THE DEATH OF BARRICADA: POLITICS AND PROFESSIONALISM IN THE POST SANDINISTA PRESS
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Adam Jones

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Abstract

This article examines two decades in the life of Barricada, established as the “official organ” of the revolutionary Sandinista Front (FSLN) in Nicaragua, from its founding in 1979 through to its demise as a daily in 1998. It is argued that as distinct from the overriding “mobilizing imperative” of support for its Sandinista sponsor, an institutionally-generated “professional imperative” was also evident in Barricada’s functioning from the early days of the paper’s operations. After the FSLN’s election defeat in 1990, this professional imperative —along with the political preference of most senior staff for “renovation” within the FSLN— resulted in the paper’s establishing a significant degree of day-to-day autonomy from its sponsor, and important transformations in its journalistic project. This semi-autonomy was foreclosed when the dominant ortodoxo faction of the Front engineered the dismissal of Barricada director Carlos Fernando Chamorro in 1994. Barricada then returned to its more highly-mobilized role as FSLN propagandist, but lost readers and advertising revenue as a result, finally closing in February 1998. The final section of the paper situates the experience of Barricada in the comparative context of mass media and political transitions worldwide.

Resumen

Este artículo examina dos décadas en la vida de la Barricada, establecida como el “órgano oficial” del Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) en Nicaragua, desde su fundación en 1979 hasta su desaparición como periódico en 1998. Se ha argumentado que para el funcionamiento de la Barricada era evidente, además del “imperativo movilizante” por parte de su patrocinador Sandinista, la generación de un “imperativo profesional” desde sus primeros días de operación. Después de la derrota en la elección del FSLN en 1990, este imperativo profesional —aunado a las preferencias políticas de la mayoría del personal más antiguo para la “renovación” dentro del FSLN— produjo en el establecimiento del periódico un grado significativo de autonomía día a día, y una importante transformación en su proyecto periodístico. Esta semi-autonomía fue excluida cuando la facción ortodoxa dominante del Frente diseñó la renuncia del director de la Barricada, Carlos Fernando Chamorro, en 1994. La Barricada entonces volvió a su papel de movilización como propagandista del FSLN, pero tuvo como resultado la pérdida de varios lectores así como muchas anunciantes, finalmente en febrero de 1998 fue cerrado. La última sección del artículo sitúa la experiencia de la Barricada en un contexto comparativo de medios de comunicación en la transición política mundial.
In the early evening of Friday, 30 January 1998, Tomás Borge—the director of the Nicaraguan newspaper Barricada—called staff representatives to his office for a 45-minute meeting in which he announced the 'temporary closure' of the newspaper, effective immediately. Staff responded with 'first panic, then fury' to Borge's announcement. They nonetheless set about preparing a four-page edition of Barricada for publication the following day, with a front-page headline to read: 'Aquí estamos: Barricada se debe al pueblo' (Here we are: Barricada must be with the people). According to its crosstown rival El Nuevo Diario, the text for the edition of Barricada was prepared and laid out, and an agreement was reached with general manager Soraya Montoya to supply paper for printing. But 'when we tried to print that night', chief editor Juan Ramón Huerta stated, 'Montoya had already left, leaving the paper wrapped up with instructions' that the imprecations of staff should be ignored. Huerta called it 'the final betrayal'.

It was not, however, the final act in the Barricada drama. Editorial staff arrived at the newspaper's Managua offices as usual on 31 January, and several began a hunger strike to protest their treatment. On 2 February, a workers' delegation petitioned the First Civil Court to grant an injunction against Editorial El Amanecer, Barricada's publisher, and director Borge for violating the terms of a December agreement on pay and production mediated by noted Sandinista Vilma Núñez. On 3 February, the Nicaraguan Institute of Social Security (INSS) acted, placing a three-month embargo on the operations of El Amanecer. The enterprise allegedly owed some 11 million córdobas—more than a million US dollars—to the INSS, debts that extended as far back as 1993.

The combination of staff protests and government action meant that the 'temporary' closure of the paper would, in fact, be an enduring one: Barricada, founded in 1979 as the official organ of the Sandinista Front (FLSN), has not published since. The ignominious death of Barricada marked the end of two decades in which, like many media organs in revolutionary and transitional societies, the paper served as a bellwether of larger political and social transformations in Nicaragua. Most notably, the 1990 decision by Barricada's former directorate to establish a broader and more professional orientation 'in the national interest'...
marked a decisive break with the paper's official-organ status, and symbolised the growing 'renovationist' sentiment within the Sandinista Front following its crushing electoral defeat at the hands of Violeta Chamorro's UNO coalition. Likewise, the mounting pressure from ortodoxo elements within the Front, led by former president Daniel Ortega, exemplified the reassertion of party hegemony over 'wayward' elements and institutions like Barricada. The pressure culminated in one of the more dramatic scenes in the recent history of Latin American journalism: the highly public defenestración ('throwing out the window') of Barricada's director, Carlos Fernando Chamorro (son of Nicaragua's then-president), and the departure under duress of approximately 80 percent of the paper's staff. Barricada was returned to the ortodoxo fold under the stewardship of Tomás Borge, a former member of the FSLN National Directorate and the sole surviving founder of the Front. But its new/old orientation proved disastrous: readership and advertising revenue hemorrhaged, resulting in the crisis of late 1997 and the daily's eventual closure in January 1998. 

Previous published research on Barricada described the paper's evolution throughout the tense and conflictive decade of the 1980s, when the Sandinista revolution found itself under siege from both within and without. In particular, a 'professional imperative' was isolated in the paper's operations that ran to a certain extent counter to the 'mobilising imperative' of the FSLN leadership, and resulted in a number of conflicts and debates between the paper's staff and the higher echelons of the Sandinista Front. While always exceptional, given the exigencies of revolutionary solidarity, these conflicts clearly resulted in a reframing of the Barricada project evident as early as the mid-1980s, and set the stage for the fateful autonomy experiment of the early 1990s, foreclosed by the defenestración of 1994. After briefly reviewing the origins of Barricada and the nature of its journalistic project during the revolutionary decade, this article will evaluate the years of semi-autonomy in the paper's functioning, and the issues, events, and personalities surrounding the defenestración. An examination of Barricada's role under its post-1994 ortodoxo directorate will follow.

The article concludes with some observations on the Barricada drama in the context of struggles for professionalism in the press worldwide, including in the specific context of political liberalization and democratic transition. As Lise Garon


4 This article is derived from a full-length manuscript, Chronicle of A Coup Foretold: Barricada and the Struggle for the Sandinista Press, 1979-1998, currently under submission. The comparative dimension is explored in my Ph.D. dissertation, The Press in Transition: A Comparative
has pointed out, the press is to some extent "the forgotten actor in transition analysis". There has been little attention to the complexity of press functioning even under authoritarian conditions, and to the role that the press correspondingly may be poised to play when those conditions change in the direction of greater democratic freedom. In comparative work on this subject, I have sought to develop a framework of "mobilizing" versus "professional" imperatives in press functioning—the former predominantly located among press "sponsors" (owners, publishers, managers, and to some extent senior editors), the latter predominantly located among journalists and editors of the press institution itself. This framework goes some distance towards clarifying the various, in some respects opposed, influences on institutional behaviour. It also helps to understand the conflicts that frequently arise between the guardians of the different imperatives—conflicts that are rarely so well exemplified as in the Barricada case.

Study of Nicaragua, South Africa, Jordan, and Russia (University of British Columbia, 1999), also under submission in book form. For overviews of Nicaraguan media functioning from the 1970s to the 1990s, see John Spicer Nichols, ‘The news media in the Nicaraguan Revolution’, in Thomas Walker (ed.), Nicaragua in Revolution (New York, 1982), pp.181-199; Guillermo Rothschuh Villanueva and Carlos Fernando Chamorro B., Los medios y la política en Nicaragua (Managua, 1995); Rothschuh, Vuelta de siglo (Managua, 1997); and Kent W. Norsworthy, ‘The Mass Media’, in Thomas W. Walker (ed.), Nicaragua Without Illusions: Regime Transition and Structural Adjustment in the 1990s (Wilmington, DE, 1997), pp.281-295. On a personal note, I wish to thank Professors Rex Brynen, Phil Resnick, and Diane Mauzy for their unstinting support during a decade of Master’s and doctoral-level study of Barricada and the transitional press worldwide. At Barricada, Carlos Fernando Chamorro and Sofia Montenegro were extraordinarily helpful at all stages of the research, as was Diane Chomsky. More generally, editorial and production staff of both the pre- and post-defenestración versions of the paper granted me free access to Barricada’s facilities and sat for extended interviews.

Lise Garon, “The Press and Democratic Transition in Arab Societies: The Algerian Case”, in Rex Brynen et al., eds., Political Liberalization & Democratization in the Arab World, Vol. I: Theoretical Perspectives (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995), p. 150. Garon provides an important defense for the study of print media as opposed to their broadcast counterparts, worth stressing in light of the widespread perception that print is in decline and electronic media on the rise. “In the Arab world [and elsewhere], the press contrasts with radio and television, which are usually State property and act as mouthpiece for the official discourse. Quite to the contrary, the press explicitly expresses opinions and, in permissible political contexts, is a vehicle of opposition and contestation to state authority. More likely to influence the transition process, the press therefore becomes the exclusive focus of this essay”, and of the present one. Garon, p. 163 (n. 6).


The Nicaraguan revolution gave birth to Barricada in a blaze of truck headlights. Six days after the ragtag Sandinista armies vanquished the last pockets of Somocista resistance and flooded into the capital city, the first four-page broadsheet edition of Barricada began to circulate through whatever channels were available in the chaotic transitional environment. The banner headline of the 25 July 1979 edition proclaimed: ‘¡Vencimos, y Adelante!’ (‘We’ve Triumphed—Now, Forward!’).

The early days of the paper’s operation were characterised by disorganisation and inexperience at all levels. For a full three years after its founding, Barricada was produced in the offices of the old Somocista newspaper, Novedades. Many production basics had to be improved. ‘Sometimes’, according to staffer Sofía Montenegro, ‘we had to work with the delivery trucks providing illumination for the journalists to write’. The core staff of fifteen consisted of ‘nearly complete amateurs’, in Montenegro’s recollection. ‘We had no idea that things like accounting and administration even existed ... We didn’t sell the paper initially, we just gave it out. We had no distribution network, nothing. And frankly, we didn’t give a shit, you know’.7

In June 1980, Carlos Fernando Chamorro took over as Barricada’s director. Much of his cachet was the result of his upbringing: Chamorro was the son of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, the former director of the opposition paper La Prensa, murdered in 1978 allegedly at the behest of the Somoza dictatorship.8 Chamorro would occupy the director’s office for a decade-and-a-half, apart from a brief interregnum at the Department of Agitation and Propaganda, where he helped to orchestrate the FLSN’s successful 1984 election campaign.

If the material environment was unstable and unpredictable, Barricada could at least count on a role and an identity that were all but predetermined. From the moment it first hit the streets, the paper’s raison d’être was the Sandinista National Liberation Front and its revolutionary struggle to transform Nicaragua. Barricada would be a party-political project, along the classic lines sketched by those two journalists and revolutionaries, Karl Marx and v.i. Lenin—although a more Gramscian ‘organic-intellectual’ tinge was occasionally evident. Lenin’s ‘idea of the newspaper as an organiser of production’ would guide Barricada’s journalism,

according to Carlos Fernando Chamorro. As the paper reached its first month of publication, an editorial made the Marxist-Leninist influence plain:

We are, in this moment, the only newspaper written by the revolutionary vanguard. We know that this implies a complex and diverse agenda: to inform, in the sense of making known that which occurs in our country and around the world; to orient the people and contribute to the task of National Reconstruction; to disseminate the political line of the FLSN; to help bring about the organisation and normalisation which our liberated country so badly needs as it emerges from the rubble of war; to support the measures taken by the [FLSN-dominated] Government of National Reconstruction; and to provide information that is both truthful and dedicated to the demands of our people.

Though in crucial respects the Sandinistas departed from the standard state-socialist model Lenin had propounded, on the need for a 'revolutionary vanguard' —a driving force to propel Nicaragua into the revolutionary future— they demurred not a bit. The vanguardist tendencies within the Front would only increase throughout the 1980s, as the revolution confronted the implacable hostility of the Reagan Administration and the terrorist force, the so-called contras, that the United States armed and sustained along Nicaragua's borders and in the thinly-populated zones of the north and south. No Sandinista institution would remain untouched by the trend —least of all, perhaps, the party’s official organ. When Barricada’s perfil editorial (editorial profile) was finally formalised in 1985, at the height of the contra war and with the economy spiralling towards chaos, Carlos Fernando Chamorro was frank in his acknowledgment that ‘as an official organ, Barricada must comply with the following functions’:

a) To be a vehicle of mass information of the FLSN for the divulging of its political line, an instrument of support for the mobilisation of the masses around the tasks of the revolution, and to convert itself into an effective medium of communication between the masses and the FLSN.

b) To contribute to the formation of the base committees, members, and activists of the FLSN to wage the ideological struggle, arming them with arguments and revolutionary

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conceptions, and to be a vehicle of support for the organisation of ideological work at the base.\textsuperscript{11}

In this vanguardist and para-statal conception, there was naturally little room for ‘bourgeois’ virtues of journalistic ‘professionalism’ and ‘objectivity’. In fact, there was barely room for the kind of stylistic agility that would allow a journalist to move beyond ponderous official pronouncements and engage the reader on a more personal, conversational level. It was not that classical-liberal notions of critical distance and the press’s ‘watchdog’ role were altogether absent. What was central, apparently, was the kind of criticism advanced. Chamorro conceded in 1980 that ‘without criticism there can be neither journalism nor revolution’, but added: ‘We do not refer here to destructive, counter-revolutionary criticism, but rather to criticism which offers a searching analysis of problems and proposes alternative revolutionary solutions for them’.\textsuperscript{12}

Clearly, this vanguardist conception offered Barricada relatively little opportunity to develop its own agenda of news-coverage and editorial concerns. How, then, was such a project able to do an about-face after the FLSN’s election defeat of 1990—to ‘de-officialise’ and establish itself as a more balanced and professional publication ‘in the national interest’?

The answer may lie, in large part, in an analytically-distinguishable ‘professional imperative’ running generally in tandem, but sometimes in conflict, with the mobilising requirements of the Sandinista Front. If the mostly young and ill-trained journalists and editors who launched Barricada in 1979 were imbued with a desire to serve as the ‘vanguard’s vanguard’, they were also participants in the building of an institution that, over time, achieved greater internal coherence, amassed important new resources, and established a firmer sense of its own professional capacities.

While Barricada’s mobilising and professional imperatives were generally able to establish a harmonious balance, they not infrequently brought the paper into conflict with those whose main concern was that Barricada be a dependable mouthpiece for the Front. As Barricada entrenched itself as a revolutionary institution —and even before— staff chafed at party-imposed restrictions, and experienced regular difficulties in juggling the political and professional obligations implicit in the idea of ‘revolutionary journalism’.

The roots of the professional imperative in the context of revolutionary Nicaragua, and their presence even in a propaganda organ like Barricada, require some explanation. Perhaps the most important factor was the overarching character

\textsuperscript{11} Perfil editorial de Barricada, cited in Guillermo Cortés Dominguez and Juan Ramón Huerta, ‘Critical Journalism in the Daily Barricada’, monograph prepared for the degree of journalism at the University of Central America (UCA), Managua, 1988, pp.4-5.

\textsuperscript{12} Chamorro quoted in ‘One year of revolutionary information’, Barricada, 26 July 1980.
of the Sandinista revolution —by contrast, say, with Cuba or the Soviet Union. Almost uniquely in the annals of leftist revolution, the Sandinistas never sought or exercised a monopoly over Nicaraguan media. As with their decision to leave 60 percent of the economy in private hands, the relatively wide latitude given to opposition-owned newspapers and radio stations reflected the FLSN’s desire to avoid scaring away ‘patriotic producers’ domestically, as well as international sympathisers, by imposing a more draconian system of control.

An outside —US— influence was also prominent in Nicaragua’s pre-revolutionary journalism. The only school of journalism in the country before the revolution was a wholly-owned subsidiary of the US Embassy. However vigorously Barricada denounced ‘bourgeois media’ practices, its writers and editors could hardly help but define themselves against, and to some extent in terms of, that same tradition.

The cultural heritage of the Nicaraguan revolutionaries, and the macro-pluralistic character of the policies they implemented during the 1980s, had two basic implications for the development of a ‘professional imperative’ at Barricada. First, they determined the essential character of relations between the FLSN (for most purposes, its nine-man National Directorate) as the sponsor of the revolution’s ‘official organ’, and Barricada staffers as the day-to-day custodians of that institution and its journalistic project. It is no exaggeration to say that Barricada had greater room for manoeuvre, and more say in establishing the terms of the relationship with its sponsor, than any comparable organ in the history of leftist revolution.

Second, the pluralistic environment shaped Barricada’s conflictive but curiously interdependent relationship with the opposition daily La Prensa. The importance of the ‘reflex relationship’ between the two papers became plain in June 1986, when La Prensa was closed indefinitely on the orders of the Minister of the Interior (and future Barricada director), Tomás Borge. Perhaps surprisingly, Barricada staffers strongly opposed the closure. According to senior editor Xavier Reyes, the opposition derived from a sense that, while ‘politically we [and La Prensa] were rivals, professionally we were colleagues’. The disappearance of the daily competition for fifteen months left a void at the heart of Barricada’s political

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13 The FLSN’s fractious relationship with the anti-Sandinista La Prensa during the 1980s is usually cited against this thesis. But the fact that there was a relationship—that La Prensa was not simply annihilated and its editors jailed, exiled, or killed—attests to the comparatively tolerant media policy adopted by the Sandinistas. Even at the level of daily material supplies, essential goods like Russian newsprint and printer’s ink were distributed equally by Sandinista state authorities to all three daily newspapers throughout the revolutionary era.

14 Carlos Fernando Chamorro interview, Managua, 28 April 1991.

15 The ban was lifted as part of the Esquipulas peace process in October 1987.

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and professional project. ‘Our reason to fight every day was La Prensa’, said Sofia Montenegro. ‘And it was very dull, you know, when it wasn’t there’.17

In a sense, though, the role of other influences in shaping Barricada’s professional identity was always secondary to the core issue of relations between the paper’s staffers and their primary sponsor, the FLSN National Directorate. For Barricada, the status of official organ brought with it significant material privileges, including the endowment of the offices of Novedades in its early days, extensive state-sector advertising (about 85 percent of total advertising prior to the electoral débâcle of 1990), bulk orders for military personnel and diplomatic legations, and state-sector printing contracts (along with the gift —arranged by the FLSN leadership— of an East German printing press that allowed Barricada to fulfill those contracts).18

In this way a material ‘norm’ was established for party-paper relations. Somewhat less smooth, however, was the process of ‘norming’ the political and professional relationship.

In the earliest days of Barricada’s operations, the task of ensuring a basic harmony between the Front’s mobilising requirements and the editorial content of the official organ was achieved through two major institutions. The first was a network of political cadres that directly oversaw and approved every word that made it into the paper’s pages. The successor arrangement saw individual members of the National Directorate delegated to serve as dominant, and direct, mobilising influences. The transformations that took place in both institutions, and from one to the other, were the direct result of the efforts of Barricada’s staff, especially Carlos Fernando Chamorro. Likewise, what tensions arose in the party-paper relationship throughout the 1980s tended to result from Barricada’s bridling, primarily on professional grounds, at the mobilising demands placed upon it by its FLSN sponsor.

The first attempt to assert direct party control over Barricada’s operations took the form of a political commissariat that included just one trained journalist —Xavier Reyes. Barricada journalists, according to Reyes, felt their professional sensibilities piqued by ‘the fact that people who weren’t journalists would touch their material’. In 1981, under Reyes’s supervision, the commissariat was overhauled, and a ‘normal writing structure’ instituted in the newsroom —‘that is, without any political intervention by the party’.

These first intimations of professional autonomy, though, were quickly undermined by another, more personal kind of intervention —one that proved no less exasperating on professional grounds. The culprits this time were the individual

18 The new press nearly quadrupled Barricada’s printing capacity, and gave Editorial El Amanecer, its FLSN-owned publisher, the only colour-capable press in Nicaragua. As of 1987, Barricada/El Amanecer was far and away Nicaragua’s largest publisher.
19 Xavier Reyes interview, Managua, 13 April 1991.
members of the FLSN National Directorate. Despite their ideological differences, all
FLSN leaders had something in common—a conviction that their own activities were
most central to the revolution, and thus should command the greatest attention in
Barricada’s pages. ‘All the members of the National Directorate demanded a strong
presence on the newspaper’, recalled Reyes. ‘So you had nine telephone calls every
day! ... Some days were more unbearable than others’.

Finally, Carlos Fernando Chamorro took it upon himself to press Barricada’s
case in an audience with the Directorate. Chamorro described the foundation of the
new norm this way: ‘If you had five members of the National Directorate
participating in different activities, there might be one thing out of the five that was
really a priority, decided politically by the FLSN. So I would say, ‘Okay, you tell me
what’s your priority, and from then on I decide what is more important, according
to my perception of the public interest. ... Basically the new concept was:
Journalistic criteria have to be respected, and you can’t predetermine everything’.
The result was the most significant institutional innovation in Barricada’s
operations during the revolutionary decade: the designation of a single National
Directorate member as liaison between the paper and its FLSN sponsors.

Despite the important steps towards ‘norming’ the relationship between party
and paper, though, it was standard for most Nicaraguan and foreign readers to
assume that every word in the paper was rubber-stamped by the FLSN leadership. As
a result, political coverage was a perennial minefield, in which outright disaster
seemed only a step away. The result was an inordinate amount of self-censorship
that effectively cancelled out much of Barricada’s hard-won autonomy. ‘You were
absolutely conscious of your responsibilities toward the Front’, said Sofia
Montenegro. ‘Out of this there developed a paralysed journalism. You were so
intimidated by the possible effects of what you could write about the revolution that
you always exercised immense self-restraint’.

It was a signal feature of Barricada’s operations, though, that the
deficiencies were noted and decried at the time—indeed, they commanded greater
attention and concern than perhaps any other subject, if internal documents and
related evaluations are given credence. A 1988 study by Barricada staffers
Guillermo Cortés and Juan Ramón Huerta cited an ‘almost absolute preponderance,
in Barricada’s coverage, of official discourse and official sources’. ‘In Barricada
there is not an integral exercising of the journalist’s critical function’, the staffers
concluded bluntly.

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20 Ibid.
21 Carlos Fernando Chamorro interview, Managua, 19 March 1991.
22 The representatives were the late Carlos Núñez, until 1984, and Bayardo Arce thereafter.

SANDINISTA-CONTRA CEASE-FIRE TERMED MAJOR BREAKTHROUGH BY NICARAGUA'S RIVAL FACTIONS. On 25 March 1988, readers of The New York Times awoke to a four-column headline announcing the decisive step towards resolving Nicaragua’s grinding conflict. The result was a notable ‘thaw’ in a country that had been a political pressure-cooker for many years. The new buzzword was concertación —a somewhat hazy concept that combined national reconciliation with peaceful political competition. Shortly thereafter, the FLSN leadership imposed a range of ‘austerity’ measures, which proved popular with the private sector and conservative business classes, but caused profound distress to many Sandinista militants.

The FLSN’s policy reversals decisively shifted the arena of conflict from the military to the political-ideological arena. The measure with the greatest implications for Barricada was the decision to allow La Prensa to resume publishing after a 15-month forced hiatus. This meant a renewal of Barricada’s political and professional confrontation with its main competitor. It also presented the paper with an ideal opportunity—and a practical reason—to push for greater professional autonomy, since it could be argued that this was necessary to meet La Prensa’s challenge. The line of argument actually found a receptive audience among the Sandinista leadership. ‘The National Directorate was conscious that we needed a change’, said Sofia Montenegro. ‘They felt themselves that [Barricada’s] officialising everything had become a straitjacket’.

In charting the future course of the paper, Carlos Fernando Chamorro stated that he drew on the example of Mexico’s ‘institutionalised’ revolution, and its press. Like Excélsior, the leading pro-establishment Mexican daily, Barricada would seek to advance a project that ‘would not necessarily be official, would not be too tied to the FLSN, but would seek to be more the paper of consensus on the basic foundations of [Nicaraguan] society’. Excélsior, Chamorro said, was ‘seen by the society as an institution which speaks for itself; it has a commitment to the basic foundations of the system —the type of economic and political model you’re promoting— and at the same time it’s not too tied to the party’.

The ripples were felt within Barricada, occasioning what Phil Ryan calls ‘perhaps [the] most critical editorial ever’ published in the newspaper while the Sandinistas held power. Headlined, ‘A counterpart to the economic logic is missing’, the editorial pointed to the regime’s alleged failure to take into account the ‘social and ideological repercussions’ of the austerity measures, and bemoaned the FLSN’s failure to successfully convey their ‘socialist orientation’—putting quotation marks around the phrase, Ryan notes, ‘perhaps for the first time’. Phil Ryan, The Fall and Rise of the Market in Sandinista Nicaragua (Montreal and Kingston, 1995), pp.219-20.


Carlos Fernando Chamorro interview, Managua, 17 April 1991.
It is quite likely that this ‘establishment’ project would have prevailed, in some form, had the Sandinistas won the 1990 elections. As it transpired, though, a much more drastic reconfiguring of the political landscape loomed, one that would require a more far-reaching response from the leading Sandinista media organ.

The calamitous electoral defeat of February 1990 forced Barricada to confront a harsh new environment: one in which it could no longer depend on the sympathy and support of the ruling regime; in which the movement that had given it life and provided it with a ready-made constituency was in disarray; in which new rounds of austerity measures and market-oriented reforms would threaten the very material survival of the newspaper. The result was a maturing of the earlier plans for quasi-autonomy, and their substantial reformulation in the face of radically-transformed circumstances.

The winds of change blew through Barricada’s pages even before the National Directorate met in December 1990 to approve the paper’s New Editorial Profile. In mid-1990, an important structural transformation took place at Barricada that paved the way for the paper’s formal relaunching in January 1991. It took the form of an Editorial Council, something Chamorro had been working to get off the ground since at least 1987. With the creation of the council, the role of the FLSN leadership would be further muted, and Barricada’s professional autonomy correspondingly increased. Bayardo Arce, who remained the Directorate’s representative, was named president of the council. There, however, he would be only one appointee among seven: in addition to Arce, the council comprised three representatives from Barricada, and three of what could be called ‘institutional Sandinismo’.

In the New Editorial Profile that Chamorro now drafted on the basis of council deliberations, the newly-constituted body was portrayed as the very anchor of Barricada’s continuing role as ‘an organic medium of the FLSN’. In a sense it was. But the initiative for the council, as with all such initiatives in the life of the paper, had come from within Barricada. And the primary motivations were professional. After its ‘deep de-officialisation’, Chamorro wrote in the New Editorial Profile, Barricada would cease to be an organ of the vanguard, and would emerge ‘as a journalistic institution with its own identity, that is to say, with some degree of autonomy in relation to the FLSN as a political subject’.

On 30 January 1991, less than a year after the historic elections that lent a decisive impetus to its drive for autonomy, Barricada formally ‘unveiled a new and in some ways radically revamped version of itself’:

28 The three external representatives were Alejandro Martinez, the Minister of Foreign Trade in the Sandinista government; William Ramirez, an FLSN representative in the National Assembly; and Rodrigo Reyes, a member and ex-president of the Nicaraguan supreme court.

Gone was the insurrectionary logo alongside the masthead: a guerrilla crouched behind a barricade of paving stones, taking aim with a rifle. Gone, too, were the broad swaths of red-and-black—the banner of Sandino. Most striking of all was the change in the paper’s slogan, altered to read, ‘In the National Interest’ [por los intereses nacionales]. As if to emphasize the move away from Barricada’s official-organ status, a new logo also appeared: Sandino’s trademark cowboy hat, emblazoned over a Nicaraguan flag. Even this, though, was soon deemed too partisan. A few days after the first edition of the new Barricada hit the stands, the hat and flag were separated.\(^{30}\)

As political and programmatic bulwarks for the new orientation, the paper proposed ‘The defense of the State of Law, the Constitution, and democratic rights, among which the most important is freedom of expression ... The struggle for the political depolarisation of society, and the channelling of conflicts into democratic forms of expression’.\(^{31}\) A *sine qua non* of the new editorial orientation was acceptance of the new UNO regime’s right to rule. ‘It would be wrong, totally wrong, for us to deny the legitimacy of this government’, said Carlos Fernando Chamorro in 1991. ‘If we decide they don’t exist, that they’re a fraud, simply the sons of *Yanqui* imperialism — well, what we’d have to do is organise a *coup d’état* or a military insurrection. But they exist, and we have to dispute their ideas against our ideas’.\(^{32}\)

Envisioned as well was a much broader canvas for reporting and opinion-editorial contributions. An attempt would be made to reflect and promote not only the vigorous discussions taking place within the FLSN, but also the ‘debate ... between Sandinismo and other social sectors’. Barricada, Chamorro argued in the New Editorial Profile, ‘must aspire to convert itself into a leader of public opinion. This supposes its aggressive involvement and the taking of positions in the national debate, not only in relation to political questions, but with regard to all the themes of interest to the population’.\(^{33}\)

Among the immediately-evident aspects of the transformation was Barricada’s attempt to woo readers with *periodismo amarillo* (‘yellow journalism’): ‘crime, beauty contests, women’s asses on the beach’, as business manager Max Kreimann unabashedly conceded in 1991.\(^{34}\) The sensational turn in Barricada’s coverage can itself be sensationalised: Barricada remained a serious, sometimes dour paper. But a more general emphasis on human-interest stories was also evident.

Some sense of how this new emphasis translated to daily coverage can be gleaned from a non-systematic glance through several months of Barricada

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\(^{30}\) Jones, ‘Beyond the Barricades’, p.63.

\(^{31}\) ‘Nuevo perfil editorial de *Barricada*’.

\(^{32}\) Carlos Fernando Chamorro interview, Managua, 28 April 1991.

\(^{33}\) All quotes from the ‘Nuevo perfil editorial de *Barricada*’.

\(^{34}\) Max Kreimann interview, Managua, 4 April 1991.
coverage not long before the *defenestración* of 1994. In addition to stories on corruption, the paper published an exposé of the mafiosi operating in Managua’s market; features on incest, AIDS, drug addiction, unemployment, and the energy crisis in Nicaragua; a long meditation on the legacy of the Sandinista Revolution, entitled ‘The Children of the Change’; a profile of a forensic scientist at work; and a two-part, non-sensationalistic story on transvestism. One of the most important side-projects of the new era (though it had actually been introduced before the election defeat) was *Gente* (People), a weekly supplement directed by Sofía Montenegro. The supplement featured ground-breaking analysis of controversial social issues, especially those linked to gender and sexuality; it dealt frankly—sometimes brazenly—with sexism, homosexuality, impotence, and pornography. Its tonal range was impressive, ranging from ‘infotainment’-style gossip to long scientific treatises by noted professionals. The results proved popular with readers. Clearly, *Barricada*’s informational canvas and stylistic range had expanded greatly since the bland and predictable days of the early and mid-1980s.

But *Barricada* entered the 1990s with its glory days behind it, at least as far as circulation was concerned. The inflated print-runs of the mid-1980s had ebbed even before the FSLN fell from power, beginning with the Sandinistas’ hesitant adoption of market-based reforms. These sharply cut back the subsidies, especially for paper and ink, on which *Barricada* (along with the other Nicaraguan dailies) depended. Accordingly, beginning even before the Sandinista election defeat, *Barricada* was forced to introduce deep staffing cuts. The payroll plummeted 17 percent in 1988-89, to 400 employees. Further cuts after the 1990 elections reduced total staff to 350. Yet another cut of 35 or 40 workers would take place around Easter 1994.

Most features of the material crisis were shared by the other Nicaraguan dailies. But the new era also brought challenges specific to *Barricada*. The most obvious was the collapse of the privileged relationship with *Barricada*’s largest client, both in terms of advertising revenue and publishing contracts: the state. *Barricada* responded by seeking non-traditional clients in both areas, with some considerable success. From 1991 to 1994, the paper was actually able to increase its size from a daily average of 10 pages in the 1988-91 period to between 16 and 24. The expansion gave *Barricada*’s professional project considerably greater scope as well, funding new editorial sections and the expansion of existing ones.35

35 The range of clients for the publishing service greatly increased as well. In 1991, *Barricada* was printing the weekly newspaper of the right-wing business organisation COSEP (*El Nicaragüense*), along with ‘thoroughly anti-Sandinista religious newspapers’, according to business manager Max Kreimann. ‘This didn’t happen before, because the political factor predominated in business decisions. Now you see more the business aspect of the newspaper, because it’s more necessary; if we don’t [adopt this approach], we won’t survive’. Kreimann interview, Managua, 4 April 1991.
The Politics of Barricada

For those who decried the de-officialised incarnation of *Barricada*, the politics of the paper between 1990 and 1994 represented a 180-degree about-face from the mobilising imperative that had guided it from its birth. *Barricada* had abandoned its revolutionary principles and commitments —uncritically supporting the UNO government, and affiliating itself with a dissident ‘social-democratic’ wing of the Front that sought to undermine the revolutionary energies of the movement by diverting them into bourgeois pseudo-opposition.\(^{36}\)

Clearly, many thousands of dedicated Sandinistas felt betrayed by *Barricada*'s new political and editorial ‘line’. And the defenestración of 1994 would vividly demonstrate how fragile was *Barricada*'s position within the FLSN. Accordingly, the newspaper was forced —or willingly chose— to subordinate the strict requirements of a professional imperative to the mobilising role that remained central, in many respects, to its self-definition. It is worth exploring these trade-offs: the issues and policy areas in which *Barricada* plainly accepted mobilising constraints; others in which its editorial policy was ambiguous, and which regularly attracted criticisms from the increasingly powerful ortodoxo tendency of the Front; and one —the issue of violent struggle— in which the paper adamantly held to its own ‘line’, while FLSN leaders and militants seemingly vacillated according to the political requirements of the moment.

The internal politics of the FLSN. Upon its relaunching in January 1991, *Barricada* responded to criticisms of the paper’s new orientation with a pledge ‘that we would not interfere in the internal affairs of the Frente’, according to Carlos Fernando Chamorro. The basic editorial strategy revolved around a distinction between formal editorialising, on the one hand, and opinions of individual writers and outside commentators, on the other. Chamorro and his editorial staff reserved the right to publish personal opinion-pieces that took strong stands in the intra-party debate. Several of these articles —like Chamorro’s 1993 call for Humberto Ortega to resign as Chief of the Army— were as controversial as anything *Barricada* published during this period. In editorials, however, ‘It was clear that *Barricada* ... would not make any comment’ on the Front’s internal politics.\(^{37}\)

The ‘piñata’. Of all the dubious actions that dogged the Sandinista Front through the early 1990s, none was pricklier than the ‘piñata’, the term popularly attached to the outgoing Sandinista regime’s stripping of state assets prior to the April 1990 handover of power. With the Front’s leadership constantly on the

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\(^{36}\) Former president Daniel Ortega told a Cuban news agency after the defenestración in 1994 that *Barricada* ‘had been turned into a mouthpiece for neoliberal, imperialist, and rightwing politics’. Pro-Ortega militants denounced the semi-autonomous *Barricada* as ‘rightist, in the service of the government, and the exclusive redoubt of the renovationists’. See Juan Carlos Sarmiento, ‘Continuar el profesionalismo perdido’, *Barricada*, 2 November 1994.

\(^{37}\) Carlos Fernando Chamorro interview, Managua, 23 May 1996.
defensive over the piñata. Barricada was the very last quarter from which criticism would be tolerated. Carlos Fernando Chamorro, and others at the paper, got the message. ‘We never had an editorial on the internal abuses of Sandinismo, nothing at all’, said Chamorro. He called it ‘the most powerful concession I made to the Frente’. 

Human rights and violent struggle. The revolutionary past and oppositionist present of both Barricada and its FLSN sponsor drew the paper naturally towards an editorial stance aimed at promoting and defending the human rights of all Nicaraguans. The political and professional imperatives that guided the new Barricada were founded on a defense of constitutional freedoms. Nonetheless, Barricada’s zeal in pursuing the subject during the years of semi-autonomy seemed a little pallid, compared with its vigorous investigations into corruption and economic mismanagement under the UNO regime. The reason, according to Chamorro, was that ‘human rights are very politicised here, and there’s one side of the story which is Sandinistas violating human rights’. The taboo against delving into the FLSN’s own behaviour placed Barricada in an awkward position when it came to the actions of the UNO government. The paper, said Chamorro, was ‘more or less consistent in trying to find a balance’ on the human-rights issue. But Barricada never succeeded in becoming ‘a point of reference’ —a public-opinion leader—in this area.

In one area, however, Barricada stuck adamantly to its own ‘line’, regardless of feelings within the Front. The issue was the legitimacy of violent struggle. ‘I developed a very strong conviction’, Chamorro said, ‘that one could not make any concessions on that issue’. The paper, here, was exploiting—but also implicitly denouncing—the leadership’s uncertain stance on the issue, which Chamorro characterised as riddled with ‘ambiguity [and] double standards ... saying one thing but doing another’. Such equivocation ‘probably made me much more suspicious of the leadership ... I was very careful in the newspaper that we should not follow the Frente on that’.

38 Carlos Fernando Chamorro interview, Managua, 16 May 1996.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid. Any number of examples can be cited to bolster the assertion of a basic consistency in Barricada’s ‘line’ on violent struggle. Typical was the editorial-page condemnation of tit-for-tat kidnappings and armed assaults by leftists and rightists carried out in 1993. Barricada denounced all such actions ‘with the same energy’, arguing that ‘violence only engenders more violence, and this state of armed kidnappings carries with it the risk of bringing the country to the brink of anarchy’. (Editorial, ‘Unidad contra la violencia’, Barricada, 21 August 1993.) After a car-bomb attack rocked Esteli in August 1994, Barricada published ‘Our condemnation of the violence’ (‘Nuestra condena a la violencia’, 10 August 1994), pledging: ‘Barricada will never cease to reiterate that the method of irrational violence is not conducive to solving the grave social problems of the country, but rather aggravates them and delays any solution’.
On no occasion were the delicate tradeoffs of *Barricada’s* balancing-act cast in such stark relief as when *Barricada* broke the story of the Buzón de Santa Rosa—perhaps the greatest ‘scoop’ the paper could claim in its two decades of publication. At issue was a large cache of weapons and forged documents uncovered in a suburban Managua neighbourhood in May 1993. The cache’s existence was not the story—it had already been revealed by police. What was not known, until *Barricada* published the details, was the complicity of El Salvador’s Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL) in stashing the arms—in collusion with the terrorist forces of the Basque ETA. When *Barricada*’s star investigative journalist, the late Noel Irias, traced the web of complicity to its source, *Barricada* became ‘the first medium, [whether a] newspaper or radio station, to talk about the existence of the network and all these false documents’. The next day, Chamorro remembered, ‘we had dozens of telephone calls—from Mexico, the United States, everywhere. Everybody wanted to know about our story. We did it very well’.41

But whatever professional pride *Barricada* staffers felt when the news broke on the paper’s front page, it was hardly shared by the FPL—which still maintained close ties with the FLSN leadership. Salvadorean representatives paid a visit to the newspaper and ‘asked me not to create problems for them’, in Chamorro’s recollection. When he declined to limit *Barricada’s* coverage, ‘They were upset, obviously. They thought that because we were political friends, we were supposed to hide their problems. And we said, ‘We cannot hide this’.42 The FPL were not the only ones to take umbrage. For many Sandinista ortodoxos, the former official organ was rubbing salt in the wounds of revolutionary movements throughout Central America.

In the case of the *buzón* saga, *Barricada* chose to emphasise professional considerations over mobilising ones. When the chips were down, however, this was rarely the case. The forbidden areas established by the FLSN leadership were largely respected. The *quid pro quo* that *Barricada* secured for abiding by these constraints was the Front’s respect for the paper’s institutional identity and professional agenda—in other words, a recognition that *Barricada* required commensurate concessions from the leadership. These it received, but only as long as the Front deemed the tradeoff an acceptable one. In 1994, *Barricada’s* leash was snapped decisively back.

1993-94: Anatomy of a Defenestración

On 11 July 1993, 29 Sandinista militants—including deputies to the National Assembly, mayors, political secretaries, and union leaders—issued a call for the FLSN to ‘distance[e] itself clearly from the government’ of Violeta Chamorro, and ‘to

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41 Carlos Fernando Chamorro interview, Managua, 16 May 1996.
Among the key figures of the Group of 29 (as it was quickly dubbed) were René Vivas, the former police chief of Managua; Mónica Baltodano, a former guerrilla leader who had served as Minister of Municipal Affairs during the revolutionary decade; her husband, Julio López Campos, the future ‘brains’ behind a revamped and reofficialised Barricada; Victor Hugo Tinoco, the FLSN’s political secretary in Managua; and Mirna Cunningham and Lumberto Campbell, two prominent Sandinistas from the Atlantic Coast. All but López were members of the FLSN National Directorate at the time, or would be appointed to the expanded 12-member Directorate at the May 1994 Special Congress. The signatories included three more Sandinistas (Doris Tijerino, Orlano Núñez, and Carlos Fonseca Terán) who would be drafted to the Directorate when its three remaining ‘renovationist’ members resigned in February 1995.

‘The greatness of our party’, proclaimed the Group of 29, ‘has been, and must continue to be, its stand alongside the people, and not on the side of the structures of power that oppress them’. The signatories argued that the time for *concertación* and *co-gobierno* (co-government) with the Chamorro regime was now past: ‘Administrative corruption, the surrendering of national sovereignty, non-compliance with political agreements, and the hoax of promises made to the people have become the institutionalised policy of the [UNO] government’.

As *Barricada* noted the next day in a po-faced front-page headline, the Group of 29 declaration ‘reopen[ed] debate in [the] FLSN’. That was putting it mildly. The manifesto was the first coordinated salvo fired by the ortodoxo current of the Front, which now felt itself sufficiently strong to challenge the renovationist sentiment which had briefly gained the upper hand after the 1990 elections. In February 1994, a second seminal ortodoxo proclamation, the Proposal of the Sandinista Democratic Left, formalised the alliance between the Group of 29 and its new leader—Daniel Ortega.

It would prove a fateful alliance for *Barricada*. In February 1992, Ortega had issued one of the harshest public denunciations of the paper’s new ‘professional’ vision. In what *The New York Times* called a ‘frontal attack’ on *Barricada*, Ortega expressed opposition to the Directorate’s decision to grant semi-autonomy to the institution: had he been in the country at the time of the vote, he said, he would have opposed it. And ominously, he said he wished to see the decision overturned. The paper responded with a ‘Declaration of *Barricada* Journalists’ that protested Ortega’s attack on the grounds that it ‘could injure the personal and professional dignity of our collective’, while Chamorro published a rare front-page riposte under his own signature, entitled ‘The *Barricada* That We Need’, urging Ortega and the
FLSN to 'support and respect the autonomy of the revolution's communications media'.

The renovationist wing of the Front was always more chimerical than its ortodoxo counterpart. It mustered no formal response to the Group of 29 proclamation. But the consolidation of the alliance with Daniel Ortega could not pass without comment. A formal renovationist response came on 10 February 1994, less than a week after the ‘Democratic Left’ announced its existence. It was titled ‘Proposal for a Sandinismo for the Majorities’, and —crucially— it was co-drafted and signed by several key figures at Barricada, including Carlos Fernando Chamorro and Sofia Montenegro. The ‘Majorities’ document appealed for ‘a new vision of change and renovation’ within the Front, and the development of party structures that were more ‘open, participatory, and creative’. Most emphatically of all, the document rejected violence as a means of struggle: ‘Sandinistas cannot sponsor, defend, justify or excuse any type or method of armed or violent struggle in Nicaragua’.

As the FLSN’s Special Congress of May 1994 convened, Barricada announced what was plain to all observers —that it would be ‘an open struggle’. The ortodoxo-Ortega alliance, though, all but ensured that it would be a lopsided one. In the final balloting for the new Sandinista Assembly, the ortodoxos secured an impressive 75 percent of delegate support. Ortega was re-elected General Secretary by an equally convincing 287-147 margin over Henry Ruiz, who presented himself as leader of an ‘anti-current’ current. ‘From that day on’, said Carlos Fernando Chamorro, ‘I knew perfectly well that [the defenestración] was just a matter of time. The whole question was if they were willing to pay the political cost to do what they did. And they were willing to pay the cost, and they did it’.


All quotes from ‘Surge propuesta Sandinismo de las Mayorías’, Barricada, 11 February 1994. A good summary of the differences between these Sandinista currents is Guillermo Fernández Ampié, ‘The FLSN’s most serious crisis’, Barricada Internacional, September 1994, pp.4-5: ‘Those belonging to the current ‘For the Majorities’ [i.e., the renovationists] fought for modifications to a number of statutory and programmatic concepts which had previously been fundamental to the FLSN, in order to ‘adapt to changing times’. These included discarding the concept of a ‘vanguard’, anti-imperialist party as well as the practice of classifying members in two categories, as activists or affiliates. Furthermore, they rejected and openly condemned all forms of armed struggle and violence in the popular fight for political and economic objectives. ... The Democratic Left [ortodoxos], although proposing some changes of their own, argued that following the other group’s recommendations would ‘destroy the revolutionary essence’ of Sandinismo. ... The dispute between the tendencies was also influenced by the personal struggle between [former vice-president Sergio] Ramirez and Daniel Ortega for political control of the party, apparently motivated by the [leadup to the] 1996 general elections, for which there [then was] no designated Sandinista presidential candidate’. (B/translation.)

Carlos Fernando Chamorro interview, Managua, 23 May 1996.
Barricada decided to seize the initiative. Staffers prepared a submission of their own to the Directorate. On 19 September 1994, a number of them gathered for a press conference at the office of the Union of Nicaraguan Journalists (UPN), seeking to explain their position on the Barricada project and condemning ‘the implicit will to silence and censor us’. A document signed by 37 staffers, entitled ‘Journalism for a Democratic Society’, was presented, and was published in the paper on 20 September. Behind the scenes, a more formal submission to the Directorate was being prepared by the members of Barricada’s Editorial Council. The document that resulted, ‘Adjustments to the Editorial Strategy of Barricada’, was hardly designed to assuage those FLSN leaders and militants — now apparently a majority — who supported the reassertion of Directorate control over the former official organ. As staffers had done in their open letter, the council members called quixotically not for a diminution of the paper’s autonomy, but for that autonomy to be increased. Remarkably, at no point did the text actually refer to Barricada as a ‘Sandinista’ or ‘revolutionary’ institution. The emphasis throughout was on the paper’s ‘Sandinista and non-Sandinista’ constituencies, both actual and potential. If Barricada was to extricate itself from its economic dire straits, the authors claimed, it would have to further strengthen its autonomy from the partisan interests of the FLSN. This led to the most barbed passage in a generally moderate document: ‘These aspirations run contrary to the demand of sectors of the base and leadership inside the party structure of the FLSN, who demand a greater degree of support [protagonismo] for their political activities in the newspaper’s pages, together with a “militant” editorial policy favouring the official positions of the FLSN’. The Editorial Council instead urged ‘consolidation … the daily’s professional discretion … News judgment cannot be placed at the service of subjects, sources or groups, but [only at the service of] the broader public, and of what the audience considers vital. The newspaper must administer this criterion with total autonomy [emphasis added]’.

In retrospect, the document reads partly as a deposition to the Directorate, partly as an elegy for the autonomy experiment that was shortly to be foreclosed. ‘I think we were trying to sell the project without being much convinced of our ability to do so’, Chamorro stated. Inevitably, the arguments counted for little. The document was submitted to the Directorate on 21 October 1994, but ‘was never discussed at all’, said Chamorro. ‘They had already made their decision’. Four days later came the defenestración.

48 Ajustes en la estrategia editorial de Barricada’, unpublished internal document, privately supplied.
49 Carlos Fernando Chamorro interview, Managua, 16 May 1996.
Coup and Interregnum

The first that Carlos Fernando Chamorro heard about the precise timing of his "throwing out the window" came as Barricada headed into its final weekend as a semi-autonomous publication. Senior editor Daniel Alegría had received a call from Tomás Borge, whom Alegría had served as both bodyguard and speechwriter in the Ministry of the Interior during the 1980s. Apparently perceiving Alegría to be one of the few sympathetic figures within the newspaper, Borge sought to persuade him to serve as Barricada's editor for a period of transition following Chamorro's impending departure. Eventually, grudgingly, Alegría agreed. Then he phoned Chamorro to tell him the sword was about to descend.*

The atmosphere at the Barricada offices on the afternoon of 25 October 1994 has been described as 'tense, but in a way festive.' It was in any case expectant. With Barricada journalists assembled on the front doorstep, Tomás Borge and Lumberto Campbell arrived at the paper's plant in jeeps with tinted windows. A retinue of bodyguards and local party personnel trailed in their wake. As Borge and Campbell made their appearance, similar purges were underway across town at the FLSN-owned Radio Sandino and Radio Stereo Ya. Three programs were abruptly pulled from the airwaves—including one that had been on the air for 21 years—and their directors were fired. But neither of these events had the air of ceremony and significance of the scene unfolding at Barricada. There, the defenestración of Carlos Fernando Chamorro proceeded with the dignity and sense of familiarity befitting longtime revolutionary comrades in a movement that had always forewarned violent internal vendettas.

Chamorro—looking 'tired, but serene', according to one observer—received the two Directorate representatives, and led them into his office. After a while, he emerged to speak to assembled staff, announcing that he accepted the decision as a fait accompli, but protesting that the Directorate did not in fact possess the authority to depose him. Then he retired again to his office to pack his belongings and embrace a succession of Barricada employees, clinging 'much of the while to a small wooden statue of Augusto C. Sandino, the peasant insurrection leader who lent his name to the [Sandinista] Front'.

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* Carlos Fernando Chamorro interview, 23 May 1996. Alegría declined comment when asked whether he was Chamorro's source for the information.
1 Daniel Alegría interview, Managua, 10 May 1996.
By the time Chamorro re-emerged, more than a hundred representatives from national and international media had flooded to the Barricada offices. One staffer, Economics editor Roberto Larios, covered his mouth with masking tape as a sign of protest for the assembled photographers. Chamorro strolled through the throng to his Jeep Cherokee and drove off for his suburban home. Many Barricada staffers would join him there later, for a bittersweet commemoration of the day’s events.

The day before his dismissal, Chamorro had written a ‘final reflection’ as director of Barricada. It was published on the morning of the defenestración. In it, Chamorro summarised the impasse that had brought about the day’s dramatic events:

Over these last four years, since it was agreed that Barricada would cease to be the official organ of the FSLN, I have waged, with the support of the Editorial Council, an incessant battle to secure the autonomy conferred on this newspaper and its professional profile. I had to overcome pressure from powerful interests to ensure that Barricada became a daily dedicated to truthfully informing the reader, independently of our own political interests. Only by moving beyond the narrow framework of party interests was it possible to set the precedent of transforming a party institution into a credible and influential national newspaper. However, now the will of those who were never in agreement with the change in editorial profile, and who continue to see the paper as the extension of the party apparatus, has been imposed. Underlying the practical urgency of bringing the paper into line and converting it into their political instrument is the insistence on a totalising vision of power [una visión totalizante del poder], which recognises as legitimate only those expressions under their strict control.

The National Directorate did not necessarily foresee the dismissal of Carlos Fernando Chamorro as involving sweeping changes to every aspect of Barricada’s staffing and functioning. The leadership likely felt that economic pressures—together, perhaps, with an institutional esprit de corps—would keep the majority of Barricada’s journalists and editors in place after the coup. On the first Barricada anniversary celebrated since the defenestración, Tomás Borge acknowledged as much. ‘The journalists identified with the former director of Barricada are good at their profession’, he said, ‘and, in general, [they are] good persons. This is the reason why we intended—in vain—to keep them on.’

In vain indeed. Over the three weeks following the defenestración, approximately 80 percent of Barricada’s editorial staff resigned, or were forced out by a new directorate that finally realised the scale of internal opposition to its project. It is easy, in retrospect, to overlook the interregnum between old and new

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orders at Barricada, since the final housecleaning was so extensive. Nonetheless, this brief period must be numbered among the noteworthy sagas in Latin American journalism. Day after day, the policies and editorial preferences of Barricada's new directorate—and their allies within the FLSN as a whole—were exposed to withering criticism from Barricada's journalists and remaining editors, in the paper's own pages. Typical was the statement titled 'Autonomy vs. partidismo', published the day after the defenestración and signed by 74 journalists and administrative staff at Barricada. 'The dismissal of our director is more than just the dismissal of an individual', the staffers wrote. 'It is the liquidation of an entire journalistic project'.

Serving as caretaker at this time was Daniel Alegría. But as he sought to balance the wishes of the new directorate with Barricada's professional orientation, 'every day' became 'a struggle. ... I could see how the paper was changing'. He rapidly decided that he wanted no part of it. On 3 November, Alegría resigned. His departure coincided with a rapid hemorrhaging of the staff that the new leadership had counted on to run the re-officialised Barricada.

At some point about a week into the interregnum, the FLSN leadership seems to have decided the following:

* that Barricada staff were too united in their opposition to the new project to serve as a foundation for it;
* that the political costs of the defenestración and subsequent outcry had largely been borne, and there was now little to lose by wiping clean the slate;
* that even if Barricada's circulation and influence were decreased by an exodus of readers, this could be overcome in time to mobilise the paper effectively for the 1996 elections;
* that the circulation of the paper might even increase in the wake of the defenestración —there were, after all, 350,000 registered FLSN militants in Nicaragua who mostly supported the ortodoxo line, and might be prevailed upon to support the new version of Barricada; and
* that even if none of these strategies worked, and Barricada declined in both circulation and influence, the material deficit would be offset by a new harmony of interests between the paper's directorate and the now-dominant ortodoxo current of the Front.

The circumstances of the top-to-bottom transformation of Barricada's editorial staff that ensued remain the subject of bitter controversy. All that can be said with confidence is that the situation prevailing after Chamorro's dismissal—the clash of mobilising and professional imperatives that seemed to occur at every editorial gathering—was ultimately untenable for either side. Who among

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58 Quoted in Guillermo Fernández Ampiè, 'Changes at Barricada', Barricada Internacional, October/November 1994 (BI translation).
Barricada's staff jumped ship, and who was pushed? Tomás Borge offered a paradoxical assessment that may also be the most accurate one: the staff 'chose to leave', he said, but 'we formally fired them because they asked us to do so'. Whatever the mechanism, the human underpinnings of the semi-autonomous Barricada rapidly disappeared. Some sense of the scale of the transition can be gleaned from Barricada's masthead. The edition of 25 October 1994 listed sixteen members of Barricada's Editorial Council and various sections. Three weeks later, only one — Juan Ramón Huerta, who would be the daily's last editor — remained.

Barricada's new directorate moved rapidly to replenish the depleted editorial corps. Within days of the defenestración, the two leading ortodoxos at the paper's Managua office — Huerta and photographer Pablo Emilio Barreto — had been promoted to leading roles at the paper. Alfonso Malespín, a journalist unaffiliated with the Sandinista Front who had been brought in to work on the entertainment sections and to buttress the 'objective' tone of Barricada's political reporting in the early 1990s, agreed to stay on. Many regional correspondents — the one generally pro-ortodoxo sector of Barricada's editorial staff — offered to move to Managua to help fill the yawning editorial gaps. The focus of outside recruitment then shifted to target a disproportionate number of Tomás Borge's assistants at the Ministry of the Interior during the 1980s: Fernando Solís, Mayra Reyes, José Reyes Monterrey, and Judith Ruiz among them. Many of these figures had little if any prior journalistic experience. As Alfonso Malespín told El Semanario at the time: 'The problem [the new directors] have is that they want to change the newspaper, but they don't know how to do it, because they haven't brought in anyone technically capable of introducing the changes they want'.

A smoother transition was effected at the leadership level. Julio López, a presence at the paper from the first day of the defenestración, was appointed sub-director. On the same day, 4 November, a more enigmatic figure, William Grigsby, was installed as chief editor. And Tomás Borge formally replaced Carlos Fernando Chamorro as the new director of Barricada.


When the dust settled at the new Barricada in November 1994, the paper's directorate faced a challenge that was by nearly any measure unenviable. In an immediate sense, the task of producing publishable copy would have to be accomplished despite a severe deficit in professional skills and technical capabilities.

There was also the question of who would buy Barricada. The well-publicised struggle at the paper had greatly compromised Barricada's standing in the eyes of established readers — those who had shored up the declining, but perhaps sustainable, circulation levels of the early 1990s. Almost immediately after the defenestración, Barricada’s circulation went into a free fall. Roberto Fonseca reported in December 1996 that the number of subscribers declined from 4,000 in October 1994 to 2,500 in May 1996, while overall circulation fell from 15,000 to 7,000 in the same period. By the end of January 1998, when for the first time in its history Barricada failed to appear on newsstands, some estimates put the circulation as low as 5,000. Advertising revenue was also scarce even before the government of Arnoldo Alemán took power in 1996 and launched an advertising boycott of Barricada and other opposition media.

Tomás Borge, the new director, oscillated between buoyant predictions that Barricada’s circulation would stage a recovery, and claims that even if it didn’t, the paper could still fulfill its designated role in the Sandinista movement. A Reuters dispatch published in El Nuevo Diario shortly after the defenestración quoted Borge as ‘predict[ing] that Barricada’s circulation would increase and that, together with the party’s radio stations and TV channel, [the paper] would lead the Sandinista Front to victory in the 1996 elections’. On another occasion, though, Borge allowed that Barricada was ‘not exactly a commercial undertaking’; ‘its primary objectives’, he said, were ‘oriented towards service’.

The editorial team that took over at Barricada in October-November 1994 saw and presented its mission as one of liberation. ‘Under the pretext’ of an autonomy project, Borge said, Barricada had become ‘aligned with a fraction of the FLSN’. It had ‘abandon[ed] national interests in order to place itself at the service of a minority group, in which the old director of Barricada was registered’. Did this mean that Barricada would now return to being the official organ of the FLSN? Borge sidestepped the question. But he rejected the idea that reharmonising Barricada with the dominant current of the Front would lead to the paper’s becoming merely ‘a party bulletin or pamphlet’. Instead, Barricada would be ‘a professional newspaper, very broad, flexible, giving space to all [sectors of] national thinking’. The new environment, though it posed its share of constraints, was also open to a more innovative and creative blending of mobilising and professional

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63 Roberto Fonseca, ‘El periodismo partidista agoniza’. Confidencial, 8-14 December 1996. In an interview in Managua on 27 July 1998, Carlos Fernando Chamorro stated that the average daily circulation of Barricada in 1994 (when promotional print-runs were factored in) was actually about 23,000 copies daily.
64 One of the ‘closest collaborators’ of Tomás Borge told Confidencial in September 1997 that ‘the circulation continues to stagnate between 5,000 and 5,500 copies’. ‘Conato de huelga en Barricada’, Confidencial, 21-27 September 1997.
considerations, in Borge’s view. ‘The idea is not only to provide continuity’, he confirmed, ‘but to widen the options that Barricada offers to readers’.  

But was a genuine balance of the imperatives still possible after the institutional restructuring of October-November 1994? Earlier in this article, I suggested that the bedrock of Barricada’s evolving autonomy and professionalism was the ‘firewalls’ —most notably the Directorate representative and Editorial Council— that insulated the newspaper from personal and political interference by the party leadership. Important transformations were quickly apparent in this area. Perhaps the most striking was the recomposition of the Editorial Council and its almost-immediate ossifying as a meaningful decision-making body at the paper. Neither editor William Grigsby nor director Borge, for example, even bothered to mention the council in conversations with me, let alone assign it a formative role in constructing a strategy for the paper. The council continued to appear on the masthead, but on 23 December 1996 it vanished, without comment or explanation, and did not reappear.

What power had once resided in the hands of Carlos Fernando Chamorro and the Editorial Council now devolved in certain (apparently decisive) part to Tomás Borge. But the comandante’s day-to-day involvement in the paper, at least through to the terminal crisis of late 1997, was surprisingly limited. Borge may have viewed Barricada as his personal ‘toy’, as his critics alleged. But he apparently sought little of the practical involvement that Carlos Fernando Chamorro had maintained. He was often absent from the paper for extended stretches, pursuing his business involvements and political contacts throughout Central America and in Mexico.

An evaluation of the degree of democratic decision-making at the new Barricada leads the analyst into rather subjective terrain. But the person who was perhaps the closest to being a detached observer of the new experiment —Alfonso


67 Daniel Alegría used the term: ‘From the very beginning, [Borge] saw the newspaper very much as his toy’. Alegría interview, Managua, 10 May 1996.

68 In conversation, Borge depicted his role as on the one hand strategic, and on the other symbolic. ‘I am the strategic leader of the [publishing] enterprise and of the newspaper’, he told me, and ‘it is me who takes the decisions’. But practical direction of the operation devolved to his two immediate subordinates. Julio López served as the ‘day-to-day director, the immediate authority on the newspaper’. As chief editor, meanwhile, William Grigsby was guardian of the ‘professional’ side of the operation. The symbolic dimension of Borge’s presence lay, obviously, in his status as founding member of the FSLN and senior member of the Sandinista National Directorate. In the wake of the defenestración, there was ‘a much closer relationship’ between Barricada and the Front, Borge acknowledged, ‘since I am one of the most important leaders of the Sandinista Front. ... In spite of that’, he contended, ‘the newspaper has autonomy. ... This isn’t a bulletin of the Sandinista Front’. Nonetheless, ‘We are partisans in political activity. We are professionals, but in the service of a particular cause. One way or another, that will be reflected in our pages’. Borge interview, Managua, 23 May 1996.
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Alfonso Malespín—found the new atmosphere at the paper both more highly mobilised and more rigidly hierarchical:

I believe there was a more democratic daily life before [the defenestración]. We had daily [editorial] meetings before, and we discussed the things we were doing and how we were publishing them. We also criticised not only the director, but the Editorial Council—how they were running the paper. Now [1996] that doesn’t happen, because there’s a direct link between the party and the director, and he [Borge] randomly meets with Julio [López] and William [Grigsby], so they have the ‘line’.

The ‘firewalls’ constructed between editorials, news coverage, and personally-signed opinion pieces also seemed in danger of disappearing. Nowhere was this more evident than in the ongoing dispute with the renovationist wing of Sandinismo. The defenestración at Barricada marked the climax, but not the end, of the battle; the new Barricada’s ‘dispatches from the front’ were decidedly one-sided in tone and content. In August 1995, for example, the paper launched an attack on the most prominent renovationist figure, headlined, ‘Sergio Ramírez: Gossip and Liar’. The shrill contribution was not an editorial, nor did it appear on the opinion-editorial page. It did not even carry a reporter’s byline. As such, it was typical of Barricada’s new blurring of mobilising and professional imperatives.

The erosion of professional firewalls was also evident in the paper’s coverage of the UNO government. The analyst could hardly fail to be struck by the increasingly aggressive and personalised tone of the paper’s reporting of regime actions and policies. When police fired on protesters in downtown Managua in May 1995, Barricada ran banner headlines reading: ‘Chamorro represses’ (17 May) and ‘Violeta guilty’ (18 May). When police and student demonstrators clashed in December of the same year, leaving one person killed and 35 students (as well as several police) injured, Barricada again ran the news on its front page, with the headline: ‘Chamorro repeats [Somoza’s] massacre of 1959’—a reference to one of the earliest outbreaks of student protest against the dictatorship. This rhetoric would have seemed out of place even as an op-ed contribution to the semi-autonomous Barricada. ‘FLSN denounces manoeuvres of the new traitors’ was another representative headline of this period (22 November 1995); the examples could be multiplied. By contrast, coverage of FLSN leaders was worshipful. In November 1995, as Daniel Ortega celebrated his birthday, Barricada wrote that ‘the people’ celebrated along with him. Half of the ‘Astrology’ page of the same edition—an

69 Alfonso Malespín interview, Managua, 17 May 1996.
innovation of the post-1991 *Barricada*— was turned over to Ortega’s horoscope, with entries like, ‘To understand him, it is necessary to know and love him’.

**Decline and Fall**

Whatever strategies the new directorate tried to shore up (or effectively replace) *Barricada’s* constituency, and to make the paper an economically viable operation, failed spectacularly. *Barricada* between October 1994 and January 1998 lurched from crisis to crisis. The paper was never able to establish a clear or consistent institutional identity—at least in the opinion of Juan Ramón Huerta. Interviewed in 1998, *Barricada*’s final editor recalled the post-defenestración period as a time of confusion and interpersonal conflict: ‘The truth is that when Carlos Fernando left, they [his successors] had no clear idea what kind of newspaper they wanted. ... There was no coherence in their policy. ... It was a determined utilisation of the newspaper for propaganda and in the service of special interests [*intereses muy particulares*].’ A pervasive, morale-sapping backdrop to the ‘identity crisis’ was the catastrophic decline in readership and subscriptions that had begun with the defenestración. Advertisers, too, deserted *Barricada* in droves, many of them ‘because the policy of Grigsby and López was to mount a charge against the bourgeoisie, and it was they who gave us the ads’, to cite Huerta again.

As readers and advertisers abandoned the paper, so too did staffers, alienated by the poor and sometimes-tardy salaries, and by the lack of direction at the FLSN’s flagship. The full dimensions of the crisis, though, did not become apparent until after the national elections of October 1996. *Barricada*—or rather, Editorial El Amanecer, the publishing operation which subsidised it—had counted heavily on winning a contract with the Supreme Electoral Council to print the ballots for the voting. The contract was worth about US $1.5 million. To maximise its competitive advantage, El Amanecer invested heavily in new machinery and equipment, and put forward the lowest bid. In the end, though, the contract went to *La Prensa*, leaving *Barricada* bereft.

There was one further hope: that the FLSN would rebound from the electoral disaster of 1990 to recapture national power in 1996. Had it done so, it is likely that the resources available to *Barricada*—in the form of state-sector advertising and publishing contracts—would have increased. The paper undoubtedly did what it could to promote the FLSN’s candidates, above all Daniel Ortega. ‘Nothing restrains the Sandinista fervour of the people’, read a typical headline during the campaign. *Barricada* also heaped derision on Arnoldo Alemán’s Liberal Alliance, referring to

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72 All quotes from Juan Ramón Huerta interview, Managua, 28 July 1998.
73 Fonseca, ‘El periodismo partidista agoniza’.
its candidates standardly as ‘somocistas’ and ‘arnoldistas’. According to Juan Ramón Huerta, the paper was used outright as a ‘propaganda instrument’, and ‘also for a dirty-tricks campaign [para campaña sucia]’ against the FLSN’s opponents.

The rhetoric did not subside with the vote of 20 October 1996. After a brief interregnum in which the results were proclaimed to be ‘uncertain’ (21 October), the paper declared a ‘Colossal fraud!’ (23 October), linking alleged abuses in the process to the tradition of electoral manipulation under the Somoza dictatorship. When the Supreme Electoral Council issued its official results, which gave Alemán a victory over the FLSN by 51 to 41 percent, Barricada’s front page fumed: ‘May God forgive them! Results illegitimate — the struggle continues.’

The defeat of 1996 immediately spawned a far-reaching internal crisis at Barricada. A further wave of staff cuts was unavoidable, and 92 staffers (including Alfonso Malespín) found themselves cast out of the paper in early December. A few days later, an article at the bottom of the back page announced the surprising resignations of chief editor William Grigsby and sub-director Julio López. According to former Barricada staffer Roberto Fonseca, writing in Confidencial, the departures were linked to a debate over Barricada’s future direction. The essence of the debate remains unclear, but according to Alfonso Malespín, Grigsby and López both ‘thought it was time to ... take a step back, and try to retake the road the newspaper was travelling until 1994’. They also allegedly felt ‘that in order for Barricada to survive, it was necessary that [Tomás] Borge step aside. They considered him a big part of the problem. ... They thought that as long as Tomás remained in Barricada, the paper would have more and more problems getting advertising’.

Whether as a result of Borge’s leadership or not, Barricada indeed encountered even more severe difficulties in securing advertising as 1997 dawned. Part of the problem was the decision by the new Alemán administration to centralise state-sector advertising in the hands of five agencies, including one run by a relative. Persistent rumours circulated that a presidential advisor had issued orders both to governmental ministries and to sympathetic private businesses, ‘indicating to them which media should not receive advertising’. Throughout 1997, Barricada and its director would cite the government’s campaign as the principal source of the

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75 See, e.g., the reference to Alemán as ‘el candidato somocista’ (‘Borge y Asociados admiten derrumbe de Alemán’, Barricada, 13 September 1996).
78 ‘Qué Dios los perdone! Resultados ilegítimos — Seguiremos luchando’, Barricada, 9 November 1996.
79 Fonseca, ‘El periodismo partidista agoniza’.
'profound financial crisis' in which the paper found itself.\textsuperscript{82} Tomás Borge accused President Alemán of having 'decided on his own to liquidate this enterprise, not only by denying us state advertising, but also by pressuring private enterprise to deny us advertisements'. Advertisers, he claimed, were now 'fear[ful] of being seen as sympathisers of the Sandinista Front'.\textsuperscript{83}

There was clearly more at work, though, than the 'sadistic reprisals' of the government.\textsuperscript{84} Nicaragua's economic and political elite had found reasons to support Barricada between 1990 and 1994—whether because they wished to back the paper's attempts to bring about concertación and reconciliation; or because they appreciated Barricada's new professionalism; or even because they considered Carlos Fernando Chamorro a fellow aristocrat. But there was precious little reason for them to do so after October 1994. If the FSLN had decreed the end of Barricada's autonomy experiment and the outward-looking stance towards other social sectors that defined it, why would those sectors be enthusiastic about supporting a more militant and partisan project with their subscriptions or advertising contracts?

It was hard to avoid the conclusion that the crisis afflicting Barricada was at heart one of legitimacy. This was evidenced by the fact that it was not only 'the most obsequious sectors of private enterprise' that shied away from advertising in Barricada.\textsuperscript{85} A plaintive, at times almost hysterical editorial commentary of 23 December 1997 also faulted 'progressive sectors, or even worse, [those] identified with the Sandinista Front' for their 'excrement, illegitimate, and immoral attitude' towards Barricada, which the editorial's author (Borge?) found 'absolutely incomprehensible'. 'Public opinion identifies as 'Sandinista' hundreds of enterprises and public personalities', the editorial raged. 'Where are the advertisements of these hundreds of firms and the public personalities that control them, directly or indirectly?' The answer, apparently, was: 'In the other communications media'.\textsuperscript{86}

Barricada appears to have survived as long as it did only because of extensive personal subsidies from Tomás Borge himself. The comandante is estimated to have poured between half a million and one million US dollars into the publication between 1994 and 1997.\textsuperscript{87} In early December 1997, Borge took the additional step of surrendering his mansion on the lakeshore of Xiloá, outside

\textsuperscript{82} '1998: el año de Barricada', Barricada, 30 December 1997.
\textsuperscript{83} Tomás Borge, 'Si, hay salida para superar la situación', Barricada, 11 November 1997.
\textsuperscript{84} Borge quoted in 'Barricada lanza dramática sos', Confidencial, 6-12 July 1997.
\textsuperscript{85} 1998: el año de Barricada'.
\textsuperscript{86} '¡Al ladrón, al ladrón! contra Barricada', Barricada, 23 December 1997.
\textsuperscript{87} The lower figure was given by Roberto Fonseca in 'El periodismo partidista agoniza', an article which dates from December 1996. Francisco 'Paco' Gómez, an outsider brought in to try to construct a new profile and strategy for Barricada, claimed Borge had told him upon his (Gómez's) arrival in Autumn 1997 that he had invested a million dollars of his own money in the daily (Gómez interview, Managua, 24 July 1998).
Managua, valued at more than half a million US dollars, and two vehicles with a value of about US $80,000. The money was applied to *Barricada*’s debt to the Nicaraguan Institute of Social Security (INSS). This left the paper not much closer to solvency, however. An internal financial statement of November 1997 showed a loss of more than $30,000 for the month of September alone, with nearly as much owed to employees in the form of unpaid wages.

Whatever threats had confronted the semi-autonomous *Barricada* in October 1994, the institution at least did not have to fear rebellion within its own ranks. Even the staff of El Amanecer’s printing works, decimated by layoffs, did not actively demonstrate support for the *defenestración* of Carlos Fernando Chamorro. The threat came instead from outside the immediate parameters of the institution; the *defenestración* was perceived by the vast majority of *Barricada* staff, and by the public at large, as an intervention by a distinct and opposed political force.

In the last weeks of 1997 and into 1998, the prospect of such outside intervention—at least by Sandinistas—was minimal. The relationship between *Barricada* and the FSLN leadership was formally a mutually-supportive one. That support, though, was confined mostly to the level of rhetoric. The FSLN was in no position to subsidise *Barricada*—except by rather desperate and ad-hoc means, as with Borge’s personal dispensing of largesse. The other channels of possible sustenance—street sales, subscriptions, publishing contracts, and advertising revenue—were non-starters for the reasons already outlined. And now, fatally, rebellion arose among the staffers themselves.

The first inklings of revolt came on 12 September 1997, when *Barricada*’s editorial staff declared their refusal to write another word for the paper until wages owing for August and the first half of September were paid. ‘To avoid a scandal’, the administration issued a one-time payment of 300 córdobas (about US $30) to each staff member; Borge pleaded with workers for two months’ breathing space to seek foreign investors for the enterprise. The truce in fact lasted three months, though staffers spent the interim making repeated appeals to Daniel Ortega to intervene in the dispute. Ortega declined to do so.

Finally, on 20 December 1997, two *Barricada* staffers, Xavier Rayo Valle and Pedro Vindell, launched a hunger strike demanding US $80,500 in back-wages and other benefits. By this point, *Barricada* was a month late in paying its Managua-based staff; for correspondents in the regions, wages were arriving as much as three months late. Health benefits had been suspended, along with transportation subsidies for night-shift workers. Food subsidies for the children of *Barricada* staff were also cut.

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88 This according to the financial statement prepared by *Barricada* general manager Soraya Montoya on 13 November 1997, privately supplied.
Vilma Núñez, the longtime Sandinista who was now president of the Nicaraguan Centre for Human Rights (CENIDH), was brought in to mediate the dispute. On 22 December an agreement was reached, ending the hunger strike after 60 hours. Borge promised to pay all wages owing —now reckoned at about one million córdobas (US $100,000) — by 31 January 1998. Barricada, on its front page, proclaimed the agreement ‘a triumph of maturity’. One last burst of guarded optimism was mustered. An opinion-piece of 30 December claimed that 1998 would be ‘the year of Barricada’. But the first two weeks of the new year passed without a saviour appearing on the horizon. On 26 January, two Barricada staffers —Carlos García and Freddy García— made a final direct appeal to Daniel Ortega, calling the situation at the newspaper ‘a time bomb’. But again Ortega kept his distance.

The end, when it came, was hardly unexpected; but it arrived with a suddenness perhaps more shocking than the defenestración of 1994. The events of 30 January 1998, and the ensuing protests by Barricada staff, were described in some detail at the outset of this article. They proved deeply disillusioning for those, like Juan Ramón Huerta, who had welcomed the 1994 dismissal of Carlos Fernando Chamorro as a necessary step towards returning Barricada to the Sandinista fold. In 1998, Huerta recalled, ‘the owners ... remained completely indifferent’ to the workers’ plight. ‘This was one of the greatest contradictions. It created in me, and in many other compañeros [comrades], a real feeling of dejection, and a critical attitude—not towards Sandinismo, but towards the party leadership. When a labour problem arose in a private enterprise, the Sandinista leadership were the first to abandon the struggle of the workers’. Tomás Borge and Daniel Ortega were behaving like ‘patrones’, bosses — ‘the most noxious figure to the working classes’.

**Conclusion: Barricada in Comparative Perspective**

The Barricada story illustrates a number of the means by which media workers, especially those in ‘soft’ authoritarian societies, seek to balance mobilising with professional imperatives, and in particular to open greater space for the latter. This closing discussion draws upon comparative research into other media systems (notably Russia, Jordan, and South Africa) to generalise about the types of

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90 Núñez was also the wife of the late Carlos Núñez, the National Directorate’s representative to Barricada in the early and mid-1980s.  
94 See note 4.
strategies employed, and the overriding factors and variables that may act to constrain professional functioning.

Nicaragua must first of all be seen as an exemplar of underdeveloped media systems. The ramifications of low levels of development for professional functioning are numerous. First of all, underdevelopment correlates with high levels of poverty and illiteracy, which strongly militates against the written press as compared with its broadcast-media counterparts. Newspapers are comparatively expensive media products, meaning that even in a revolutionary society like 1980s Nicaragua, *Barricada*’s readership was disproportionately tilted towards middle- and upper-class elements (still more so after 1990). Distribution difficulties, dependence on material imports, and a paucity of advertising revenue are all marked features of this type of media system. All acted at various points to limit *Barricada*’s ‘reach’ and potential impact. Regime subsidies during the 1980s offset these difficulties to a certain extent, but when these were progressively withdrawn, beginning in the later 1980s, the impact on *Barricada* was immediate and in many ways devastating. This was still more true after the defenestración of 1994 and the election of a right-wing government in 1996 that appeared to dedicate itself to maximising the material travails of opposition media outlets.

The strategies employed by *Barricada*’s staff were often typical of those employed by media workers internationally to preserve a degree of institutional independence and advance a conception of ‘professional’ journalism, even if this sometimes ran counter to mobilisers’ interests and stated preferences. Taking advantage of splits in sponsors’ ranks is one time-honoured strategy. With the Sandinista Front divided and dislocated after its election defeat in 1990, *Barricada* found the ideal moment to forge a more autonomous agenda that allowed greater breathing-space for the professional ambitions staff had long harboured. ‘Right now, the Front is going through a very hard time’, said staffer Guillermo Cortés in 1991. ‘It[s leadership] has lost authority, credibility, legitimacy. It’s difficult for them to lead even their own organisations. Even if they wanted to have greater control over *Barricada*, the situation itself prevents it. Well, we’re taking advantage of that’. But when the ortodoxo contingent established hegemony and imposed ‘unity’ within Sandinista ranks, the professional space opened to *Barricada* was doomed, and finally—in October 1994—closed.

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95 In rural areas of northern Nicaragua, according to a foreign aid worker with whom I spoke in 1991, newspapers were usually purchased in bulk (at a steep discount) days or weeks after they were published. They were bought not mainly for informational purposes, but for use as toilet paper—though the aid worker assured me that literate peasants read them first.

96 Guillermo Cortés interview, Managua, 9 April 1991. Cortés added at the time, presciently: ‘I don’t know if, when the Sandinista Front recovers from the electoral defeat and repairs itself organisationally, when it feels stronger and more solid with its new statutes and program, it will want to exercise greater control [over *Barricada*].’
Exploiting a ‘soft’ authoritarianism was an important avenue open to Barricada during the revolutionary decade of the 1980s. The Sandinista regime, as we have seen, was an unusually tolerant and open one, providing a space for opposition media unusual not just for left-revolutionary regimes in this century, but even compared with liberal-democratic societies in conditions of war or national emergency. The effect on the FLSN’s official organ was multifaceted. The paper was able to develop its own sense of professional identity — and then to lobby the leadership of the Front, successfully, for greater institutional room to express that identity. These negotiations presaged the more dramatic transformations of January 1991; they would hardly have been countenanced in, for example, Castro’s Cuba, the left-revolutionary society that was closest to Nicaragua in both the geographic and the political sense. Unknown elsewhere, too, was the existence of a broad range of opposition media throughout the Sandinista years in power. The ‘reflex relationship’ between the two papers was a powerful spur to Barricada’s professional imperative; staffers spoke of a sense of disorientation in both mobilising and professional senses when La Prensa was banned.

Barricada also employed a variant of the ‘piggy-backing’ strategy common in authoritarian media systems, in this case by exploiting its privileged relationship with the ruling regime. Usually ‘piggy-backing’ strategies are manifested in the relationship between the regime (or factions thereof) and the media organ’s director or chief editor. The degree of professional space granted to newspapers under authoritarianism often correlates directly with the trust established between senior figures at both the regime and the institutional level. Favoured editors and directors may use their greater leeway to bolster the professional imperative and institutional autonomy of their paper — even when this irritates or alienates other important regime players. Much of the success of Barricada’s autonomy project in the early 1990s can be ascribed to the proximity of its director, Carlos Fernando Chamorro, to the inner circles of Sandinista power. (Chamorro, as noted, headed the FLSN’s Department of Agitation and Propaganda for a time in the mid-1980s.) Partly as a result, Barricada was never exposed to the kind of prior censorship visited upon the other Nicaraguan dailies in the 1980s (even the pro-Sandinista El Nuevo Diario); the chief censor during this period, Nelba Blandón, referred in an interview to a relationship of trust existing between the Front and its official organ under Chamorro’s direction. As well, it is unlikely that Barricada’s FLSN sponsor would have been willing to grant the far-reaching independence that it did in December 1990 to a paper headed by a more mercurial, less sympathetic figure than Chamorro.

The trend carried over to the post-defenestración era: whatever stability Barricada enjoyed was derived in large part from the guiding role played by Tomás Borge, a sitting member of the FLSN National Directorate and one of the leading figures in the history of the Nicaraguan revolution.

Barricada’s post-1990 trajectory also points to some regular and predictable, though not ubiquitous, features of the media in times of political transition. The first point to note here is that such epochs almost —though not quite— inevitably prove enormously turbulent for the media (and other) institutions forced to navigate them. The ‘onset phase’ of transitions standardly features an explosion of new media outlets; indeed, this is one of the most reliable indicators that liberalization and transition processes are underway. Established media thus tend to confront a range of new competitors, many of which may benefit from a lack of association with the ancien régime. In the Nicaraguan case, the ‘onset phase’ began well before the fall of the Sandinista government, confronting Barricada with renewed competition from its erstwhile rival, La Prensa, as well as a new daily that targeted much the same middle- and upper-class constituency as Barricada, namely La Tribuna. Likewise, however, the flowering of new media outlets is almost always followed by a rapid winnowing, as economic pressures combine with (and help to spawn) a decline in public interest compared with the heady early days of liberalization. Nicaragua’s calamitous economic state in the 1990s was in many ways typical of the economic crisis that generally haunts political transitions in the Third World, where the majority of such transitions have taken place. We have seen that the period between 1990 and the defenestración of 1994 represented a constant struggle for survival for the newspaper —a struggle that, under the post-1994 management, proved impossible to wage with success. We also saw that a number of the most significant ‘professional’ decisions taken at the paper between 1990 —indeed, 1987— and 1994 reflected a desire to reach out to new constituencies and develop new journalistic projects and content. While a “mobilizing imperative” clearly underlay some of this outreach and exploration, material requirements —the need to find new readers and advertisers— were profoundly influential.

Newspapers and other media outlets also tend to be one of the most sought-after prizes in the transitional era. The Nicaraguan media landscape is not as complex or developed as that of other transitional societies this author has studied, notably Russia and South Africa. There were correspondingly fewer actors and forces contending for power (including media power) during the transition, and so Nicaragua did not witness the scenario so common to post-communist Russia, with various political figures, parastatal corporations, media magnates (both domestic and foreign), and mafiosi all struggling for a piece of the media pie. Nonetheless, it is clear that for the Sandinista Front, preservation of control over the party’s media flagship was deemed essential to the party’s political viability in the transitional period. As noted above, the onset of the transition threw the Sandinista Front into near-calamitous internal upheaval, creating splits in sponsors’ ranks and granting Barricada a crucial breathing space to advance the professional project that most of its staff had long cherished. This opportunity was magnified by the disappearance of most restrictions on media functioning, both in the last years of the revolutionary
government and under Violeta Chamorro’s transitional regime. But when power within the Frente, still Barricada’s sponsor, coalesced around the ortodoxo contingent led by Daniel Ortega, Barricada’s days as a semi-independent institution were numbered. The determination of the ortodoxos to re-establish control over a “wayward” organ obviously reflected Barricada’s perceived political significance in the transitional era, which had eroded or destroyed the party’s parastatal hold over other key Nicaraguan institutions.

It may be that political liberalization and transition also tend to make publics less tolerant of excessive partisanship in journalistic work, in part by increasing the influence and appeal of the hegemonic “western” model of the relationship between mass media and society. Close adherence to a mobiliser’s ideological ‘line’ may bring rewards in the form of stable sponsorship (though in the end even this was denied to Barricada), a familiar editorial style and agenda (though after 1994 Barricada journalists had to cope with the caprice of Tomás Borge), and perhaps the political satisfaction that accrues to militant journalists from their service to a cause. But the fact that even Sandinista militants abandoned Barricada in its final years suggested that the partisan journalism of the post-defenestración era was unappealing even to partisans. The model was hard to abandon for those, like the ortodoxo FLSN, with a ‘permanent conception of the press as an extension of the party apparatus’, as Carlos Fernando Chamorro put it in 1998. But the 1991 comments of Nicaraguan communications theorist Guillermo Rothschuh seem prescient in retrospect. ‘It’s been proven in Nicaragua that this kind of journalism provokes a certain if not total rejection by the readership, a certain distance and cautiousness’, Rothschuh told me. ‘Because people understand that what comes first isn’t defence of the interests of society as a whole, but of a particular party or governing regime’. Seven years later, and possibly wiser, Juan Ramón Huerta considered ‘the Nicaraguan reader today’ to be ‘more demanding. You have to provide him or her with a coherent product - not at the behest of the owner [por la voluntad del dueño], or because you personally believe it to be true’.

Lastly, the Barricada saga is a reminder that political transitions —both at the national and institutional level— can never be considered immune to ‘rollback’ and retrenchment. Though there has been no return to the dictatorial atmosphere of the Somoza dynasty, the new freedom extended to Barricada after 1990 proved extremely vulnerable to pressure from elements within the FLSN that adhered to the older (revolutionary and pre-revolutionary) model of journalism as an expression of mobilizers’ interests and priorities. In this regard, it is perhaps fitting that Barricada’s longtime director, Carlos Fernando Chamorro, should have the final word. In mid-1998, I asked Chamorro —who now hosts a current-affairs program

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100 Juan Ramón Huerta interview, Managua, 28 July 1998.
on Nicaraguan television, and edits the respected weekly *Confidencial*— how he would generalise from Barricada's experiences. 'One angle would be to say that transitions do not always produce the results you’re looking for', Chamorro responded, after pondering the question for a while. 'You can have different outcomes, advance or regression. There’s no way to predict that transitions in the press will always lead to modernisation, or pluralism, or whatever it is you’re looking for'.

Chamorro nonetheless thought that Barricada had helped to pave the way for the emergence of a truly national and independent journalism in post-revolutionary Nicaragua—one that would renounce partisanship while 'not giving up on promoting the transformation of society, and people’s participation in decision making. Is that a political role?' Chamorro asked rhetorically. 'Yes, I think the role of the press is political in that sense. I see a very close connection between the press and democracy, and a very political role for the press. Not a partisan role—but not neutral, either'.

**Postscript**

In May 2000, with midterm elections approaching in Nicaragua, the Sandinista Front revived Barricada as a party weekly overseen by Tomás Borge. According to *The Los Angeles Times* (22 July 2000), 'The newspaper is being printed at cost. Sandinistas holding elected office are being charged an unspecified fee to cover those costs because the newspaper has no advertising yet. Distribution relies on party activists who buy 100 copies at 30 cents each and resell them to friends at cost. The volunteer editor and a managing editor paid by the party supervise three staff writers and a photographer'. There were no plans to return to daily publication. In Borge's words, 'A daily newspaper is a costly, complicated undertaking. We do not have the economic conditions for that'.

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101 Carlos Fernando Chamorro interview, Managua, 27 July 1998. For more excerpts from this interview, see Jones, *Barricada and Beyond*. 
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