

America Faces Credibility Test on Nicaragua

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WASHINGTON—Ominous portents of the predictable election victory by the Somoza dynasty last Sunday in Nicaragua pose a new credibility test for U. S. policy in Latin America.

The Question: If Nicaragua's President-elect, Gen. Anastasio (Tachito) Somoza Jr., turns to repressive violence, will the U.S. react as it has against Communist-infiltrated governments? If not, the climate may be ripe in Nicaragua, too, for Communist insurrection.

The question is scarcely hypothetical. Tachito Somoza, who follows his father and elder brother to the presidency, is the worst of the dynasty that has maintained dictatorial rule in Nicaragua for 30 years. He showed his iron fist on Jan. 22 when his National Guard smashed with excessive force a badly managed coup attempt by the opposition. The count of civilian casualties ranges from 50 to 150.

U.S. officials emphasize that Washington will not tolerate a regime of blood and steel in Managua. But there is grave doubt that Washington will be nearly so antagonistic to Tachito as it was, for instance, to the late left-wing Brazilian government.

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THE SOURCES of the Latin American credibility gap are found in both past and present.

The Somoza dynasty (as well as the National Guard, its source of power) was created by the U.S. Marine intervention in 1926-33. Moreover, the current U.S. image in Managua was molded by the disastrous 10-year reign (1951-61) of Thomas E. Whelan, a North Dakota businessman, as U.S. ambassador there. Whelan virtually became a member of the Somoza government.

Since then, a more prudent neutrality has prevailed. But the Somoza opposition complains bitterly, and with

INSIDE REPORT

By ROWLAND EVANS

and ROBERT NOVAK

some reason, that this neutrality helps the entrenched Somoza dynasty.

This was shown last December when Dr. Fernando Aguero, leader of the Conservative party and presidential candidate of an anti-Somoza coalition, visited Washington. He flatly informed officials of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the State Department that the cards were clearly stacked against him.

Aguero claimed that the Somozas had padded the voting rolls, with a fantastic 850,000 voters in a country of 1.7 million. Worse yet was the Castro-like workers and farmers militia called AMROCS created by the government. These bully boys, Aguero charged, were committing mayhem and even murder against the opposition.

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OAS OFFICIALS explained to Aguero that the international team he wanted to referee the election was impossible without the request of the Somoza-controlled government. That request could only be made if the U.S. cast

aside diplomatic niceties and put the pressure on Somoza.

Instead of that, a series of small incidents—the Nicaraguans—incorrectly—that U.S. neutrality Somoza neutrality and that the day of Tom Whelan not over.

After an autumn visit to Washington, Gen. Somoza to his countrymen Washington was solidly behind him. Then, a U.S. general received a royal welcome in an inspection tour.

And on Jan. 21, President Johnson, Vice President Humphrey and Secretary of State Dean Rusk attended festivities in Washington for the gala wedding of the daughter of Nicaragua Ambassador Guillermo Sevilla-Sacasa (dean of the diplomatic corps here). To Nicaraguans, this was tacit endorsement of the Somozas, allied in politics and marriage with Sevilla-Sacasa.

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ON THE NEXT DAY, Jan. 22, a desperate Aguero wrecked his own cause by attempting his desperate coup (with Communists infiltrating Aguero's forces in vain hopes of enlisting support from National Guard dissident officers). The bloody repression by the National Guard insured Somoza's victory.

Whether the U.S. now narrows its Latin credibility gap in Nicaragua is a matter of vital concern. For the Nicaraguan scene begins to take on ominous tones of the Cuban tragedy to wit:

Anti-Communist reformers ignored by Washington; a dictatorship first coddled and then tolerated by the U.S.; right-wing repression set in a bloody frame.

Whether the next steps consist of still greater repression, followed by a Communist revolution, depends in no small part on the skill and daring of President Johnson's Latin American policymakers.