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The Latin American Studies Association vs. the United States: The Verdict of History

Alfred G. Cuzán

The collapse of the Soviet Union has been accompanied by critical commentaries on what are called "sins of Sovietology." Critics have focused not so much on the failure of specialists to predict the breakup of the empire that Stalin built as on their alleged inability to understand the very nature of communist regimes.[1]

By the same token, Nicaragua's repudiation of the Sandinistas in the 1990 election and the approaching demise of Fidel Castro's thirty-five-year-old dictatorship (a Latin American record) over Cuba call for analysis of what Latin Americanists have said about the two regimes in the Western hemisphere most like—and for most of their life closely allied to—those that once made up the Soviet bloc.[2] How well did Latin Americanists diagnose the nature of Marxism-Leninism when it showed up at their doorstep speaking Spanish, quoting Jose Marti and Ruben Dario?[3]

An exhaustive study of the judgments that Latin Americanists have rendered on Cuba and Nicaragua during the last two decades, even if restricted to the leading journals and best-selling textbooks, would fill a rather lengthy book and is beyond the scope of this essay.[4] I shall instead consider the resolutions, reports, and other official declarations or statements of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), the leading organization of Latin Americanists in the United States, if not the world. Since LASA's resolutions are adopted only after ratification by the entire membership, those on Cuba and Nicaragua should reflect what a large body of Latin Americanists have thought about these countries through the years.

LASA, which was founded in 1966, has over 3,000 individual and about 80 institutional members. Every 18 months it holds an international congress that attracts about 2,000 participants. Members receive the *Latin American Research Review* (LARR), a scholarly journal, and the LASA *Forum* (formerly the LASA *Newsletter*), a quarterly publication of announcements, reports, analyses, and opinion. LASA's resolutions, task force reports, and related documents, whose contents will be analyzed in these pages, appear in the latter.

LASA is governed by a nine-member executive council consisting of six elected representatives, an elected vice-president (who automatically succeeds

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to the presidency), the president, and the immediate past president. With the council's consent, the president makes appointments to task forces charged with specific missions. Two of the oldest, each more than twenty years old, are the Task Force on Scholarly Relations with Cuba and the Task Force on Human Rights and Academic Freedom. More recent is the Task Force on Scholarly Relations with Nicaragua, later renamed the Task Force on Scholarly Relations with Central America. It is in these three task forces that most of LASA's official pronouncements and reports have germinated or come to fruition. Another arena is the business meeting of the international congress, where political resolutions are born, although, as previously noted, official adoption must await ratification by mail ballot.

Like other learned societies, LASA became radicalized during the 1970s.[5] The Association took to denouncing in impassioned language atrocities perpetrated by Latin American military regimes and, as one resolution had it, their "accomplice," the U.S. Government. At the same time, LASA passed over in silence similar violations by Castro's Cuba and Sandinista Nicaragua, and actually took the side of these regimes in their respective conflicts with Washington.

As recalled by Ronald Chilcote of the University of California at Riverside, a self-professed radical who later criticized the Association for not going far enough in its denunciations of U.S. policies, the struggle for LASA's political soul started at a conference sponsored at the Latin American Center of the University of California at Los Angeles.

> A series of prominent speakers, some conservative and some liberal or radical, had been invited to participate in what appeared to be a dull program of tedious talks organized one after the other in a format that precluded involvement of some one hundred participants. It was too much for the radicals in attendance who demanded that the conference be reorganized to allow for involvement of all. A confrontation with the organizers of the conference resulted in the restructuring of the program, and two days of interesting dialogue ensued. The Union of Radical Latin Americanists [URLA] was born shortly thereafter, bringing together radicals on the West as well as East Coasts. (*Newsletter*, June 1973, 31)

Flushed with success, URLA sponsored a series of resolutions at the next three LASA congresses.[6]

Two resolutions from the 1973 meeting at Madison, Wisconsin, put an imprint on LASA political activities for the next two decades. Resolution One, "On Repression in Latin America and United States Complicity Therein," accused the United States of supporting, "through its police and military training program" and other assistance, the abduction and murder of students and priests, internment and torture of political prisoners, exiling of dissidents, and the abolition of university autonomy in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and Uruguay. Colombia, too, was accused of repressing "university professors with the

purpose of destroying academic freedom." Resolution One directed the establishment of a "Committee on Human Rights and Academic Freedom which shall investigate and prepare reports on the above-mentioned situations and any other similar situations to be distributed to the LASA membership and to public officials and the mass media" (*Newsletter*, March 1974, 9–10).

Resolution Four, "On the U.S. Blockade of Cuba and Chile," "publicly condemned" the U.S. "economic and political blockade against Cuba" as well as the "invisible blockade" against Chile, which was at the time under the administration of Marxist president Salvador Allende. The resolution provided for its own dissemination "through the major newspapers of the United States and other appropriate channels" (*Newsletter*, March 1974, 12).

By the time these resolutions were ratified by mail ballot, Allende's government had been overthrown in a military coup. This turn of events persuaded LASA's executive council not to implement Resolution Four. In a letter to the LASA membership, a sponsor of the resolution, executive council member Karen Spalding, of Columbia University, explained:

> My own reason for withdrawing the resolution passed is that subsequent events have proven that my understanding of the lengths to which U.S. corporations and the U.S. Government would go to achieve the overthrow of a government that was not completely subservient to their interests was limited and incomplete. While many of us sought to draw the attention of the U.S. public to the "invisible blockade" of Chile, which was instrumental in the deterioration of the Chilean economy, and asserted that this blockade was essentially the same as the blockade of Cuba, agencies of the U.S. Government were actively supporting the plans being made for the overthrow of President Allende.
>
> Subsequent events have made it brutally clear that the U.S. Government is prepared not only to deal with governments representative of the most extreme forms of fascism and repression, but also to actively participate in their accession to power...[and] to use *any* ends to prevent the extension of socialism in the Americas. The growth of fascism in the Americas is consistent with and in fact part of the long term political objectives of U.S. policy in Latin America. (*Newsletter*, December 1973, 2, emphasis in original)

The vote to ratify these resolutions was close. "On Repression in Latin America and U.S. Complicity Therein" received 402 votes in favor, 340 against, with 16 abstentions. The tally for "On the U.S. Blockade of Cuba and Chile" was 416 for and 326 against, with 16 abstentions. As a proportion of the vote, the resolutions passed by 52 percent and 55 percent, respectively. Somewhat fewer than half of the ballots were returned (*Newsletter*, December 1973, 1).

Ironically, at about the time that these resolutions were ratified, a majority of members, in a separate survey, disapproved of political resolutions. In September 1973, due to divisions in the Executive Council regarding the propriety of LASA's adopting "resolutions of a political nature," a questionnaire was sent to the membership, asking whether "concern with political resolutions"

should or should not "be a part of LASA's activities." The "poll" was taken "only for informational and further discussion purposes," yet it elicited a near-record response. Of about 1,600 questionnaires mailed, 865 (54 percent) were returned, of which 522 (61 percent) *disapproved* of political resolutions, 329 (38 percent) approved, and 14 (under 2 percent) represented abstentions (*Newsletter*, December 1973, 26).

This "poll" was the high-water mark of opposition to LASA's radical resolutions; after that, the oppositionist tide quickly receded. Notwithstanding the results of the survey, political resolutions continued to be proposed at every business meeting, approved nearly unanimously by those present, and, in a turn-around from the contested votes of 1973, ratified by ever-larger margins, ranging from three-to-one to over ten-to-one. Ever since, the radicals have exercised uncontested hegemony over LASA's political resolutions.

This is not to say that the entire membership was radicalized. Participants at the business meeting have always been but a fraction of those attending the international congress. As a proportion of the total, the number of ratification ballots returned has never again exceeded 40 percent. In the last referendum, which included a resolution on U.S. policy toward Cuba, scarcely 500 out of around 3,000 ballots were returned, an all-time low (*Forum*, Winter 1993, 35). Moreover, the votes in favor of radical resolutions have always been fewer than 1,000, and were never cast by more than 35 percent of the entire membership.

In other words, a majority of LASA members has kept silent. But the meaning of this silence is not obvious. Some of those who choose not to attend or speak out may do so because they "have felt intimidated from expressing dissenting views on resolutions and motions presented at the business meetings," as the executive council argued when it changed the by-laws to provide for secret voting at the congress (*Forum*, Summer 1984, 8). Nor did vocal opposition to the radicals cease altogether; an intermittent trickle of letters and other expressions of dissent continued to appear in the *Forum*. A letter by Abe Lowenthal and Jane Jacquette complained that "the content and style" of business meetings, motions, and resolutions amounted to a "collective violation of professional norms," did damage "to the Associations's reputation for scholarly integrity," and reduced LASA's "scant chance to affect the real world beyond words by these rhetorical outbursts" (*Newsletter*, September 1979, 2–3).

During his presidency, Jorge Dominguez, too, criticized the Association's radical politics. Noting that "LASA has a mixed public reputation among academics and nonacademics," and that "many find appalling what goes on at LASA business meetings and may recoil as well from some of what passes for scholarship at our conventions," he confessed to

> shar[ing] the views of those who indict part of the convention's activities for being grossly unprofessional.... [O]ne of the darkest moments of my professional life in LASA was the Bloomington plenary meeting on Nicaragua. That

> meeting revealed appalling behavior for any audience, but it was even more scandalous for an audience presumably composed of academics. Specifically, the lack of minimal courtesy, and the expression of naked intolerance toward James Cheek, then deputy assistant secretary of state for Inter-American affairs, was damnable. (*Forum*, Summer 1982, 1, 3)

Other LASA presidents have alluded to members' quitting the Association for political reasons. Helen Safa admitted, "I am well aware that strong partisanship can destroy LASA and that some disenchanted members have already left the association" (*Forum*, Summer 1983, 3). Cole Blasier agreed: "We need to attract those Latin Americanists who left LASA when the organization's policy orientations differed sharply from their own" (*Forum*, Winter 1988, 4). Still, from the early 1970s through the present, among Latin Americanists who renewed their LASA membership and who chose to participate in the Association's political activities, a consensus solidified behind the radicals.

The radicals' agenda involved the application of a double standard. On the one hand, the universality of human rights—including academic freedom—and the purity of scholarship were repeatedly invoked to condemn, and to avoid any type of contact with, right-wing military regimes, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the U.S. Department of Defense. On the other, the very same standard was used, not to deplore the repression of intellectual freedom in Castro's Cuba or Sandinista Nicaragua, but to justify LASA's reaching out to those regimes for the purpose of establishing "scholarly relations."[7]

At the Atlanta meeting in 1976, a motion was made advocating "A Reaffirmation of the Commitment of the Latin American Studies Association to the Universal Applicability and Necessity of Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility of the Higher Educational Community." It reads in part:

> That the Latin American Studies Association reaffirms its beliefs that Academic Freedom is necessary for a free and progressive society, in all nations of the world,...and, [t]hat U.S. institutions and organizations representing academia and individuals acting on their behalf, should be ready to take all necessary steps to dissociate themselves from any actions and relationships with countries in which it is evident that massive and systematic violations of academic freedom have occurred in order that such actions and relationships might not appear to condone these violations. (*Newsletter*, June 1976, 6)

Next came the "Resolution on LASA Guidelines for Relations Between U.S. Scholars and Universities and Latin American Scholars and Universities Under Repressive Regimes," which appears to be aimed, at least in part, at Latin Americanists who do contract work for the CIA.

> Covert operations and covert sponsorship of open operations have no place in scholarly pursuits. For the sake of the integrity and effectiveness of the profession as a whole, LASA members must shun all projects the purposes and sponsorship of which cannot be openly acknowledged. LASA members must struggle against censorship in all its forms, including the most subtle, most pervasive, and

> most threatening form of all: Self Censorship. We must guard against distortion of our own work and against the suppression by any public or private entity of information that should be in the public domain. And we must guard against giving credence to "disinformation."...We must continue...to raise our voices against abuses of human rights throughout the Americas. (*Newsletter*, December 1980, 2)

Even as LASA invoked academic freedom to shun the CIA, it made use of it to build bridges to Fidel Castro's regime. Probably no country in the hemisphere has received as much consistent attention from the executive council as has Cuba. Funds from the Ford Foundation have been used to finance activities of the Task Force on Scholarly Relations with Cuba, to pay for trips of LASA officers to the island, for attendance by Cuban scholars at LASA congresses, and to organize small conferences in Havana. The "Cuba Task Force" is "among the most active of the Task Forces and one that involves many scholars from both its targeted area of interest and in the United States," as a recent report put it (*Forum*, Fall 1992, 16).

In the early 1970s and again in the mid-1980s, the U.S. Government did not issue visas to Cubans to attend LASA congresses.[8] LASA lobbied hard for a change of policy, and when Cubans were admitted, they were welcomed with "great pleasure" (*Newsletter*, December 1977, 10), and their "incisive contributions" to the discussions were praised (*Newsletter*, March 1978, 7).

LASA's pronouncements concerning Cuba have gone beyond the issue of "scholarly relations." Ever since Resolution Four was ratified in 1973, hardly a congress has failed to adopt a motion or resolution demanding that the U.S. Government cease its "hostility" to and establish full diplomatic relations with Cuba. The following resolution is representative:

> Whereas the U.S. government has pursued a policy of hostility toward Cuba; Whereas the U.S. government is denying many U.S. citizens the right to travel to Cuba as tourists; and Whereas professional scholars must seek special clearance from the U.S. government if they wish to do research in Cuba; Therefore, be it resolved that the Latin American Studies Association urge the U.S. government to end its policy of hostility and to begin negotiations for the further normalization of relations between the two countries, including the lifting of obstacles to travel. (*Forum*, Spring 1984, 3)

In pursuit of "scholarly relations with Cuba," LASA officers have met with high officials of the Cuban Communist Party. Helen Safa, then president of LASA, reported that a three-member LASA delegation headed by herself had met in Havana "with several members of the Departamento de America of the Central Committee of the PCC [America Department of the Cuban Communist Party], with Armando Hart, minister of culture, and Rene Rodriguez, head of the Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos" (*Forum*, Fall 1984, 9). The America Department of the Cuban Communist Party is said to have responsibilities in the area of covert operations.[9]

This is not to accuse Helen Safa or any other LASA officer of engaging in conspiratorial activities. Rather, my purpose is to note the operation of LASA's double standard, one that called for shunning the CIA and right-wing Latin American regimes but was willing to engage the regime in the Americas closest to the Stalinist model.

In promoting "scholarly relations with Cuba," LASA has been uncharacteristically circumspect about the state of human rights and academic freedom under Castro. The Task Force on Human Rights and Academic Freedom has not published a single word on the subject. Here and there in the pages of the *Forum*, there are hints that LASA is aware of the lack of free expression in Cuba. In 1985, the *Forum* published a letter signed by Samuel Farber of Brooklyn College, Noam Chomsky of MIT, the writer I.F. Stone, and 22 others calling attention to the plight of "Ariel Hidalgo, a Cuban leftist writer, historian and educator," who had been sentenced to from one to eight years in prison under the article in the penal code punishing "enemy propaganda." The letter reads in part:

> We believe that Hidalgo's trial, the law under which he was punished, and the prison conditions which he is currently enduring, fail to meet the most elementary standards of human rights. Consistent with our stand in support of struggles for freedom and self-determination throughout the world, we ask the Cuban government to release Ariel Hidalgo, and any other persons whose rights have been similarly denied. (*Forum*, Spring 1985, 6)[10]

Van R. Whiting, Jr., co-chair of the LASA Task Force on Cuba, thereupon forwarded the Farber letter to Ramon Sanchez Parodi, head of the Cuban Interest Section in Washington, explaining:

> As you know, the LASA Task Force on Cuba is committed to the improvement of scholarly relations between the United States and Cuba.
>
> We are also charged with monitoring the conditions of human rights in Cuba, especially with relation to the scholarly community. ... [W]hen a specific case is brought to our attention, we must demand a clarification.
>
> The case of Ariel Hidalgo is a case in point. The enclosed letter, published in the LASA *Forum*, raises serious concerns about the conditions for academic freedom and for judicial process in Cuba.... If the description contained in the enclosed letter is accurate, Ariel Hidalgo was convicted for expressing his opinions, not for taking any subversive action. The conditions of his trial suggest that he was not allowed to present an adequate defense. Finally, the conditions of his imprisonment seem unjustifiably harsh.
>
> We ask that you make immediate inquiries into the case of Ariel Hidalgo. Given the conditions stated in Samuel Farber's letter, we call upon the Cuban government to release Ariel Hidalgo. (*Forum*, Spring 1986, 36)

The matter seems to have been dropped there, and nothing has been published since in the *Forum* on the case of Ariel Hidalgo or any other

Cuban intellectual or academic imprisoned for expressing opinions. Neither the Task Force on Scholarly Relations with Cuba, nor the Task Force on Human Rights and Academic Freedom, nor any other LASA officer has in the pages of the *Forum* protested violations of human rights and academic freedom in Cuba in the style that LASA affects when speaking of other Latin American governments.

The closest a LASA officer has come to acknowledging political repression in Cuba was in a response by then-president Cole Blasier to a complaint from the U.S. State Department concerning a LASA resolution asserting that U.S. measures on travel between the two countries were more restrictive than Cuba's. The official had written:

> It is astonishing that an organization composed of scholars interested in Latin America would make such as [sic] assertion. The closed nature of the Cuban system is too sufficiently known as to require elaboration here, but it should be clearly understood that Cuba exercises complete control over all persons who would be permitted to leave Cuba to visit the United States just as it applies severe sanctions to those who seek to leave Cuba without official permission. It also controls carefully the admission of scholars who wish to visit Cuba, as you are aware from a case at the University of Pittsburgh.

Blasier responded:

> Almost all Latin Americanists of my aquaintance [sic] are familiar with the characteristics of the Cuban system which you correctly describe. Even so, the fact remains that U.S. visa policies are more restrictive than Cuba's in the sense that the United States refuses visas to most Cuban academics, while Cuba admits most U.S. academics. (*Forum*, Spring 1987, 20)

If LASA has been all but silent about "the characteristics of the Cuban system," it has actually praised Castro's most successful imitators in Latin America, the Sandinistas of Nicaragua. As domestic and international criticism of the *comandantes* mounted during their decade in power, the Association rushed to their defense, condemning the U.S. Government in the process. In 1984 LASA accepted an invitation of the Nicaraguan Government to observe the first elections held by the Sandinistas since the 1979 revolution. A fourteen-member delegation, headed by LASA president Wayne Cornelius, spent two weeks, including election day, in the country, after which it produced a widely disseminated and much-cited report.

The main opposition candidate, Arturo Cruz, standard-bearer of the *Coordinadora Democratica*, had decided to boycott the election, alleging press censorship, *turba*, or Sandinista mob violence against his supporters, militarism, fusion of party and state, and refusal on the part of the Sandinistas to negotiate with the *Contras*, release political prisoners, or discuss with the opposition a mutually acceptable date for the election.[11] The six small parties that stayed in the race monitored fewer than 10 percent of the precincts each.

Nevertheless, the LASA delegation put its imprimatur on the election. Almost at the outset, its report averred that "for most [Nicaraguans] the 1984 electoral process was their first experience with participatory democracy." Some thirty pages later, it concluded that, "by Latin American standards," the election was "a model of probity and fairness (at least to all candidates who chose to register and submit themselves to a popular test)," and "an impressive beginning" of "political liberalization" in Nicaragua (*Forum*, Winter 1985, 12, 40, 42).

In between, the report credited the Sandinistas with "deepening" an already broad base of support with remarkable achievements in education and public health. Relying exclusively on official sources—one government publication and interviews with ministry officials—the delegation accepted Sandinista claims to have slashed illiteracy by more than half in a six-month National Literacy Crusade, and to have reduced infant mortality by one third in a few years, by such means as temporary mass mobilization of tens of thousands of "volunteers."

The report stated that the Sandinista "agrarian reform" program had "created a large class of beneficiaries," and that these *campesinos* were "staunch supporters of the government that made them landowners. Much the same could be said of *campesinos* now involved in the cooperative sector. Even workers for the state-owned agricultural enterprises enjoy mechanisms for participation in the management of such enterprises" (*Forum*, Winter 1985, 13–14).

It is not clear how the delegation was able to read the minds of the *campesinos* on agrarian reform, since no sources were cited for this claim. Due to a Sandinista prohibition, no independent polling was possible in Nicaragua at that time. Remarkably, the report noted the lack of public opinion surveys, but it gave no reason for it.

The LASA delegation defended the *comandantes* from domestic critics, minimized the political importance of the "abstentionist opposition," and accused the Reagan administration of using "a combination of diplomatic, economic, and military instruments in a systematic attempt to undermine the Nicaraguan electoral process and to destroy its credibility in the eyes of the world" (*Forum*, Winter 1985, 38).

About university autonomy and academic freedom, a recurring theme in LASA's criticisms of other Latin American governments, the delegation had this to say:

> Several well-informed sources consulted by our delegation expressed concern about what they termed a "serious erosion" of university autonomy—one of the objectives of the struggle against Somoza—which has occurred since 1979. Now, the rectors of the two divisions of the National University are appointed by the government rather than elected by their faculties; and the activities of at least one other academic research center have been heavily politicized. It is not clear, however, whether reduced institutional autonomy has been translated into less freedom of expression for individual scholars. (*Forum*, Winter 1985, 36)

In response to a letter from LASA member Daniel Levy, who complained that "the abuse of university autonomy received only one paragraph" (*Forum*, Spring 1985, 9), Cornelius replied, "I can assure readers that we utilized every scrap of reliable information on this subject that came into the delegation's hands. This is a complex issue meriting systematic, in-depth investigation. We simply did not have the time nor the personnel to pursue it in this way" (*Forum*, Winter 1986, 24).[12]

LASA returned to Nicaragua the following year, not to clarify the status of academic freedom, but to investigate the war between the Sandinistas on the one hand and, on the other, Miskitos, other Indians, and Creoles of Nicaragua's Atlantic coast. The Task Force produced a two-part report, "Peace and Autonomy on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: A Report of the LASA Task Force on Human Rights and Academic Freedom" (*Forum*, Spring and Summer, 1986).

The war had begun in 1981, when Indians refused to go along with a Sandinista plan to "'incorporate' the coast into the new national development process" (*Forum*, Spring 1986, 9). Following the arrests and killings of brethren who had protested the "incorporation" plan, many Indians took up arms. The government responded with forced relocations of "approximately 8,500" Indians and the "systematic destruction of houses and livestock" (*Forum*, Spring 1986, 11). Some 15,000 Indians fled Nicaragua by crossing the Coco River into Honduras. Thousands more were to follow.[13]

In contrast to a previous LASA resolution denouncing Guatemala's "forced relocation to the so-called model villages" (*Forum*, Summer 1985, 4), the Task Force on the whole defended a similar policy of the Sandinistas:

> The relocation was a regrettable policy that even the Sandinistas now call an error. It was, however, consistent with the rights of states to defend their national integrity and was carried out with minimal violations of the human rights of the Miskitos. It occured [sic] in a context of violence during which the Sandinistas committed human rights violations. Most of these have been punished and there has been a marked reduction of them since that time, certainly fewer than the systematic violations committed by the *contras* and always less than the levels regularly reported by the governments of Guatemala against its indigenous population or by the government of El Salvador against its civilian population.... There was certainly no policy of massive abuse or genocide. (*Forum*, Spring 1986, 13)

The Task Force then proceeded to denounce the United States:

> This conflict was complicated, however, by the immediate threat to Nicaragua posed by military units *created*, trained, and financed by the U.S. The external conflict created a context in which Miskito demands for self-determination were seen by the Sandinistas as separatist and related to U.S. efforts to overthrow the government by arming indigenous insurgents and by attempting to turn world opinion against the Sandinistas through false accusations of "genocide." This tense context heightened the internal conflict and contributed to the relocation

> to Taspa Pri [a "model village"], on the one hand, and the growing insurgency on the other. (*Forum*, Summer 1986, 15, emphasis added)

As the reference to U.S. support of the *Contras* suggests, LASA's construction of the conflict between them and the Sandinistas was that those who had risen up against the *comandantes* were creatures of the U. S. Government, and in any case unworthy of American support. Several resolutions ratified during the 1980s made this clear. The following is typical:

> Resolution Against U.S. Aid to Anti-Nicaraguan Forces.
>
> The Latin American Studies Association, the largest U.S.-based professional organization of specialists on Latin American affairs, deplores the U.S. Congress' approval of military aid to the anti-Nicaraguan "contra" forces attacking Nicaragua from Honduras, El Salvador and Costa Rica.... LASA calls upon Congress to reverse its dangerous course, which opinion surveys continue to show is not supported by a majority of the U.S. public, and calls on concerned U.S. citizens to redouble their efforts to halt the war against Nicaragua. (*Forum*, Winter 1987, 25)

LASA's double standard is most clearly illustrated by contrasting its view of Nicaragua with that of another war-torn country, neighboring El Salvador. A typical resolution would "deplor[e] the violation of academic freedom and human rights in higher education in El Salvador," and call on the Salvadoran government "to return to the university the control of its own elected officials" (*Forum*, Spring 1984, 3). Taking aim at U.S. policy, LASA proclaimed:

> It is our considered professional opinion that the turmoil in El Salvador is primarily the result of long-standing social and economic injustice, persistent repression of nonviolent forms of political participation, and the well-documented brutality of government security forces. The growing popular opposition to the military-dominated government of El Salvador is not the work of a small number of terrorists, nor is it engineered by external political forces hostile to the United States. The armed opposition in El Salvador represents an internal struggle against injustice and authoritarian rule.... (*Newsletter*, Spring 1982, 44)

That LASA's view of Nicaragua was a mirror image of what it claimed was the U.S. Government's misconception of El Salvador is demonstrated by substituting equivalent Nicaraguan terms in the just-quoted resolution: "The growing popular opposition to the military-dominated government of [Nicaragua] is not the work of a small number of [Somocistas], nor is it engineered by external [U.S.] forces hostile to [Nicaragua]. The armed opposition in [Nicaragua] represents an internal struggle against injustice and [totalitarian] rule." In other words, the very reductionism LASA criticized in U.S. policy toward El Salvador characterized the Association's construction of Nicaragua.

This summary of LASA's many resolutions and reports over two decades should leave no doubt as to the Association's political radicalism. There is in

the LASA *Forum* not a single passage in which U.S. policy toward Latin America is singled out for praise. Not even when the U.S. acted in ways that LASA implicitly approved, as when various U.S. Government agencies assisted the coalition opposing General Pinochet's bid for another ten-year term as president of Chile, has LASA chosen to register a word of appreciation.[14]

LASA's dramatization of U.S.-Latin American relations and the domestic conflicts within Latin American countries left out a key player, one to which U.S. foreign policy around the world was geared for almost half a century—the Soviet Union. Here and there one reads in the *Forum* vague references to "U.S. security interests,"[15] but the object of U.S. security concerns is never brought into focus or discussed at any length. Soviet bases in Cuba—for submarines, bombers, and intelligence-gathering facilities[16]—are nowhere mentioned in the *Forum*.

Another distortion is LASA's miscasting of Cuba, or, rather, Fidel Castro, as victim. The totalitarian nature of Castro's regime, its silencing of dissent, the repression of speech and academic freedom, the confining of tens of thousands of political prisoners at various times throughout its history, and the Stalin-style show-trials (the latest, in 1989, resulting in the execution of the regime's erstwhile favorite general) are passed over in silence. Ironically, overlooking the totalitarian nature of Castro's regime while pursuing "scholarly relations with Cuba" may have led LASA into violating one of its most cherished policies: that against practicing self-censorship and legitimating governments that suppress academic freedom. Not that LASA was wrong in pursuing scholarly relations *in* (rather than *with*) Cuba, but it did so without publicly weighing or even acknowledging the risks of establishing such contacts with a totalitarian regime where the political police spreads its tentacles into every institution—including, of course, the universities and research centers.

Neither has LASA taken into account Fidel Castro's historic hostility toward the United States, nor a policy of training Latin American guerrillas that "mirrors the efforts of the United States in the region."[17] The Cuban dictator's nearly month-long visit to Allende's Chile, his close ties with Maurice Bishop of Grenada, the Sandinistas of Nicaragua, and Panama's Manuel Noriega, the many operatives sent into these countries, and the training of thousands of Latin American guerrillas (and, one should add, Africans as well), simply play no part in LASA's analysis. Nor did it take into account that it was a democratizing Venezuela, not any of the military dictatorships, that bore the brunt of Castro's revolutionary foreign policy during the 1960s.[18]

LASA's resolutions and task force reports were especially egregious in the case of Nicaragua. In LASA's eyes, the conflict there amounted to a U.S. "war on Nicaragua," waged indirectly through Somocistas and other "anti-Nicaraguans." What actually took place was a civil war between the Sandinista *comandantes*, Marxist-Leninists all,[19] and their opponents, a very heterogenous group, even if both sides were backed by foreign powers. There was no inter-

nal consensus in favor of the Sandinistas' war policy, as evidenced by the terrible unpopularity of the military draft. The *Contras* were not a bunch of Somocistas, even if one—the largest, as it turned out—of the *Contra* armies had been founded by ex-National Guardsmen who, in any case, came to be superseded by new leadership rising through the ranks on the field of battle. The *Contras* were not hirelings of the United States, but a homegrown army that had sprung from a peasant social base alienated by the Sandinistas' agricultural policies—the very policies that, the LASA Nicaraguan elections report of 1984 said, had won the peasantry over to the government—and attacks on the Roman Catholic Church. If the *Contras* relied heavily on U.S. assistance, support for the Sandinistas from the Soviet Union, Cuba, Latin American revolutionaries, European and Middle-Eastern terrorist organizations, and the Western Left far surpassed U.S. aid to the *Contras*.[20]

The National Opposition Union (UNO) that defeated the Sandinistas in the 1990 election consisted of the very forces the 1984 LASA report had belittled—the business community, small parties and labor unions, the newspaper *La Prensa*, and the Roman Catholic Church. Supporting the UNO coalition from the sidelines, though not a formal part of it, were the *Contras*. In two of the three areas of the country where the war was most fiercely fought—in the central and Atlantic regions—the Sandinistas lost badly, while eking out a bare plurality in the North.

After the 1990 election, the Sandinistas, who during the campaign had said that, if the inconceivable were to happen and they lost, they would turn over the government, but never surrender power, boasted that they would continue to "rule from below." They threatened the president-elect, Violeta Chamorro, with "chaos" and a possible coup were she to attempt to remove them from control over the police and military. Apparently considering discretion to be the better part of valor, Chamorro did not disturb those outposts of Sandinista power.

As well as keeping control over the coercive instruments of the state, the Sandinistas appropriated for themselves a veritable booty between the election and inauguration day. The lame-duck Sandinista-dominated assembly enacted laws enabling the *comandantes* to go on a privatization binge, transferring to themselves and their followers titles to large farms, art collections, opulent mansions, beach-front properties, and all kinds of capital and luxury goods that had been expropriated from the Somoza family, their cronies, and, after the revolution, many Nicaraguans who emigrated or dared to raise their voices in protest.[21] Thus after ten years of revolution Nicaragua is in some ways still the stereotypical Latin American banana republic, where a narrow elite of generals and businessmen enjoys the fruits of ill-gotten power and wealth. Only in this case the elite is a self-appointed vanguard of the poor.

Ever since scholarly societies became radicalized, dissenters have argued that it is improper for an academic organization to take positions on political

issues.[22] But quite apart from their advisability, the *content* of LASA resolutions on Cuba and Nicaragua during the last two decades betray a profound misunderstanding of the nature of Marxism-Leninism in the two countries of the Western hemisphere where it vaulted into power. LASA missed, misread, or ignored the internal structures of repression and the supporting roles these regimes played on the Soviet side of the Cold War. This cyclopic vision of the geopolitical forces that collided in Latin America following Fidel Castro's seizure of power in Cuba could not but result in a misunderstanding of the political issues on which the Association claimed to speak with the authority of superior knowledge. By overlooking, if not denying outright, that the Soviet Union was using Cuba, Nicaragua, and revolutionary fronts elsewhere in Latin America for its own purposes in a global struggle with the United States, LASA was led into assuming an ill-conceived, not to say irresponsible,[23] stance of intransigent opposition to U.S. policies in Latin America.

This is not to say that the U.S. Government should have been exempt from criticism. Reasonable people, especially academics, can and should disagree—reasonably and civilly, if vigorously—about public policy. The U.S. embargo on Cuba, the denial of visas to Cubans with academic credentials, support for the Salvadoran Government and the *Contras*—these and other policies should have been subjected to rigorous scrutiny in light of possible alternatives. But inside LASA there was no debate. Rather, there came to be near-unanimity of opinion, and this opinion was expressed in language that left little room for disagreement. Feeling intimidated, most dissenters either fell silent or dropped out of the Association altogether.

This conclusion points to a line of further investigation, whether, or to what extent, LASA resolutions correlate with what, during the same period, Latin Americanists were publishing on the same topics in the leading scholarly journals and best-selling college textbooks. Do those publications exhibit some of the same biases as LASA resolutions, albeit in more subtle ways? Do they tend to highlight Fidel Castro's and the Sandinistas' claims to achievements in public health and education, while downplaying their violations of human rights and academic freedom? Is U.S. opposition to these regimes analyzed without reference to their alliances with what was then the Soviet bloc? Are repressive policies undertaken in the name of national security viewed more critically when executed by right-wing military regimes rather than by revolutionary ones in Cuba and Nicaragua? Answers to such questions would allow us to assess whether LASA's resolutions amounted to a sideshow of little or no consequence for serious scholarship, or whether they added up to a line marking the boundaries of political correctness in Latin American studies.

Notes

1. See the essays by Robert Conquest, Martin Malia, and others in "The Strange Death of Soviet Communism," a special issue of *The National Interest* (Spring 1993).

2. On the similarities between pre- and post-revolutionary Cuba and Nicaragua, see respectively Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas & Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 263–281, and Rafael A. Lecuona, "Cuba and Nicaragua: The Path to Communism," in *Cuban Communism*, 7th ed., Irving Louis Horowitz (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 87–106.
3. Poet laureates, respectively, of Cuba and Nicaragua, who lived long before the arrival of communism in their countries.
4. See, for example, the book-length treatment of what Latin Americanists have said about dependency theory in Robert A. Packenham, *The Dependency Movement: Scholarship and Politics in Development Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992). See also Tony Judt's study of what French intellectuals wrote about Stalinism between their liberation from the Nazis and the suppression of the Hungarian uprising, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
5. Ira Eli Wessler, *The Political Resolutions of American Learned Societies*, doctoral dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Arts and Sciences, New York University, 1973. For a previous study of LASA's radicalism, see William Ratliff, "Latin American Studies: Up from Radicalism?", *Academic Questions* (Winter 1989–90), 60–74.
6. This is how a founding member of the Association recalls the 1970 meeting: "I was present at the 1970 LASA conference in Washington when Chilcote and several others interrupted the proceedings with loud shouting. LASA's president at the time, historian John J. Johnson of Stanford, could not restore order without calling on the hotel security forces to restrain the few who were most vociferous." Telephone conversation with Marvin Alisky, 22 October 1993.
7. It was, in fact, LASA's joining a suit against the U.S. Government over this issue which suggested the title for this essay; the title is adapted from that of a 1986 article, "LASA vs. the U.S. Customs Service," by Wayne Cornelius, then president of LASA (*Forum*, Summer 1986, 16–17). In 1986, following "approximately a dozen separate incidents of [U.S.] Customs [Service] harassing travelers [returning from Nicaragua], including the seizure and photocopying of scholars' research materials, personal journals, address books, and draft news articles," LASA joined a suit initiated by the Center for Constitutional Rights. A federal judge ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, and the government declined to appeal (*Forum*, Fall 1986, 11, and Fall 1989, 3).
8. It is known that travel abroad is a privilege granted to those Cubans believed to be loyal, but the regime keeps tabs on them anyway with one or more political officers introduced into their ranks. LASA, though, proceeded to treat every Cuban affiliated with a university or research institute as a *bona fide* scholar and to chastise the U.S. Government when it did not agree.
9. Rex Hudson, *Castro's America Department* (Washington, D.C.: The Cuban-American National Foundation, 1988), originally published in *Terrorism: An International Journal* 9 (2), 1987, 125–67. See also Andres Oppenheimer, *Castro's Final Hour: The Secret Story Behind the Coming Downfall of Communist Cuba* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 196.
10. On Hidalgo and the fate of other Cuban intellectuals, see Carlos Ripoll, *Harnessing the Intellectuals: Censoring Writers and Artists in Today's Cuba* (Washington, D.C.: The Cuban American National Foundation, 1985). See also Robert E. Quirk, *Fidel Castro* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), ch. 21, "Outside the Game," and ch. 24, "Poets and Prisoners," and Heberto Padilla, *La Mala Memoria* (Barcelona: Plaza & Janes Editores, S.A., 1989).
11. See Arturo Cruz, *Nicaragua's Continuing Struggle* (New York: Freedom House, 1988). The *New York Times* bureau chief in Managua wrote that Cruz had pointed out "quite correctly that the electoral system they [the Sandinistas] had established made an opposition victory impossible." See Stephen Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1991), 242.
12. For a detailed report on what the Sandinistas did to Nicaraguan universities and academics during their decade in power, see Eric Chenoweth, "Nicaraguan Universities Betrayed," *Freedom at Issue* No. 102, 1988, 11–16.

13. See Bernard Nietschmann, "The Miskito Nation and the Politics of Self-Determination," *Journal of Political Science* 19, 1991, 18–40.
14. Neither has LASA repudiated any of its previous radical resolutions or ceased to adopt new ones. As recently as 1992, LASA called "for the normalization of diplomatic and economic relations with Cuba," and "an end to U.S. intervention as exemplified by Radio and TV Marti and by aid to opposition forces in and out of Cuba." Another 1992 resolution accused the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service of abusing illegal immigrants with "acts which constitute cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, and unnecessary deadly force." *Forum*, Fall 1992, 17-18.
15. See, for example, Lars Schoultz's article on post-invasion Grenada (*Forum*, Spring 1985, 13).
16. Timothy Ashby, *The Bear in the Backyard* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1987).
17. Wickam-Crowley, op. cit. [n.2], 87. Indeed, according to that author, "it does appear that the ratio of overall Cuban trainees to the maximum number of guerrillas at any one time was very high, perhaps surpassing one-half (note that this does not mean that one of every two guerrillas was trained there; there were, after all, deaths, desertions, and turnover as well)." *Ibid.*, 86.
18. *Ibid.*, 88-91.
19. On the Sandinista variety of Marxism-Leninism, see David Nolan, *The Ideology of the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Coral Gables, Fla.: Graduate School of International Studies, University of Miami, 1984) and Donald C. Hodges, *Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986). On the totalitarian characteristics of the Sandinista regime, see Alfred G. Cuzán, "The Nicaraguan Revolution: From Autocracy to Totalitarian Dictatorship?", *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* I (1/2), 1989, 183–204. See also Jack Child, "National Security," in *Nicaragua: A Country Study*, ed. James D. Rudolph (Washington, D.C.: American University, 1982), 185–228, which notes that East Germans and Bulgarians helped set up and run the Sandinista state security apparatus.
20. See Michael Radu, "Nicaragua," in *The New Insurgencies: Anti-Communist Guerrillas in the Third World*, ed. Michael Radu (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1990), 268–269. See also Glenn Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo: The CIA & the Contras* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, Inc., 1992), R. Pardo Mauerer, *The Contras: A Special Kind of Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1990); and Donald Castillo Rivas, *Gringos, Contras, y Sandinistas. Testimonio de la Guerra Civil en Nicaragua* (Bogotá, Colombia: T/M Editores, 1993).
21. See Mark A. Ulig, "Nicaragua's Permanent Crisis: Ruling from Above and Below," *Survival* XXXII, 5 (1991): 401–23.
22. See Robert Bierstedt, "The A.S.A. and Public Policy," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 30, no. 1 (1965): 128–129.
23. Tony Judt characterizes his book as "an essay on intellectual irresponsibility." Op. cit. [n.4], 11.