

Augusto C. Sandino

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Augusto Nicolas Calderon Sandino, although born in an obscure Nicaraguan village called Niquinohomo in 1895, went on to alter the history and heritage of his country in a dramatic way. Augusto's beginning in no way hinted at his future--he was born illegitimately to a peasant worker named Margarita Calderon and her married boss, Gregorio Sandino. However, when he was about ten years old his mother abandoned him and he went to live with his maternal grandmother. He was later brought into his father's household but he was forced to earn his keep by working and was never fully accepted.

In 1921, what might be interpreted as the climax of his life occurred when he shot, but did not kill, Dagoberto Rivas a son of an important Conservative in the village in retaliation to some comments which Dagoberto had made about his mother. He then ran away to the Pacific Coast of Nicaragua and from there to various other Central American countries. He finally landed in Mexico, however, and he spent the next four years working for Standard Oil. While there, he began to get involved in several diverse radical groups which seemingly influenced his perspective on life and hence his future actions.

Sandino's main thesis was the support of nationalism and anti-imperialism, specifically the resistance of US occupation and domination of Nicaragua. The United States had maintained a US Marine force in the country from 1912 on, with only brief periods of respite. The US had also intervened in internal affairs through control of the Conservative party and economic influence. Sandino believed in the glorification of personal heritage and liberty and once said, "The sovereignty and liberty of a people are not to be discussed, but rather defended with weapons in hand." Sandino was always an eloquent speaker and wrote enough to fill two books.

Augusto returned to his homeland in 1926 as the Statute of Limitations on his crime ran out. Augusto wanted to return to his home town of Niquinohomo and start a business, but his victim, Dagoberto Rivas, who had become an important national political figure, crushed his ambitions and Sandino began to wander around the country. He stopped in a US- owned mine in northern Nicaragua and began to influence the miners to rebel against what he saw as unfair foreign intervention in Nicaraguan affairs. When the Liberal rebellion began in 1926, he took some of his personal savings and purchased some old weapons from some gun-runners on the Honduran border to arm the miners. They then attacked El Jicaro but were defeated by the garrison force because Sandino was inexperienced and fought with standard mass-army tactics. Sandino decided that in order to be effective he would have to have better weapons and so he communicated with the rebelling Liberal troops led by Commander General Jose Maria Moncada but was refused better weapons and more men. However,

Sandino somehow managed to acquire some more weapons and he became popular with the other important Liberals, and Moncada was finally convinced to allow Sandino to stage some independent attacks with the help of Liberal soldiers. Sandino had learned from his earlier mistakes, and he gradually refined his warring techniques into a guerrilla hit and run style of fighting like the Vietnamese employed in the Vietnam War. It was these same tactics that the Sandinistas and the Contras used in the back-to-back Sandinista Revolution and civil war of the 1980s.

The United States, wishing to end the conflict between the Liberals and the Conservatives as well as the casualties inflicted on the US forces, created a peace settlement between the two parties. All of the Liberals agreed to the peace, except for Sandino who chose to keep on fighting until the US had left Nicaragua. This decision changed the war for Sandino from a case of Nicaraguans against Nicaraguans to Nicaragua against the world.

Even though Sandino was an idealist with radical political and social ideas such as having communal lands and a unified Central America, Sandino was always a man of action and organized the sentiments of the common peasants into revolt. These common people provided the manpower to fight and die when needed as well as a constant information network for Sandino's backwoods fighting.

The United States finally capitulated to Sandino's request and left Nicaragua for good in 1933. All in all, in spite of growth and recession of Sandino's military strength, Sandino was still as great or greater a force as he had ever been when the US left. With his ideal fulfilled, Sandino agreed to lay down his weapons and signed a preliminary agreement with the Sacasa government. The agreement was that, in exchange for peace, some men who wished to stay with Sandino could do so in a commune in the Rio Coco commune. These men would be formed into an auxiliary military group under the president's supervision for one year. As the United States left, they formed a powerful National Guard under the head of Anastasio Somoza Garcia which was supposed to create a solid, non-political force to allow the country to grow in stability. The problem was, however, that Somoza was anything but apolitical and he rapidly began to turn the National Guard to his own uses.

In 1934, with the review of his "auxiliaries" getting ever closer, Sandino told the President that he might not lay down his weapons because he believed that the National Guard was unconstitutional. Sacasa called Sandino to Managua to speak with him and when Sandino arrived he publicly announced that he thought that the National Guard was unconstitutional. Sandino's talks with the President resulted in an agreement which would, among other things, reduce Somoza's power through the National Guard significantly. On February 20, as Sandino returned from speaking with the President, the National Guardsmen under Somoza's command, fearing a loss of power, surrounded him and his party and executed them. The next day the National Guard raided the northern commune, destroyed it, and killed most of Sandino's men, their wives, and children.