State Department and the White House, though, Nicaragua simply was not worth the level of trouble this Texan congressman was threatening to unleash on their foreign policy agenda. However the Carter Administration also had to demonstrate its commitment to human rights, and so it attempted to find a middle ground that would appease both sides.

The White House reduced the military aid request for Nicaragua to \$150,000 in the budget for 1979 in an effort to appease the human rights faction. This reduction was an effort to demonstrate continued displeasure with Somoza's human rights record. Furthermore it was intended to show that the administration would follow through on its human rights rhetoric. The administration's policy followed the same pattern it had employed in September of 1977 when it had withheld some aid for domestic political reasons. Wilson and the Somoza Lobby did not fight this reduction in military aid and

¹⁰⁰ "Transcript of Wilson press conference, June 12, 1979", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 18, 4.

made no attempt to restore it to normal levels. They understood that they had already spent considerable political capital in their efforts to maintain support for Somoza throughout 1977.¹⁰¹ They simply could not muster that level of effort for every single policy clash with the White House and State Department, illustrating Wilson's political savviness and his understanding that he had to pick his battles.

Wilson and the Somoza Lobby were further rewarded for their efforts in using the Panama Treaty and threatening the entire foreign aid bill in May of 1978. In an effort to avoid the potential consequences Wilson threatened to unleash in Congress, the State Department gave in. Millions of dollars in economic aid, which had been withheld because of human rights, were released to Nicaragua. This aid was comprised of economic loans that had been approved in 1977 but were stalled in the pipeline to pressure Somoza to improve his record. The State Department was quick to reassure the human rights camp that this did not represent a shift in policy, and in the long run it did not. However, at the time Nicaragua was simply not worth the trouble of risking the administration's entire foreign aid program. The media widely singled out Wilson as the architect for the release of funds to the Somoza regime.¹⁰² He became the recognized leader of the Somoza Lobby in Congress, and that recognition brought increased attacks by both supporters of the human rights policy and the moderate Nicaraguan opposition. Wilson's success in leveraging Carter's desire for the Panama Canal Treaty into additional

¹⁰¹ Schoultz, *Human Rights*, 63-64.

¹⁰² Brenda Bell, "Wilson: too much credit", *Lufkin News*, Thursday, May 18, 1978, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 4.

aid for Somoza made him an obstacle to those who desired changes in U.S. policy towards Somoza. The attacks to which he was subjected were an attempt to remove his ability to keep aid flowing to the Nicaraguan regime.

May 1978: Attacks from Human Rights Group and the Nicaraguan Moderates

Wilson's success in using the Panama Canal to secure aid for Nicaragua, coupled with his victories in 1977, brought him to the attention of not just the American media but many in Nicaragua. His ability to repeatedly force the State Department to water down its human rights policy towards Nicaragua placed him against human rights groups in America. Wilson's victories in restoring aid, withheld for human rights abuses, in Congress made him the apparent obstacle to the success of the human rights agenda. Consequently, his status as the recognized leader of the Somoza Lobby led human rights groups to attack his credibility and motives. At the same time, members of the moderate opposition to Somoza in Nicaragua attacked Wilson for preventing a peaceful transition to democracy by maintaining American support for Somoza.

The most vocal of these critics was Larry Birns, the director of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, a liberal non-profit organization that campaigned in support of human rights policies. Birns claimed that Wilson's support for Somoza was driven in part by personal financial gain. Prior to arriving in Congress Wilson had worked for the Temple-Eastex Lumber Company based in his home district and still owned around a

hundred thousand dollars in company stock. Birns and his supporters used the idea that a desire to protect his own financial interests motivated Wilson's support of Somoza as evidence to attack his credibility. Following Wilson's success in gaining aid for Nicaragua, Birns began demanding that he release additional financial documents to prove if he had financial interests in Nicaragua.¹⁰³ These attacks had begun in September 1977, but intensified as Wilson became the public face of the Somoza Lobby in Congress.¹⁰⁴

There was no evidence that personal gain tied to his stock in the company motivated Wilson to support Somoza. Eastex-Temple reportedly imported one and a half million "rough dowels" from Nicaragua for use in making mop and broom handles, although the company denied importing wood from Nicaragua. The company manufactured ten to twelve percent of all mops and broom handles sold in the United States every year during the late 1970s.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore the Commerce Department did not list Temple-Eastex or its parent company, Time Inc., as American firms doing business in Nicaragua.¹⁰⁶ Wilson even claimed that he knew virtually nothing about Nicaragua prior to being approached by Fred Korth and recruited to the Somoza Lobby.¹⁰⁷ If Nicaragua represented a vital financial interest for him then he should have had knowledge of the country prior to his work with the lobby. Wilson responded to these

¹⁰³Bell, "Wilson: too much credit", *Lufkin News*, Thursday, May 18, 1978, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 4.

¹⁰⁴Richardson, "Wilson and the Dictator", *Texas Observer*, September 23, 1977, 8.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶Bell, "Wilson: too much credit", *Lufkin News*, Thursday, May 18, 1978, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 4.

¹⁰⁷ Bill Choyke, "Nicaraguan military aid based on 'skimpy details'", *Star-Telegram*, (Fort Worth, TX), September 29, 1977, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 34.

attacks when they began in 1977 by saying, "Every time you lefties lose a big vote, you think it's gotta be the forces of darkness. You think, 'shit, that son of a bitch musta done something. Let's find out what.'"¹⁰⁸ Such colorful language illustrated Wilson's view that the allegations of personal gain motivated his support for Somoza were angry attempts at revenge by the left because he had thwarted its agenda.

Ultimately, Wilson's involvement in Nicaragua centered on his anti-Communist beliefs and not from personal financial gain. Despite claims of financial motivations for, Wilson's anti-Communist beliefs extended well beyond Nicaragua and were not tied to his personal finances. He had become involved in Nicaragua to challenge what he felt was Carter's weakening stance against Communist expansion. Wilson believed that withdrawal of support from traditional anti-Communist allies, such as Somoza, encouraged the spread of Communism and endangered American security.¹⁰⁹ Nicaragua simply became the place, through the efforts of Korth, where he chose to take a stand against this policy. Opposition to any Communist expansion and preserving longstanding U.S. allies were both seen by Wilson as vital to national security.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, Wilson's opposition to the expansion of Communism predated his efforts on behalf of Somoza and continued after Somoza fell. However, the attacks were seen as a serious enough threat to his credibility that Wilson felt it was necessary to publicly address them.

¹⁰⁸ Richardson, "Wilson and the Dictator", *Texas Observer*, September 23, 1977, 8.

¹⁰⁹ "Transcript of Wilson press conference, June 12, 1979", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 18, 3-4.

¹¹⁰ Choyke, "Nicaraguan military aid based on 'skimpy details'", *Star-Telegram*, September 29, 1977, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 34.

Wilson challenged these accusations by going on the offensive seeking to prove the Communist links of his opponents. When Birns demanded that Wilson should provide his tax records to the media for examination to prove he had nothing to hide, Wilson responded by stating that as a member of Congress he had already provided this information to the records office, as all members of Congress are required to do. Wilson counterattacked by demanding that Birns and the Council on Hemispheric Affairs should reveal the names and identities of its donors.¹¹¹ To Cold Warriors like Wilson, anyone who supported Communist-linked groups equaled Communists or at least Communist sympathizers. Getting access to the names of the Council's contributors would provide a useful method of revealing these links. If any donors could be linked to Communist groups the credibility of the entire organization could be undermined, removing it from the human rights debate. Birns argued that his organization's financial statements were already a matter of public record because it was a nonprofit. The two men would continue to spar over the Nicaragua question, as they had since 1977. Wilson repeatedly stated his belief that Birns received money from Cuba or other Communist sources.¹¹² This was another attempt to label a critic as a Communist to destroy their credibility. Birn's personal attacks on Wilson, illustrated Wilson's recognized importance in the Somoza Lobby. The two men would continue to butt heads over Nicaragua, but as violence

¹¹¹ Paul West, "Wilson to Answer Accusation", *Dallas Times Herald*, May 18, 1978, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 4.

¹¹² West, "Wilson to answer accusation", *Dallas Times Herald*, May 18, 1978, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 4.

increased after August the human rights question became less important as would Birn's criticism.

U.S.-based human rights groups were not the only organizations to take notice of Wilson after his success in May 1978. Members of the moderate Nicaraguan opposition to Somoza also took offense at his support for the regime. On May 22, 1978, Wilson received a telegram from the Nicaraguan Democratic Movement (M.D.N.), which condemned his continued lobbying for U.S. aid to Somoza.¹¹³ Since the death of Chamorro the moderates had lacked a clear leader and were held together only by their opposition to the regime. They waited for the United States to remove Somoza, either directly or through the National Guard. The rhetoric of human rights put forward by Carter and the State Department had encouraged them in the belief that Somoza no longer had America's backing. The moderates also believed that they shared a common goal with America in preventing a Sandinista victory.¹¹⁴ In their eyes Wilson's ability to restore U.S. aid to Somoza reinforced the regime's hold on power. They accused him of undermining their opportunity to bring about meaningful change in Nicaragua by transitioning the country from dictatorship to democracy. The moderates recognized that it was U.S. aid that kept Somoza in power. The M.D.N. also claimed that its efforts were supported by the majority of Nicaragua's people who wanted to be rid of Somoza.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ "M.D.N. to Rep. Charles Wilson," telegram, May 22, 1978, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 27.

¹¹⁴ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 18.

¹¹⁵ "M.D.N. to Rep. Charles Wilson," telegram, May 22, 1978, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 27.

Their direct attacks against Wilson demonstrated that his position as the leading voice of support for Somoza in Congress was recognized by groups based in Nicaragua.

Throughout his support for Somoza Wilson never considered moderate alternatives to the regime. His refusal to consider a third option between Somoza and the Sandinistas is possible evidence of the influence the Somoza Lobby had on him. The amount of pro-Somoza propaganda in his papers provides evidence that they did have an impact on his views of the situation in Nicaragua. He comes to share their bleak projections for the country if Somoza was allowed to fall. In Wilson's opinion the only group that would have benefited from Somoza's removal from power were the Communists. His attacks on critics of the regime, including witnesses in Congressional hearings and human rights advocates, centered on linking them to Communist groups.¹¹⁶ This was a way to destroy their credibility and limit their threat to Somoza. Wilson believed that the "democratic" opposition to Somoza should prepare for the elections scheduled for 1981 rather than trying to sneak into power by undermining Somoza. He stated his support for the 1981 elections and emphasized the fact that under the Nicaraguan Constitution Somoza could not run again. Furthermore, Wilson was quick to point out that Somoza had declared that he would hand over power to whoever won the election.¹¹⁷ His statement reflected the belief that there was no need to force Somoza out of power and doing so would have only aided the Communists. The administration

¹¹⁶ *House of Representatives Congressional Record of June 23rd, 1977*, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 2; West, "Wilson to answer accusation", *Dallas Times Herald*, May 18, 1978, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 4.

¹¹⁷ "Wilson letter to the editor of *the Washington Post*," {July 1978?}, never sent, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 22.

should support the regime until the elections slated for 1981 were held and then allow these elections to bring about a peaceful political solution to the Nicaraguan crisis. His support for elections ignored the fact that the regime had never allowed a truly free and fair election to be held before. All previous elections had been rigged in favor of the Somoza dynasty and only held to provide the illusion of democracy to appease the U.S.

Mixed Signals and a Covert Operation: Carter's Letter to Somoza and Wilson's Failed Attempt at Intervention

The moderate opposition suffered a shock in August 1978, when a letter sent by President Carter to Somoza was leaked to the press.¹¹⁸ After waiting for America to force Somoza out of power, they were confronted with apparent evidence that the regime still enjoyed U.S. support. The ramifications of this letter profoundly shifted the situation on the ground in Nicaragua by uniting neighboring countries with the Sandinistas against the regime. It also further weakened the moderates and their ability to present a viable alternative between the Somoza regime and the Sandinistas.

Somoza understood that the foundation for his power rested on maintaining American support for his regime. This support had been vital for both his father and older brother in establishing and preserving the family dynasty. Realizing that the rhetoric of the State Department was moving away from reform and towards his removal from office, Somoza made public efforts to address Carter's demands for improvements on

¹¹⁸ Goshko, "Carter's Letter to Somoza Stirs Human-Rights Row," Washington Post, August 1, 1978.

human rights. On June 19, 1978, he announced a package of reforms aimed at placating his critics in the White House and State Department. These reforms included pardons for several prisoners and allowing a number of opposition leaders to return home. Promises to introduce election reforms were also included in this package. Somoza even invited the Organization of American States Human Rights Commission to visit Nicaragua. If this commission investigated the claims of human rights abuses in Nicaragua it could provide Somoza with possible vindication from abuse claims. At the same time, even if the commission did not clear his government, it could still be used to highlight the abuses committed by the Sandinistas. Somoza's plan was to delay and attempt to hold out until 1981.¹¹⁹ Appeasing U.S. concerns on human rights played into that strategy by preventing the complete withdrawal of American support. In turn this support kept the opposition divided and allowed Somoza to maintain his grip on power.

These promises to introduce reforms and improve human rights conditions reaped tangible benefits for Somoza. In an effort to encourage the dictator to carry through on his pledges for reform, Carter sent a personal letter to Somoza. This letter was meant to remain private, but Somoza had other ideas.¹²⁰ At the same time, Carter's apparent support for Somoza brought condemnation both in the U.S. and Nicaragua.

¹¹⁹ Shirley Christian, *Nicaragua: Revolution in the Family* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 64-65; Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 55-58.

¹²⁰ Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, 137-38.

Carter's Letter to Somoza: Mixed Signals and Political Divisions

One apparent benefit Somoza gained from the declaration of reforms came from President Carter. On June 30, 1978, Carter sent a signed letter praising Somoza for his public promises of reforms for Nicaragua. Carter especially acknowledged how these changes would demonstrate a respect for human rights and represented a significant step on Somoza's part in addressing State Department criticism of his regime. The president also pointed out how the Inter-American Human Rights Commission would look favorably upon Somoza's declaration that members of the Group of Twelve would be allowed to return to Nicaragua. The letter was meant to encourage Somoza to follow through on his pledges of reforms. Despite Carter's good intentions, the letter became a foreign policy blunder with far reaching consequences. The damage caused to the foreign policy agenda was partially the result of divisions between officials in the State Department and White House which resulted in concerns over the letter not reaching Carter before he chose to send it.

The letter was conveyed to Somoza in secret because the State Department was concerned that if this statement of support from the American President was made public it would embolden him. Individuals within the State Department, including Robert Pastor and Anthony Lake, both involved in shaping foreign policy at the time, expressed their concerns about the letter being sent. Pastor's concerns centered around Somoza's history of failing to follow through on promises to bring about meaningful reforms and that he

would use the letter to serve his own agenda.¹²¹ Lake also held concerns about the letter, but saw it as a minor issue at the time. He chose not to challenge the decision to send it to Somoza because he did not want to expend political capital he needed elsewhere. At the time Lake was challenging policy dealing with Cuban activities in Ethiopia. These and other concerns about the impact of the letter, expressed by administration officials, were not relayed to Carter before he decided to send it, because his National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, did not send them to him. These differing opinions reflected the foreign policy divisions within the Carter Administration between people like Pastor who supported the human rights policy and officials like Brzezinski who viewed the Cold War through the eyes of how policy would affect U.S.-Soviet relations.¹²²

The divisions between officials like Brzezinski, who saw foreign policy through the lens of U.S.-Soviet relation, and those like Pastor or Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who favored the human rights approach, had not impacted policy towards Nicaragua before 1978. Throughout 1977, Nicaragua had not been an issue for top level officials in either the State Department or the White House. They had been, and remained, primarily focused on the wider geopolitical issues of detente with the Soviets or the Camp David Accords. Nicaragua was never the top priority for the Carter Administration throughout its time in power. it became an issue in 1978 largely as a result of both Wilson's attacks on the Panama Canal Treaty and the unrest following Chamorro's death. It is only after these events brought the questions surrounding support of Somoza off the back burner

¹²¹ Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 66-67.

¹²² Lake, *Somoza Falling*, 85-86.

that the internal divisions between Brzezinski and Vance began to influence U.S. policy. Wilson had succeeded in bringing high level officials into the Nicaragua policy debate, but achieving this goal actually damaged his ability to keep aid flowing to Somoza in the long term.

The human rights bureau had opposed sending the letter in the first place because they felt it could undermine the credibility of the human rights policy. When the letter was leaked to the *Washington Post* on August 1, 1978, these fears were amplified.¹²³ The Carter Administration appeared once again to be flip-flopping because it condemned the human rights situation in Nicaragua then appeared to offer its support to the Somoza regime. At the heart of the State Department's concerns was the timing of the letter. It was believed that a letter of support from Carter might jeopardize Somoza's willingness to allow the Inter-American Human Rights Commission into Nicaragua. He had invited them to cultivate U.S. support, but if he received proof of Carter's support beforehand he would have less incentive to cooperate.¹²⁴

The letter could also have a divisive effect in Congress, where the foreign aid bill for 1979 was being debated. Liberals could attack support to Nicaragua in an effort to push back against the letter. Wilson and fellow supporters of Somoza had already threatened to retaliate with cuts in aid to countries with similar rights records. This clash could derail the entire foreign aid bill. Once again it appeared that the Administration

¹²³ Goshko, "Carter's Letter to Somoza Stirs Human-Rights Row," *Washington Post*, August 1, 1978.

¹²⁴ Goshko, "Carter's Letter to Somoza Stirs Human-Rights Row" *Washington Post*, August 1, 1978.

lacked a clear vision for what it hoped to gain through its human rights-based foreign policy in Nicaragua.¹²⁵

Fears that Somoza would use the letter for his own benefit were well founded. If the letter remained private as Carter had intended, it was of little value to him. Somoza hoped to use this tangible sign of U.S. support to strengthen his position with his neighbors. He later said of the letter, that he "was not interested in a collector's item and, without being able to use the letter publicly, that's what it was."¹²⁶ Somoza arranged a meeting with Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez, and at this meeting he bragged about the letter he had received from the American president. He hoped the evidence of support from the United States would pressure Perez, who had become an outspoken critic of the regime and called for Somoza to resign, into changing his tune. His plan failed and Perez continued to demand that Somoza resign. Somoza rejected this demand, claiming that he had to remain in power to prevent a Communist takeover.¹²⁷

The public disclosure of the letter failed to serve Somoza's intended purpose, but it did bring Nicaragua fully to Carter's attention. The leak coupled with a renewed offensive by the Sandinistas changed how the administration would view Nicaragua. Policy towards Somoza would no longer be defined solely on the basis of human rights. Instead Nicaragua became a clear political and security concern, and U.S. policy towards Somoza fell into the hands of the National Security Council rather than the State

¹²⁵ Goshko, "Carter's Letter to Somoza Stirs Human-Rights Row" *Washington Post*, August 1, 1978.

¹²⁶ Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, 137-38; Lake, *Somoza Falling*, 88.

¹²⁷ Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 57.

Department.¹²⁸ This shift would be reflected in how Wilson and the Somoza Lobby framed their argument for U.S. support for Somoza.

The fact that the letter was intended to remain secret meant that it was not the public show of support for Somoza that Wilson sought to achieve. Furthermore the letter, despite how it was interpreted, did not indicate a change in U.S. policy towards Somoza. The Carter Administration remained committed to distancing itself from the Nicaraguan regime and pressuring Somoza to make concrete reforms to his government. The refusal of the White House or State Department to change the policy towards Nicaragua frustrated Wilson. According to Noel Holmes, Wilson's personal assistant during his support for Somoza, this frustration went beyond a clash over policy to a personal need by Wilson to be recognized on foreign policy issues. By refusing to cut a deal with him, the State Department was indicating that he was not a “player” and robbed him of that recognition.¹²⁹ Wilson's desire to be acknowledged for his efforts raises questions of his ego and how a desire for personal glory influenced his decisions. Another possibility is that his perceived power in Congress came from his ability to force opponents to compromise with him. If Wilson gained public proof that he had pressured both the State Department and White House to make a deal with him, and change their stated policy goals towards Somoza, his position in Congress would be enhanced significantly. His growing frustration with the administration's lack of flexibility led Wilson to take his first steps into covert operations.

¹²⁸ Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 58-59.

¹²⁹ Lake, *Somoza Falling*, 207-208.

Charlie's First Attempt at a Covert Operation: Ed Wilson and a Plan to Save Somoza

Wilson was convinced that withdrawal of American support for Somoza would encourage a Communist takeover. As a traditional anti-Communist, preventing the rise of additional Communist states, especially in the Americas, was a core tenet of his views on foreign policy. The presence of an active Marxist insurgency, the Sandinistas, in Nicaragua with ties to Cuba reinforced the need for the Carter Administration to stand by its ally Somoza. For Wilson the only people who would benefit from a collapse of the Somoza regime would be the Communists.¹³⁰ Under these conditions preserving the regime became a matter of American and regional security to Cold Warriors like Wilson. Frustration over his inability to change State Department and White House policy towards Nicaragua, even after threatening the Panama Canal Treaty, led directly to Wilson's first attempt at a covert operation. In his desperation to preserve Somoza he became involved in a plot that would not have looked out of place in John Foster Dulles's playbook of the 1950s.

Wilson's failed attempts to use the Panama Canal Treaty to force a true change in policy towards U.S. support of Somoza appeared to be his final card to play. His options seemed limited to maintaining a certain level of American financial support. However, that changed when he was introduced to a renegade ex-C.I.A. agent named Ed Wilson.

¹³⁰ "Wilson letter to the editor of *the Washington Post*," {July 1978?}, never sent, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 22.

Charlie Wilson appears to have believed throughout their dealings that Ed was still an active member of the C.I.A., possibly in a deep cover role. Ed Wilson fit the image of what Charlie, who had never met an actual spy before, thought of an agent in the Central Intelligence Agency. Ed was taller than Wilson at well over six feet and weighed around 250 pounds, and was “just a very lethal looking person”. Charlie claimed that, “Ed had convinced me that he had personally killed Che Guevara and I thought, Shit, if he got Che, he can sure get that little turd Ortega,” a reference to the leader of the Sandinistas. Meeting this rogue former C.I.A. operative gave Wilson an idea for how to counter the unwillingness of the Carter Administration to confront the Communist threat in Nicaragua. The two Wilsons concocted a plan for how they would come to the rescue of the Somoza regime, even if the American government was unwilling to take the necessary action to protect U.S. national security.¹³¹

In the summer of 1978, Charlie arranged a meeting for himself and Ed Wilson with Somoza. The meeting took place at Somoza’s favorite American retreat, the Palm Bay Club in Miami, Florida. At this meeting Ed laid out his plan to recruit one thousand former members of the C.I.A. who would be paid to assist Somoza in his struggle with the Sandinistas. At first Somoza was thrilled with the idea of his own private army of assassins who could eliminate his enemies. As the three men continued to get drunk Wilson claimed that they got “more excited, killing Ortega, killing everybody”. This plot had all the hallmarks of an old school Cold War intervention, using mercenaries to

¹³¹ Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War*, 37-38.

covertly achieve an objective when domestic political concerns prevented direct involvement. This plot represented Wilson's first attempt at covert operations in foreign policy and suited his desire to kill Communists wherever possible. It checked all of Wilson's boxes because it provided a possible means to preserve Somoza as an American ally and presented an opportunity to directly confront and kill Communists without putting himself in direct danger.¹³²

The plan and the meeting fell apart for two reasons. The first occurred when Somoza began to dance and flirt with Wilson's date for the evening. Somoza's flirting resulted in his mistress, who had accompanied him to the meeting, beginning to berate the dictator in Spanish followed by removing his glasses and stepping on them. This display was a public embarrassment for Somoza. At the same time the dictator's flirting with Wilson's date resulted in destroying any personal affection that Wilson might have previously held for Somoza, although Wilson continued to support him. The second and most important reason for the plan falling apart was the fact that Somoza refused to provide the necessary funds to carry it out. Ed Wilson claimed that it would only cost around \$100 million dollars to fund this private army of former operatives, roughly \$100 thousand per person recruited. Somoza balked at the price tag, claiming that it was just too expensive. Given both his own personal fortune and that of his family \$100 million

¹³² *Ibid.*

dollars would appear to be a small price to pay, especially if it had the potential of eliminating a potent threat to his regime.¹³³

Although this plan to recruit former spies to aid Somoza failed, it demonstrated the lengths to which Wilson was willing to go to oppose Communism. His zeal to oppose Communism led Wilson to interact with shady characters like Ed Wilson. Ed would be arrested in 1983 for selling arms to Libya in violation of U.S. sanctions and sentenced to fifty-two years in federal prison.¹³⁴ This episode also represented a landmark moment for Wilson because it was his first direct involvement in covert operations and with the C.I.A., even if it was through a renegade former agent. Despite the failure of his plan it illustrated the possibility for using covert operations to bypass the official channels of government legislation when these were opposed to his own views. This willingness to resort to a covert war against Communist aggression would later come to fruition in the mountains of Afghanistan during the 1980s. Wilson's decision to attempt the recruitment of mercenaries to support Somoza, demonstrated how desperate he had become to preserve Somoza in the face of the Carter Administration's refusal to reverse course.

¹³³ *ibid.*

¹³⁴ *ibid.*

Chapter 3

August '78- July '79: Wilson's Desperate Last Stand to Save Somoza

By August and September 1978 the situation in Nicaragua had reached the level of a crisis and brought the questions surrounding Somoza fully to Carter's attention. Carter's active involvement, although desired by Wilson, would in fact limit his ability to influence policy towards Nicaragua, especially after a meeting between fellow Somoza Lobby advocate Rep. John Murphy and Carter in January 1979. Control over U.S.-Nicaragua policy moved from the State Department to the National Security Council. As the anger that had simmered since Chamorro's death exploded into sporadic waves of violence in Nicaragua throughout the final months of 1978, American officials increasingly saw Somoza as the problem. The White House and State Department organized and supported attempts to mediate the crisis in the hope of preventing a Sandinista victory and the spread of the revolution to other nations in the region. In contrast, Wilson, Somoza, and their allies stoked fears of a Communist government following the regime if it was allowed to fall. They also began complaining of a conspiracy involving Panama, Costa Rica, and Venezuela allied with the Sandinistas against Somoza. The uncertainty surrounding Somoza's future, placed Carter's foreign policy in limbo. This uncertainty allowed Wilson to prevent the complete withdrawal of American support during the spring of 1979, even after any chance of changing Carter's

policy faded. As the end of the Somoza dynasty neared he lashed out at the administration's policy which he viewed as a betrayal of an American ally.

August-September 78: Renewed Violence and the Shift from Human Rights to National Security

On August 22, 1978, a group of twenty-six Sandinistas led by Eden Pastora seized control of the Nicaraguan National Palace. They took 1,500 hostages and held the building for two days. Somoza decided not to storm the palace and instead negotiated with the Sandinistas. He agreed to pay half a million dollars in ransom, although Pastora had wanted \$10 million, and allow a revolutionary call to arms to be played for the next two days. Pastora and the rest of the rebels were then given safe passage to the airport and allowed to fly to Panama, where crowds gathered to greet them. Pastora and the Sandinistas, to the chagrin of Somoza, had even used the letter from Carter to justify their attack on the palace. However, this was simply a means of garnering support, and in reality the attack was motivated by fears that the National Guard would replace Somoza. The U.S. replacing Somoza would have weakened the anti-Somoza sentiment that was fueling support for the Sandinistas among the Nicaraguan public.¹³⁵

The growing instability in Nicaragua changed how the Carter Administration viewed the question of aid to Somoza. Fears that the violence could spread to neighboring countries, especially Panama, and destabilize the region alarmed the White

¹³⁵Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 59.

House. This led to a shift in U.S.-Nicaraguan policy from it being defined as a human rights issue to a security concern. By this point control over policy rested with the National Security Council inside the White House and no longer with the State Department.¹³⁶

The new wave of violence demonstrated to Wilson the need for the administration to publicly support Somoza. In an effort to pressure Carter to come to the aid of the Nicaraguan government, Wilson joined with fifty-nine other members of Congress in signing a letter to the president. This letter, sent on September 22, 1978, stressed the ties between the Sandinistas and Cuba. In it Wilson and his allies declared that clear evidence existed that showed the goal of the revolution was to transform Nicaragua into a second Cuba. The bipartisan group of Congressmen called upon Carter to publicly show his support for Somoza. They blamed the willingness of certain parts of Nicaraguan society, including portions of the business sector, to support the Sandinistas on a lack of action by both the State Department and White House. Furthermore, they claimed that growing American hostility towards Somoza had driven support to the Communists.¹³⁷

The renewed wave of violence in Nicaragua, led by the Marxist-linked Sandinistas, changed how Wilson framed his argument for support to Somoza. The risk of a Communist takeover replaced the attacks on any double standards or human rights bias as his primary means for gaining support.¹³⁸ The active conflict in Nicaragua and the

¹³⁶ Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 58.

¹³⁷ "Letter to Carter, September 22, 1978", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 36.

¹³⁸ "Letter to Carter, September 22, 1978", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 36.

waves of violence, from August 1978 until Somoza's fall in July of 1979, provided him with supporting evidence for the polarized picture he painted. This image was between Somoza, who despite his flaws was a proven ally of the United States, and the specter of a second Cuba rising in his place.¹³⁹ Regardless of the shifts in both the situation on the ground in Nicaragua and the direction of his attacks, Wilson's ability to effect real change remained limited. He could continue to pressure the administration for limited concessions to Somoza, but he was unable to force Carter to fundamentally change his core foreign policy goals.

Despite the presence of an active revolution with clear links to Communist countries, calls by Wilson and other members of Congress for increased support to Nicaragua fell on deaf ears. This was because the core principle of Carter's foreign policy was non-intervention. Carter was attempting to step back from the imperialist image that had previously dominated U.S. policy towards Latin America, with military interventions and coups. In regards to Somoza, the administration had attempted to straddle the fence in an effort to maintain support from both the conservative and liberal wings of the Democratic Party. It refused to openly embrace him as previous presidents had done. At the same time the White House would not try to actively remove Somoza from power. In the end this middle ground approach pleased no one.¹⁴⁰ Liberal Democrats condemned it for not going far enough and called for the end of all U.S. support. On the other hand, hawkish, conservative, Cold Warriors like Wilson viewed the refusal to embrace Somoza

¹³⁹ Wilson, "*Agony in Nicaragua*," unpublished {Jan 79?}, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 22.

¹⁴⁰ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 18-19.

as a betrayal of an established ally. Further complicating the equation, a large portion of the Nicaraguan people was actively trying to remove Somoza from power. They were not waiting any longer for the Carter Administration to make up its mind.¹⁴¹

Attempts to Mediate the Crisis and Wilson's Response

Responding to the growing violence and unrest in Nicaragua, the State Department and White House attempted to create a mediation process to end the conflict. The first venture would last from September 1978 until Somoza killed it in January of 1979. Carter insisted that the State Department seek support for the mediation from Latin America to ensure that it did not appear that the United States was acting unilaterally. Acting through the Organization of American States, the State Department established a mediation process. Representatives from the OAS, the Somoza government, and the Sandinistas met to discuss ending the conflict. Somoza's representatives demanded that he be allowed to finish his constitutionally mandated term, which ended in 1981. The Sandinistas demanded that Somoza resign immediately, while the OAS suggested that Somoza hand over power to a junta comprised of members of Somoza's party and the National Guard. The process broke down when Somoza refused to resign and the Sandinistas walked away from the mediation after it became clear that they would have no place in the new power structure.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 61.

¹⁴² Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 82-85.

The closest the mediation came to success was when Somoza proposed a plebiscite to resolve the conflict. He stated that if he won he would serve out the remainder of his term and if he lost then he would resign. Wilson held the offer of a plebiscite up as proof that Somoza was not the brutal dictator his rivals painted him as. He went on to speculate that President Carter probably wouldn't have made a similar offer. Wilson also attacked what he saw as the administration's attempts to claim credit for the mediation, giving all the credit instead to Somoza.¹⁴³ The plebiscite offer nearly succeeded because the moderates feared a Sandinista victory as much as the continuation of the Somoza dynasty. Fear of the Sandinistas led them to consider accepting the proposal, but it fell apart when Somoza refused to accept State Department demands for international oversight of the elections. The State Department was convinced that Somoza's offer was simply a delaying tactic and knew that the regime would never allow free and fair elections to be held. By February 1979 the mediation broke down when Somoza refused to allow all Nicaraguans to take part in the plebiscite and several opposition groups withdrew from the process.¹⁴⁴

Somoza's refusal to allow a free and fair vote for the proposed plebiscite led the Carter Administration to impose sanctions on the regime. These were designed to pressure Somoza to return to the failed mediation process. However, Wilson was able to ensure that these sanctions were directed only at military and political support, most of which had been gutted already. The N.S.C. intended the sanctions to be mostly symbolic

¹⁴³ Wilson, "*Agony in Nicaragua*", unpublished {Jan 79?}, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 22.

¹⁴⁴ Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 86-91.

and did not want to expend all its leverage with Somoza at once.¹⁴⁵ Once again Wilson was able to pressure the administration to weaken its policy towards Somoza, but he lacked the ability to force a change in direction.

Wilson never considered a moderate alternative to Somoza. In his view the only group that stood to gain from Somoza's removal was the Communists. Thus, he spun the mediation process to paint Somoza in the best possible light. The key to this effort was Somoza's offer of a plebiscite, which Wilson claimed surprised him. He also attacked the opposition for believing that the U.S. would put them in power, claiming that they had failed to demonstrate popular support or military strength. In Wilson's view, Somoza's fall would create a vacuum that would inevitably be filled by the Sandinistas.¹⁴⁶ To him the choice was clear. If the United States failed to support Somoza it would lead to another Cuba rising in Central America.

The evidence appears to support the possibility that prior to Chamorro's death, and even until the Carter letter was sent, that Somoza could have been replaced with a moderate alternative. Wilson never acknowledged this possibility and always maintained that the choice facing the U.S. was supporting Somoza, or accepting a Communist victory in Nicaragua. There was a window during which the Sandinistas could have been thwarted if a viable candidate had received sufficient American support. However, like in Cuba with Fulgencio Batista, the U.S. failed to groom an alternative leader and paved the way for a Communist revolution to seize power. Wilson's actions through pressuring the

¹⁴⁵ Lake, *Somoza Falling*, 208-209.

¹⁴⁶ Wilson, "A Lesson in Loyalty," [July 1979?], unpublished, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 22.

Carter Administration to continue its support of Somoza, aided the Sandinista victory he fought to prevent.

The lack of a viable third option between Somoza and the Sandinistas during the mediations played into Somoza's hands. It allowed him to once again stress the choice as being between him and Communism.¹⁴⁷ Without a moderate option with a broad base of support, the administration was handcuffed. As previously stated, Carter's policy was non-interference which meant that the White House was not willing to forcibly remove him from power. The death of Chamorro had eliminated the only viable alternative to Somoza. Without a moderate choice who could pry public support away from the Sandinistas, the mediation process was doomed to fail from the start. The coalition of groups that formed the revolution against Somoza was held together by their hatred of Somoza and his regime. They did not have a unifying ideology; the Sandinistas with their Marxist views were only the most visible group. The only thing holding the opposition together was their shared hatred of Somoza.¹⁴⁸

The collapse of the diplomatic effort to mediate the crisis led many moderate groups to reluctantly rally behind the Sandinistas as the only means of removing Somoza. The Sandinistas new, reluctant, allies included neighboring countries such as Panama, Costa Rica, and Venezuela which began providing support for the Sandinistas in the fall of 1978. This support increased following the collapse of the mediation when it became

¹⁴⁷ Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 63.

¹⁴⁸ Ariel C. Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America, 1977-1984* (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1997), 237 n.7.

clear that only force would remove Somoza. For Wilson and Somoza these nations supporting the Sandinistas represented a conspiracy against the Nicaraguan regime.¹⁴⁹

OAS Inter-American Human Rights Commission Report and the Growing Conspiracy against Somoza

Wilson's claims of a double standard being used against Somoza were supported in October 1978 when the OAS Inter-American Human Rights Commission arrived in Nicaragua at Somoza's invitation. The commission remained in Nicaragua for nine days to investigate the human rights situation in the country. However, if Somoza had thought the visit would aid his position these hopes were soon destroyed. The investigation had focused exclusively on abuse claims against the government and had ignored all evidence regarding abuses committed by the Sandinistas. The report issued by the commission following its investigation was one-sided and did not contain any remarks or comments from the Nicaraguan government. These had all been excluded from the report by the commission. The one-sided nature of the investigation simply provided more evidence that Nicaragua and Somoza were being singled out for punishment on the basis of alleged human rights abuses. The removal of any counter-argument from the Nicaraguan government from the report denied Somoza the opportunity to defend himself. For Wilson it also undermined the credibility of the investigation's findings. The refusal of the commission to investigate similar allegations against the Sandinistas painted a biased

¹⁴⁹"Transcript of Wilson press conference, June 12, 1979", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 18, 2.

picture against Somoza, adding additional fuel to his double standard claims.¹⁵⁰ It presented a one-sided picture which highlighted every alleged flaw of the Somoza regime while ignoring the actions of the Cuban-backed Communist Sandinistas.

Wilson also attacked the timing of the O.A.S. visit to Nicaragua and the countries that organized the trip. He found the timing of the group's arrival in early October "convenient" because the National Guard was still conducting operations against the Sandinistas. The violence of August and September had not been fully dealt with, and operations were ongoing, providing vivid pictures to cast the regime in the worst possible light. The fact that the actions of the Sandinistas were ignored in the final report further illustrated his claims of bias. Wilson also took aim at the countries who had organized the timing of the visit. Panama, Costa Rica, and Venezuela had all played active roles in arranging the visit, and their animosity towards Somoza led Wilson to condemn the entire affair as evidence of a conspiracy aimed at undermining the regime. The refusal of the United States to support Somoza, a longstanding ally, in international bodies like the OAS was why Wilson had chosen to challenge the administration's policy towards Nicaragua. The administration was allowing a friendly government to be thrown under the bus while at the same time ignoring the actions of a Communist insurgency actively trying to take over Nicaragua. Somoza was to be attacked because of his rights record

¹⁵⁰ Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, 412.

while other regimes with similar or worse records continued to receive American support and backing.¹⁵¹

January-April 1979: Attacking the Canal Once Again and Somoza on *Face the Nation*

In January 1979 Wilson had been offered a place on the Military Affairs Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee. According to Wilson, serving on the subcommittee had been his goal since he first got on Appropriations. He had taken the position on the Foreign Operation Subcommittee to wait for a position to become available on Military Affairs. However, now that the position he had coveted had been offered to him he turned it down. Wilson insisted that he made his decision not to fulfill this personal ambition so that he could remain active on Nicaragua. His position on Foreign Operations gave him the ability to influence foreign aid to the Somoza government and allowed him to use threats to the foreign aid bill as leverage in this struggle.¹⁵²

More Threats and Murphy's Meeting with Carter

He used this position to deliver a threat to the administration and the State Department. If aid to Nicaragua was reduced any further, Wilson threatened to "single-

¹⁵¹ Charles Wilson, "A Lesson in Loyalty," [July 1979?], unpublished, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 22.

¹⁵² Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 94.

handedly eliminate Latin America from the aid program this year."¹⁵³ Attacks on aid to Latin America could have potentially endangered the Panama Canal Treaty once again. His fellow Somoza supporter, Rep. John Murphy, also attempted to use the Canal to force Carter to change course on Nicaragua. While dining with the President, Murphy tried to convince Carter to link the Canal Treaty legislation to Nicaragua. Carter refused to consider this plan and made it clear to Murphy that he was serious about Nicaragua. Murphy had attempted to use his position as Chairman of the House Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee, which was responsible for maritime trade legislation including the Canal, to threaten the ratification process. However, his bargaining position was not as strong as he implied because if he attempted to hold up the Treaty in his committee, the legislation could be removed and given to other committees that also had a claim of jurisdiction. Carter went on to make his case that Somoza had to change his policies and that the current situation could not continue. Murphy promised to use his influence to moderate Somoza's policies, but he came to realize that Carter was unlikely to budge on Nicaragua.¹⁵⁴

Carter's refusal to budge during this meeting represented a watershed moment for the Somoza Lobby. With the President directly involved in the policy-making process, the divisions within the administration that had aided them for so long began to close. Carter had made it clear that he would not, as Wilson desired, reverse course and support Somoza as previous presidents had done in the past. The best Wilson and the Lobby

¹⁵³ Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 94-5.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 93-94.

could manage after this was a holding action, preventing the complete withdrawal of American support, but unable to increase that support. Their best hope was that Somoza could weather the storm and either outlast the Sandinistas or the Carter Administration. It is possible that Carter's shift to a more hawkish anti-Communists stance in December 1979, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, could have resulted in a softer policy towards Somoza. However, the regime fell in July 1979 before geopolitical events forced a foreign policy change.

Ironically, the pressure exerted by Wilson, Murphy, and the rest of the Somoza Lobby to maintain American support to Nicaragua appeared to undermine their own positions. Until 1978 the administration had been preoccupied with events in the Middle East and relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Wilson complained that this focus left policy towards Nicaragua in the hands of liberal appointees who lacked the experience to understand the effect of their policy, especially in the face of a Communist threat.¹⁵⁵ Despite his complaints, his efforts were also aided by the back-burner status of Nicaragua. The prior willingness of the State Department and the White House to bend their policy and make various concessions to Somoza were partially rooted in the fact that Nicaragua was not a top priority. Once Carter became directly involved in policy towards Nicaragua, rather than leaving it to bureaucrats in the State Department, Wilson and his allies had to confront Carter directly. Carter's refusal to budge on his policy towards Somoza revealed the limitations faced by members of Congress trying to influence

¹⁵⁵ "Transcript of Wilson press conference, June 12, 1979", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 18, 2.

foreign policy. After Nicaragua became a major issue for the Executive Branch and the State Department, the conditions that had resulted in concessions no longer existed. This limited the ability of Wilson and his allies to press for increased support to Nicaragua during the final months of Somoza's rule.

The effort to link the Panama Canal to Nicaragua ultimately failed to change Carter's policy, but they did manage to gain some concessions for Somoza. In February, the White House refused to withdraw the American ambassador from Nicaragua and cut off diplomatic relations with the Somoza regime. Critics credit this decision to Carter surrendering to pressure brought by Wilson and Murphy through their threats to wreck the foreign aid bill. Supporters of Human Rights saw this decision as another victory for the Somoza Lobby and blasted the administration for failing to break away from Somoza.¹⁵⁶ Had the American ambassador been withdrawn it would have created a clear message that the relationship between the Somoza government and the U.S. was in danger. Wilson and the Somoza Lobby were able to prevent a complete break between the United States and Somoza, preserving the image of symbolic, if tarnished, support for the regime. Through their efforts the Carter Administration was essentially trapped in Nicaragua, because it did not want to risk damage to their wider agenda.

The administration's refusal to fully sever ties to Somoza can also be viewed as an attempt to hedge its bets. Even in the spring of 1979, Somoza still appeared to hold a strong position. The National Guard had grown in size to 11,000 men and remained loyal

¹⁵⁶"Press Release, February 2, 1979," *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*, C.W Collection, Box 1 Folder 35.

to the government. Nicaragua had been resupplied with military equipment from Israel and Guatemala, and it remained unclear who would prevail in the end.¹⁵⁷ By not withdrawing all signs of support from Somoza, the State Department was leaving a path back in if the regime managed to outlast the revolutionaries.

In April Somoza travelled to America during the Easter holiday. While in the country he gave an interview on the C.B.S. program *Face the Nation*, where he sought to, as usual, make his case to the American public. He condemned the White House and State Department for failing to support Nicaragua after it had provided decades of loyal support to the United States. He also addressed claims made by the American mediation team which stated that there was no chance for peace in Nicaragua as long as Somoza remained in power. Somoza countered this statement by claiming that the State Department had simply wanted him to leave and had not had a true plan for mediation. Furthermore, he made clear that he had offered to settle the conflict with the opposition with a plebiscite. If he had won the vote, he would have remained in power and if he lost then he would have left. Somoza also attempted to stoke fears of Communist expansion by saying that the revolutionaries wanted to remake Nicaragua along the same lines as Cuba.¹⁵⁸

Somoza went on to blame the violence and unrest in Nicaragua on a conspiracy against his government between Panama, Venezuela, and Costa Rica. He claimed that the Sandinistas would disappear once support, particularly from Panama and Venezuela was

¹⁵⁷ Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 101.

¹⁵⁸ "Transcript of Somoza Interview on Face the Nation, April 15, 1979", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 32.

halted. He also blamed aggressive actions taken by the United States for encouraging the unrest and violence.¹⁵⁹ Somoza's comments blaming the Carter Administration, through its lack of support for encouraging the revolution against his government, reflected his sense of betrayal. After all, Nicaragua had been a loyal ally of the United States for decades, and now when it was threatened by a Communist revolution the Carter Administration refused to return that support.

Wilson shared the belief that America was betraying a loyal friend by not going to Somoza's aid. In a press conference on June 12, 1979, he claimed the lack of support had led the White House and State Department to trade a "totalitarian, pro-American regime in Somoza" for a "totalitarian, anti-American regime in the Sandinistas". This statement illustrated why Wilson had gotten involved in Nicaragua in the first place. It was not out of any personal affection for Somoza, but instead out of a desire to preserve an embattled American ally under threat from Communist aggression. At the same time, he acknowledged that Somoza had clear flaws, but his value as an ally against Communism meant that to Wilson these flaws should be overlooked. Other regimes with equal or worse governments, but seen as strategically valuable or contained oil, were not subjected to the same level of scrutiny as Somoza. In Wilson's opinion Somoza and Nicaragua had been betrayed after years of loyalty in part because it lacked any such asset. The lack of strategic value had made Nicaragua expendable and led it to be surrendered to the Communists. He repeatedly stressed the links between the revolution and Communist

¹⁵⁹ "Transcript of Somoza Interview on Face the Nation, April 15, 1979", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 32.

Cuba in another attempt to demonstrate that the choice in Nicaragua was between Somoza and a Marxist government.¹⁶⁰

Most surprisingly, Wilson declared that he had given up on pressuring the Carter Administration to change its policy towards Somoza. He had fought for over two years to keep support flowing to Nicaragua, but now it had become clear that the end of the Somoza dynasty was fast approaching.¹⁶¹ It was also clear that Carter's policy would not change and, given the situation on the ground, even if it had it would have made little difference. Somoza was on the ropes and barring a direct military intervention, which was not even considered, would fall. Now that it had become clear that Somoza was finished, he resigned on July 17, 1979, Wilson shifted his attacks to a new target. For the first time he came out in opposition to the Panama Canal Treaty. Despite his attempts to threaten the Treaty as leverage for support to Somoza, he had personally and consistently supported Carter's plan to hand it over to Panama. However, he claimed that he could no longer support the Treaty because of evidence that Panama was actively supporting the Sandinistas against Somoza. This was based on reports that a Panamanian plane carrying weapons bound for the revolutionaries was captured in Miami. This report was released just three weeks before Wilson gave his press conference.¹⁶²

On June 18th, in one of his final acts in support of Somoza, Wilson joined with one hundred members of the House of Representatives and five Senators in sending a

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 1-3.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 2.

¹⁶² Ibid, 3-4.

letter to Carter. In it they begged the President to come to the aid of Somoza in order to prevent a second Cuba. However, the willingness of the U.S. to continue in its support of Somoza, limited as it had become, evaporated on June 20, 1979. That day A.B.C. reporter Bill Stewart, reporting from Nicaragua, was executed by a member of the Nicaraguan National Guard. His crew filmed the event and the video was aired that evening on American television. The video shocked and outraged the American public leading to increased pressure on Somoza.¹⁶³ Wilson attempted to spin the execution as the actions of a single soldier acting without orders, because there were no officers present at the time. He also continued to urge that the administration should not forget the decades of loyal support provided by the Somoza regime.¹⁶⁴ Despite his efforts the damage was done and it became clear that the United States would not aid Somoza further. By June, the renewed offensive launched by the Sandinistas in May, had driven Somoza into a fortified bunker in the Nicaraguan capital of Managua. With most of the country in rebel hands, Somoza was forced to resign on July 17, 1979 after bowing to pressure from the U.S., bringing an end to Charlie Wilson's first war.

The collapse of the Somoza regime ended the immediate viability of Nicaragua as a battleground in this struggle. This led Wilson to look for a new target to carry on the fight. Panama's support for the Sandinistas made it an easy target of opportunity. Wilson's shift in his anti-Communist campaign towards Panama demonstrated that his support for Somoza was motivated by a desire to confront Communism. Withdrawing his

¹⁶³ Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 117-18.

¹⁶⁴ Wilson, "A Lesson in Loyalty," {July 1979?} unpublished, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 22.

support for the Panama Canal Treaty was a way of punishing for all parties involved in toppling Somoza. Wilson's anti-Communist stance on foreign policy existed before Nicaragua and his support for Somoza, it would remain a driving force behind his hawkishness into the 1980s and lead to fame in the deserts of Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Wilson's constant support of Somoza was based on his own anti-Communist beliefs and his desire to challenge what he saw as a double standard in Carter's human rights policy. He believed that the administration's preoccupation with the Middle East and normalizing U.S.-Soviet relations had left foreign policy towards other regions, including Latin America, neglected. Without the direct involvement of higher ranking and knowledgeable officials, policy towards these neglected regions was left to political appointees. In Wilson's opinion these appointees were part of the "flaming radical left", who sought to use the human rights issue to single out right-wing dictatorships friendly to the United States for abuses of human rights. At the same time they applied this policy in a biased manner by ignoring the actions of left-wing dictatorships with similar records.¹⁶⁵ It was out of a desire to confront this bias that Wilson began looking for a place to pick a fight with this group of political appointees who had allegedly hijacked American foreign policy. Nicaragua and Somoza simply became the place he chose to make his stand after being recruited by Korth and the Somoza Lobby.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ "Transcript of Wilson press conference, June 12, 1979", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 18, 1-4.

¹⁶⁶ Choyke, "Nicaraguan military aid based on 'skimpy details'," *Star-Telegram*, (Fort Worth), July 29, 1977, C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 34.

The presence of this lobby and the active recruitment of Wilson demonstrated that Somoza was aware of the need to maintain American support for his regime. Throughout his alliance with Wilson, Somoza always pursued his own agenda focused on remaining in power. At the same time he took active steps, including granting interviews with the American media, in an effort to maintain support for his government. During these interviews Somoza crafted his arguments to stress the decades of support Nicaragua had provided to the United States. He also portrayed Nicaraguan opposition groups as being linked to Cuba and sharing a Communist ideology.¹⁶⁷ Labeling opponents as Communists was a direct attempt to play on the traditional Cold War view of American foreign policy, which Wilson shared. This rhetoric had worked for the Somozas for over forty years, but Carter's election altered the equation. The recruitment of Wilson and the efforts of the Somoza Lobby were directed at correcting this shift in American foreign policy.

Wilson believed that Somoza and Nicaragua had been singled out by the human rights faction because it was a small nation without oil or strategic importance. This made it the perfect place to test the human rights policy. He viewed the attacks directed at Somoza by the State Department as a betrayal of a traditional Cold War ally in the battle against Communism. This betrayal would encourage America's Communist enemies to expand further. At the same time it would demoralize other allies of the United States who would fear their own loss of support. To Wilson this shift posed a danger to U.S.

¹⁶⁷ "Transcript of Somoza Interview on *Face the Nation*", April 15, 1979", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 32.

security and went against his own anti-Communist beliefs. America was abandoning its friends and by doing so supporting its enemies.¹⁶⁸

Wilson's efforts on behalf of Somoza began in March of 1977 and would last until Somoza fell from power in July of 1979. He used his position on the powerful House Appropriations Committee to secure U.S. aid for Somoza. During 1977 he accomplished this through the legislative process by rounding up votes to defeat measures aimed at cutting off aid.¹⁶⁹ However, by 1978 the increase in violence in Nicaragua made this tactic more difficult. Instead Wilson and the Somoza Lobby turned to threats to force the Administration to keep support flowing to the regime. They took aim at the Panama Canal Treaty, Carter's primary policy for Latin America, and threatened its ratification if aid to Somoza was cut.¹⁷⁰ Wilson used this position in Congress to threaten Carter's entire foreign aid bill in his effort to gain aid for Somoza. Threats such as this worked because until August of 1978, Nicaragua was not a major concern for the administration. This back burner status led it to compromise with Wilson rather than risk damaging its entire foreign policy agenda.¹⁷¹

The outbreak of additional violence and growing instability in Nicaragua by August brought Carter and the White House into control of U.S. policy towards the crisis. It also led Wilson to shift his attacks from arguing over supposed biases on the human

¹⁶⁸ "Transcript of Wilson press conference, June 12, 1979", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 18, 1-4.

¹⁶⁹ *House of Representatives Congressional Record of June 23rd, 1977*, C.W Collection, Box 2 Folder 2.

¹⁷⁰ Bell, "Wilson: too much credit", *Lufkin News*, Thursday, May 18, 1978, C.W. Collection, Box 2 Folder 4.

¹⁷¹ Goshko, "Nicaraguan Human Rights Situation Caught in a Crossfire," *Washington Post*, February 17, 1978, 22.

rights issue to the need to preserve Somoza in the face of a Communist threat from the Sandinistas. For him the choice for the United States in Nicaragua was between Somoza, a totalitarian American ally, or the Sandinistas, who would bring about a totalitarian anti-American regime. This Communist threat reinforced Wilson's belief that the White House and State Department were betraying Somoza and by doing so allowing a second Cuba to form.¹⁷² Carter's direct involvement brought the limitations of Congress's ability to alter foreign policy into focus. Once the President took an active role in the situation, the willingness of the State Department to make deals with Wilson diminished. Carter's refusal to change his policy on Somoza in January 1979 signaled the beginning of the end for Wilson's efforts to force a change in policy.¹⁷³ Without the support of the President or the majority of Congress it was impossible for Wilson to alter America's new stance towards Somoza.

He continued to support Somoza until the end of the regime in July 1979. Wilson blamed the Carter Administration and its lack of support for the collapse of the Somoza dynasty. He also laid the blame for the Communist takeover of Nicaragua at the feet of the State Department and White House, because even if the Carter Administration had not actively aided the Sandinistas, the withdrawal of support had undermined the regime. America's betrayal had allowed the opposition to topple Somoza and create a Marxist state

¹⁷²"Transcript of Wilson press conference, June 12, 1979", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 18, 1-4.

¹⁷³ Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, 93-94.

in his place. This outraged the anti-Communist in Wilson and made his first war a failure.¹⁷⁴

The same anti-Communist beliefs that motivated Wilson to support Somoza would lead him into the mountains of Afghanistan. The covert war he funded in those mountains would eventually make him famous. However, his actions in both Afghanistan and Nicaragua were fueled by Wilson's Cold War anti-Communists view of foreign policy. The same desire and mindset to confront Communist aggression that led him to support Somoza would drive him to the aid of embattled Afghan "freedom fighters" during the 1980s. The lessons Wilson learned in his failed adventures in Nicaragua, about the power of a well-placed Congressman to influence foreign policy, would aid him in securing victory in Afghanistan. The greatest of these lessons was the need for support from the Executive Branch in order for a Congressman to succeed in shaping foreign policy. Wilson lacked that support in Nicaragua and failed to save Somoza. He had the support of the Reagan Administration for his covert war in Afghanistan and succeeded in defeating the Soviet Union.

¹⁷⁴ "Transcript of Wilson press conference, June 12, 1979", C.W. Collection, Box 1 Folder 18, 1-4.

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