

## A Response to Misinformation on Nicaragua: It Was a Coup, Not a “Massacre”

Mary Ellsberg’s latest is a collection of tropes and distortions with little connection to the current reality. A longtime resident of Nicaragua who witnessed the coup from the ground responds.

By [Charles Redvers](#)

Global Research, August 16, 2018

[Grayzone Project](#) 15 August 2018

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean, USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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*For a summary of Mary Ellsberg’s history of work with the US government agencies actively promoting regime change in Nicaragua, and her involvement with toxic elements advocating a similar destabilization campaign against Syria, see the editor’s note that follows this piece.*

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There is so much misinformation in mainstream corporate media about recent events in Nicaragua that it is a pity that [Mary Ellsberg’s article for Pulse](#) has added to it with a seemingly leftist critique. Ellsberg claims that recent articles, including from this website, often “paint a picture of the crisis in Nicaragua that is dangerously misleading.”

Unfortunately, her own article does just that. It looks at the situation entirely from the perspective of those opposing **Daniel Ortega’s** government while whitewashing their malevolent behavior and downplaying the levels of US support they have relied on. Her piece is an incomplete depiction of what is happening on the ground, ignoring many salient facts that have come to light and which have been outdated by recent events.

The following is a brief response to Ellsberg’s main points from someone who lives in Nicaragua and has observed the situation directly and intimately.

First, Mary Ellsberg says that those who claim ‘the opposition has been defeated’ are wrong. She shows a photo of a large demonstration to prove her point. However, this demonstration occurred months ago, on May 30. It was taken at the peak of the opposition’s support. Subsequent demonstrations have seen numbers fall to levels that they must find embarrassingly low.

In contrast, while Ellsberg claims that Ortega and vice-president Murillo lack support, there were massive pro-government demonstrations throughout July, culminating in the biggest on July 19, not just in Managua but in towns and cities up and down the country. They have continued since.

The truth is that, in terms of demonstrations, strikes, and barricades on the streets, opposition support fell away rapidly once people began to see through its lies and the violence and chaos it caused.



Opposition protest numbers are rapidly dwindling. This puny march was observed in Managua on July 26.

Second, Ellsberg minimizes the importance of US money and right-wing support for the opposition. But the anti-Sandinista “Civic Alliance” gives little indication of its own political agenda for Nicaragua, beyond getting rid of the elected government, so it is perfectly legitimate to ask where its political support comes from.

Even Ortega critics, like **Ben Waddell**, have said that US agencies such as the National Endowment for Democracy have been [laying the groundwork for insurrection](#) by giving financial support to the Nicaraguan opposition.

In the middle of the crisis, its leaders traveled to Washington and Miami, funded by Freedom House, to meet right-wing Republicans like **Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen**.

Student leaders went on to [seek support](#) from the extreme right in El Salvador, meeting officials of the Arena party.

More recently, they appeared at the Hudson Institute in Washington, DC, a bastion of right-wing militarism and pro-Israel extremism. What does all this tell us about their political intentions?

Victor Cuadras, the face and voice of Nicaragua’s coup plotting opposition students, finds a natural base at the Hudson Institute, a hyper-militarist neocon think tank funded by Likudnik and far-right foundations <https://t.co/if9ZxqjAVI>  
<https://t.co/0bAstG79sN>

— Max Blumenthal (@MaxBlumenthal) [August 12, 2018](#)

Third, while the deaths in the protests are a major tragedy, calling them a “massacre” gives credence to the exaggerated and cynically manipulated numbers being used by the opposition. A [detailed analysis](#) of casualties in the first two months, which eliminated double-counted and incidents unrelated to the protests, found there had been 119 deaths, divided equally between both “sides.” A recent [official count](#) logs 197 deaths by late July.

Ellsberg cites higher figures from reports by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IACHR), but they lost any credibility they might have had by jumping to conclusions based on the work of the two local human rights bodies, which both have a long history of open bias against the Sandinista government. **Paulo Abrão**, head of IACHR, far from being a neutral observer, openly [declared his support](#) for student protesters on May 19 when they had just violently held up a bus full of people returning from a peace demonstration, resulting in various injuries.

Fourth, like the opposition leaders themselves, Ellsberg refers to “peaceful” protesters and refuses to accept the violence which they perpetrated. This has included the murder of 22 police, plus many government officials and Sandinista supporters, the most recent a few days ago in Matagalpa. Several Sandinistas have endured [gruesome torture](#).

She refers to the violent scenes when government forces managed to reopen access to the cities of Jinotepe and Diriamba, in which Sandinista supporters attacked priests and bishops. (Ironically, they were protected by a heavy police escort, the very police the bishops had earlier asked to be taken off the streets.) What she fails to say is how angry people were at the church being used as a place of sanctuary for armed protesters who terrorized these two cities for over a month, holding about 400 drivers and their vehicles hostage on the main highway.

The government would never have been able to remove the hundreds of barricades the opposition erected if they hadn't had popular support to do so.

Now that the coup has been defeated, much more evidence of violence is coming to light, such as the testimony by [Dania Valeska](#), one of the student protesters, about the arming of the people who occupied one of the main universities (the UNAN).

Ellsberg shows a picture of Valeska in one of the video appeals ("Mama, forgive me...") she made while allegedly under attack at the UNAN, later shown to be play-acting. That fake video was used by the opposition and their media friends all over the US and Europe.

Mary Ellsberg is right in one respect: the opposition has gained the support of international media, and of the US administration and the now mainly right-wing governments in the rest of Latin America. The opposition is clinging on to these allies, helped by the false picture painted by articles such as Ellsberg's, while their support in Nicaragua itself is fading.

Since mid-July the country has been gradually returning to normal; Sandinista supporters have returned to the streets; the barricades have been dismantled (often by local people themselves); and the violence has largely stopped. The enormous damage done by protesters to public buildings, health centers, roads, and dozens of private houses is being repaired. Businesses and schools that were closed have reopened. Daily life has resumed and tourists have begun to reappear.

The coup has failed, but Mary Ellsberg and others still continue to try to persuade the rest of the world that Nicaragua's crisis is 'far from over'.

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### **Note from Grayzone Project's editor**

*While downplaying the role of the US in the coup, Mary Ellsberg has worked for years with some of the main US government-backed organizations that have aimed at smashing the Sandinista movement, as well as European government NGO's that have been active inside Nicaragua.*

*Ellsberg's [George Washington University CV](#) indicates extensive work with USAID, which just committed \$1.5 million in funding to opposition media and NGO's Nicaragua. ([Here](#) is one USAID report that Ellsberg contributed to). Ellsberg has even been a member of a [delegation](#) organized by the US State Department, the governmental parent of USAID.*

*In her article, she not only failed to disclose her involvement with the US government's regime change arm, she neglected to mention that USAID has spent over \$5 million in the past four years ["laying the groundwork for insurrection"](#) in Nicaragua.*

Meanwhile, Ellsberg's son, Julio Martinez Ellsberg, has been an [advisor](#) to an opposition student group, [whitewashing](#) the opposition's violence while actively [lobbying](#) "progressive groups...to publicly cut ties with the [Sandinista] party."

Mary Ellsberg's distortion-laden [editorial](#) was published at Pulse Media, one of the most active English-language platforms for promoting regime change in Syria, and for [smearing](#) public figures who dissent from the Washington consensus. Pulse's creator, Idrees Ahmad, has been under a long-running investigation by his employers at the UK's Stirling University for his serial online harassment of ideological foes. (Ellsberg would probably not appreciate Ahmad's penchant for [leveling misogynistic insults](#) against feminist activists with whom he disagrees.)

Before I published my factual two-part expose on the [USAID-backed White Helmets organization](#), I received an unsolicited phone call from Ahmad. He unleashed a threatening tirade, seeking to intimidate me against publishing the article. I still do not know how he obtained my phone number or how he learned that I was going to publish, though I have my suspicions. (The audio is [here](#).)

It is revealing that Ellsberg, one of the principal "progressive" voices in Washington calling for regime change in Nicaragua, has joined forces with the most malicious advocates for doing the same in Syria. Fortunately for people in both countries, their efforts have so far been a failure.

**-Max Blumenthal**

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