

"THE FIRST TIME I GOT UP ON the floor at a VEA (Virginia Education Association) convention, the paper was shaking so violently that, when I sat down, people started laughing," remembers Mary Hatwood Futrell. "They were laughing because I was so nervous that they didn't see how I could read the paper." That was 15 years ago, when Futrell was a forceful but politically inexperienced black caucus leader in the newly integrated VEA.

Today, as the president of the 1,675,000-member National Education Association (NEA), Futrell is confident enough to laugh about past embarrassments. Lately she has spent much of her time challenging her organization's most powerful adversary, Ronald Reagan. In July, at her inaugural address to the NEA annual convention the 43-year-old Futrell told 7,200 teacher leaders that "I am determined that the president of the U.S. shall be held accountable for his actions as fully as he holds us accountable for ours."

Later that week, after Reagan chastized the NEA in a speech to the rival American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Futrell responded with the personal touch she often uses to lighten tense situations: "[AFT President Albert] Shanker may have President Reagan at his convention, but I have my mother."

Futrell's rise to the top of the NEA parallels the teacher organization's surprising and swift transformation from a conservative, sometimes racist professional association into a militant trade union with the strongest civil rights and affirmative action policies of any major U.S. labor organization. When she was elected in July, the NEA became the only nationwide private U.S. organization of any kind headed by a black person. She is the third black to head the NEA in the last 15 years. Yet 20 years ago, when Futrell started teaching in the Alexandria, Va., public schools, NEA was still a racially divided organization, with segregated affiliates in 11 Southern states and no blacks in significant leadership posts.

A warm and personal style has helped Futrell attract the support she needed to move up in the ranks of the NEA.

Futrell's informality and open discussion of her own strengths, weaknesses, goals and fears win friends for her every time she speaks. And she'll need all of her persuasive skills to lead the powerful but embattled NEA.

The union's many critics charge that it has become a selfish teachers' craft union, which resists changes needed to improve the quality of education. NEA's growing political power has contributed to that image. Since 1976, when the NEA played an essential role in Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign, it has been one of the most powerful forces within the Democratic Party, sending more delegates to party conventions than any other organization.

To understand the difficulties facing Futrell, one must know something of her chief rival, Albert Shanker, who has positioned himself as the more moderate teacher leader. This represents an ironic reversal from the early '60s, when the AFT wooed tens of thousands of members away from the NEA by challenging NEA's racism and its opposition—long since abandoned—to teacher unionism and teacher strikes.

The NEA today stands to the left of its similar, AFL-CIO affiliated rival on most issues. In school systems with a history of hiring discrimination, the NEA argues, seniority rules should be set aside to preserve minority jobs during periods of layoffs. Shanker is the labor movement's most vociferous opponent of minority quotas, and his union demands strict adherence to seniority rules.

While the NEA opposes U.S. involvement in Central America and is an active supporter of nuclear disarmament groups, the AFT tends to favor a hard-line U.S. foreign and military policy. Though both groups have expressed reservations about proposals to give higher salaries to "better" teachers, AFT has been more open to these merit-pay proposals. As a result, Shanker—though still



By Steve Askin



NEA President Mary Futrell

a liberal Democrat on domestic economic issues—has become something of a neo-conservative hero.

The conservative indictment of NEA was laid out most forcefully in *Commentary* magazine last year, when Chester Finn condemned the association for "declaring war on standardized testing"; waging a "shrill, well-coordinated and sustained" attack against Reagan administration budget cuts; supporting "compulsory busing"; demanding "exacting federal requirements for the education of handicapped children"; and, more generally, working to lower schools' educational and disciplinary standards. Though not uncritical of the AFT, he opined "whether one views Shanker as an educational statesman or as a crafty guardian-nurturer of a goose that lays golden eggs, a public school run according to his lights would probably be a better school than most children attend today."

Futrell is an activist in the modern NEA mold. Before winning the presidency, she spent four years as NEA secretary-treasurer, defending and sometimes devising the policies that make the group controversial. "Some of those issues have taken more time and received more emphasis than perhaps they should have," Futrell said in an interview shortly before she took office, but "I by no means believe we should abandon our support of peace or ERA, or human or civil rights and gun control," she said. "Those are issues that do impact on us as educators and do impact on the children."

In describing educational problems, Futrell has adopted some of the rhetoric of conservative education reformers, but she reshapes it to very different ends. "The last thing I would want in my school is an incompetent teacher," the NEA leader told a sometimes hostile congressional committee last year. A colleague who doesn't know the subject or doesn't teach well "makes my job more difficult in the long run," she said.

At last year's NEA convention, Futrell displayed flexibility by successfully opposing an attempt by some delegates to commit the organization to opposing any and all merit pay plans. But she shares the skepticism of her organization's more militant merit-pay opponents. Such pay systems have traditionally been used "to keep women's and minorities' salaries depressed," she argues. Futrell fears that if

administrators are given freedom to set merit-pay rates, they will reward their personal favorites, not the best teachers. But that isn't her only concern.

She also worries about the children who don't get a "meritorious" teacher. "In my school system, we have kids whose parents are in Congress, kids whose parents work in the Pentagon and kids who are on welfare and live in the ghetto," she said. If merit pay comes to Alexandria, Va., people who have political influence or economic influence, will demand the meritorious teacher," she predicted. "What are we going to do with the other kids?"

Instead of merit pay, Futrell wants school systems to recruit the most talented college graduates as teachers and help them continue improving their skills after they enter the profession. Though skeptical about most existing proposals for "master teachers," Futrell said that NEA would support "career ladder" plans that provide higher pay—and more responsibility—for the most skillful educators, without taking them out of the classroom.

But she proposes no major changes in the ways schools function. Instead, she stresses the need for more and better resources; improved textbooks, smaller class sizes, added federal aid and higher pay. She insists her concern about salaries is not simply a matter of self interest for NEA members. To Futrell "it is absolutely disgraceful" that the average starting salary for teachers is under \$13,000 a year, far less than entry-level pay for most other college-educated professionals. To persuade top college graduates to go into teaching instead of engineering, computer science, or other well-paid professions, schools must offer higher pay, she says.

Despite her opposition to some popular school reform plans, critics will find it difficult to pin the anti-education label on Futrell, whose pedagogical views and methods reflect her strict upbringing in rural Virginia and her background as an effective, hard-working, no-nonsense high school business teacher.

Growing up poor.

Futrell grew up under arduous circumstances in southern Virginia near Lynchburg. She was five years old when her father, a construction worker, died, leaving huge medical bills.

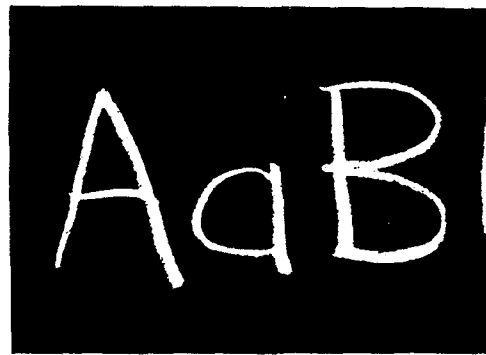
As a child she sometimes rebelled against the strict discipline imposed by her mother, a domestic worker who put in long hours to pay the bills and support two children. "Often times we would go to bed at night before she came home from work, but we had to leave the homework on the table for her to look at and see that it was done," Futrell reminisces. "And if she came home and we had not completed our tasks, because she left things for us to do, we would have to get up and do them."

Her mother was a fanatic about education, she confides. "She worked three jobs and yet she came to school, not just for PTA meetings, but simply to see how we were doing."

This ethos shaped both Futrell's desire to teach and her values as a teacher. "She taught kids respect and confidence, and she wasn't going to let them down, even if it meant going against what they wanted to do," says Shirley Greenwood, who got to know Futrell when they both taught at Alexandria's George Washington High School, where Futrell headed the business education department.

Colleagues remember Futrell as an intensely dedicated teacher, even something of a workaholic. When others went home, she was the teacher who stayed after school to give students extra help. She found time for a wide range of volunteer activities—usually related to education—with the NAACP, Urban League and several interracial human relations programs.

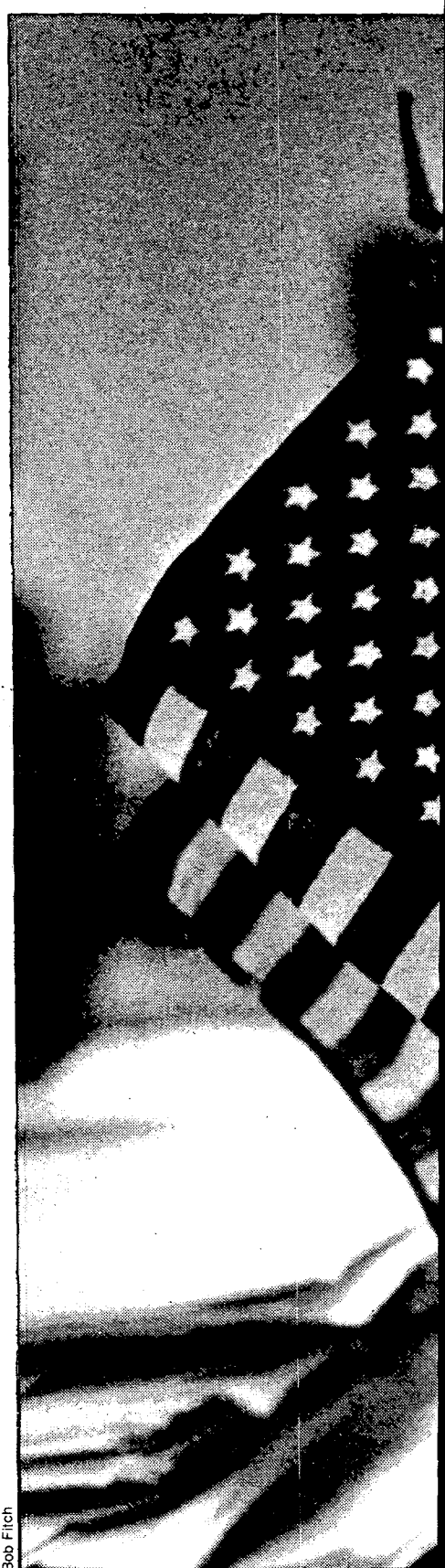
Frank Masters, Education Association of Alexandria (EAA) president in the late '60s and now NEA research director, likes to claim credit for "discovering" Futrell as a teacher leader. Masters, narrowly elected on a "somewhat radical" and pro-



civil rights platform, was looking for allies who could represent black teachers without alienating whites. Futrell's "strong, outspoken, yet very positive" personality impressed him, so he appointed her to an EAA negotiating committee.

She was a wise choice. Futrell's warmth made her popular with teachers, and she quickly emerged as a local teacher leader. Alexandria teachers elected her a delegate to state and national conventions, where she became a key black caucus activist. In 1973, they picked her as president of the EAA. In 1976, following a contested election, she became the VEA's first black president.

"What made me want to become a leader was that as a classroom teacher I began to feel a great deal of frustration in



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not having a voice in what would happen in my classroom, what would happen in my school, what would happen in my profession. I needed to find a way to express those frustrations," Futrell now says. "I was very concerned about the number of black teachers being displaced or dismissed when schools integrated [in other parts of the south], the number of coaches and administrators demoted, the number of minority children either being suspended or expelled from school...and the content of our history books. I was concerned that black and white students be able to get along."

Her reputation as a dedicated educator helped Futrell obtain respect even from adversaries. "I remember Mary more as one of Alexandria's outstanding teachers

than as a leader of the EAA," says Republican city council member Carlyle Ring, then a school board member and sometimes critic of the teachers' organization.

"You'll get a much nicer report from me about Mary, then you'll get from Mary about me," says A. Samuel Cook, a lawyer and management negotiator who fought her across the bargaining table. "She knows you can catch more bees with honey than with vinegar."

Yet Futrell was no pushover for management. "She was a fine young lady, but with a head that wouldn't be changed around if she thought she was right," said former Alexandria school board chairman Henry Brooks.

To black school board members she

was a valued ally. Fred Day, the first black to head the Alexandria school board, remembers her as a "mobilizing factor" for school integration and equal treatment of black students.

"Even though it wasn't necessarily part of her role as president of the EAA, she always spoke out when she felt that kids' rights were being trampled on," adds Shirley Tyler, who served nine years on the board.

Futrell hadn't known it at the time, but 1963, her first year teaching, was the turning point for the NEA. For nearly a decade after the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* school desegregation, NEA leaders—afraid of alienating southern white members—remained virtually silent on civil rights issues.

In 1960 the Pittsburgh editorial had condemned the "misnamed National Education Association" for "maintaining separate Jim Crow chapters of Negro teachers" and "virtually backing the position of the most reactionary southern white elements." AFT officials publicly condemned NEA's "shameful neglect of the principles of democracy."

NEA moved to change only after it felt some pressure from the then more liberal AFT. In 1962, NAACP labor secretary Herbert Hill and other civil rights advocates backed AFT's successful fight against NEA for the right to represent New York City school teachers.

But at its 1963 convention the NEA began to eliminate internal segregation. The process dragged on through the rest of the decade, yet by the early '70s—when national association officials first recognized her leadership potential—the NEA had developed a unique system of formal programs for encouraging minority participation. In merger talks with the black American Teachers Association, NEA agreed to adopt a controversial plan guaranteeing minority group members 20 percent of the seats on all national leadership bodies.

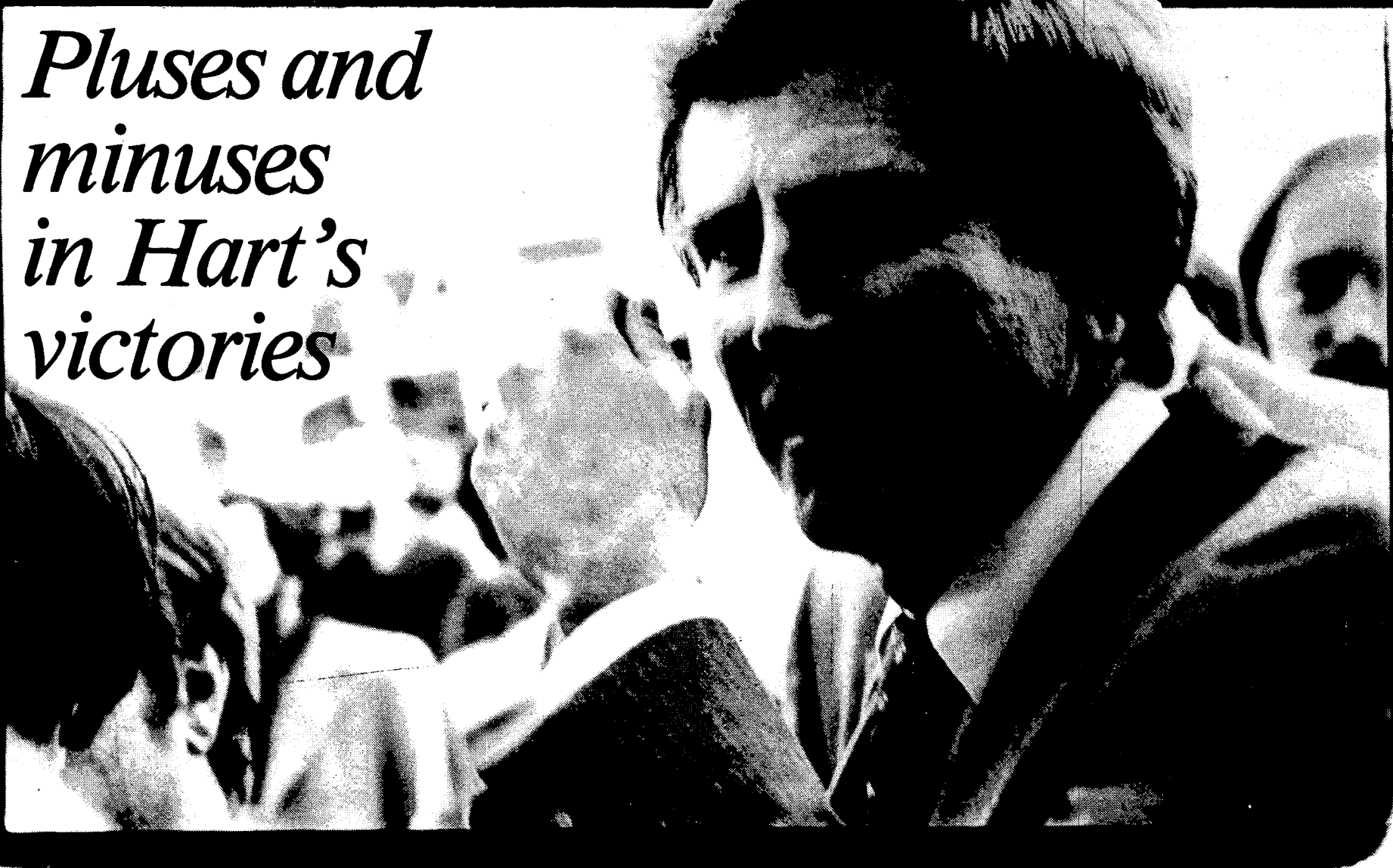
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Holding Reagan Accountable

Teachers' union
committed
schools

EDITORIAL

Pluses and minuses in Hart's victories



Lyonel Delvingne

Gary Hart's lightning surge to the head of the Democratic pack is only the most recent of a long series of events illustrating the dissatisfaction most Americans feel for their leading politicians. For just as Jimmy Carter won the nomination in 1976 by running against Washington and then went on to win in November by running as not-Jerry Ford, and just as Ronald Reagan won in 1980 because he was not Jimmy Carter, so Hart's string of victories is primarily the result of his not being Fritz Mondale.

In retrospect, it should have been no surprise that the Democratic voters would reject Mondale, whose position as front-runner was based in part on his organizational support from labor and various women's organizations, most notably NOW, but mostly on the fact that he was not John Glenn. Every pollster knew that Mondale's commanding lead masked a fundamental weakness—in their words, that his support was soft.

As long as his leading rival seemed to be Glenn, a military man who supports most of Reagan's foreign policy and military buildup, Mondale was able to maintain his lead among Democrats. But when the Iowa caucuses demonstrated Glenn's lack of popular support and the possibility of someone not identified as an insider emerging as an alternative, the floodgates opened and Hart swept on through.

There are pluses and minuses in Hart's victories and in the possibility of his nomination, but these have little to do with differences between Mondale and Hart on the issues or on matters of principle. The two are close together on the spectrum of American politics, and both are about as far to the left as one could expect a successful candidate to be in the present political situation.

The main plus in a Hart nomination is that he would have a better chance to defeat Reagan in November than would Mondale. We believe that Reagan is a lot weaker than most political pundits and various pollsters make out—especially if labor, blacks, Hispanics, women and the elderly can be brought to the polls in large numbers come November. But if Mondale is the candidate, Reagan can do a rerun of his 1980 campaign and survive

on his residuals. He'll have a much harder time running against Hart, who is not yet encumbered with the failure of his policies or his "new" ideas, but who will be able freely to attack Reagan in the name of freshness and youth.

The main minus in Hart's victories so far, and possibly in his candidacy, is that they will be seen as, and in some degrees may be, defeats for labor and for the organized women's movement. Labor's and the women's movement's attempts to secure positions of influence within a new Democratic administration have obviously suffered a setback with the popular repudiation of their man. And labor's popular image has suffered some from the campaign against Mondale as the candidate of "special interests"—as if working people and women, rather than the corporate giants that Reagan so openly serves, were narrow interest groups.

But if Hart wins the nomination he will need the active support of labor and the women's movement, as well as that of

Like Carter and Reagan before him, Hart's success is due to who he is not.

Jesse Jackson and other black leaders, in order to prevail in the general election. And if Hart is elected, labor and women's and black organizations will have a freedom of action they would not have in a Mondale administration. They will be less constrained in criticizing the new president, because he will not be "their man."

As happens every four years, we are witnessing the process by which the Democrats put together their electoral party. This year it could be a bit further to the

left than in recent presidential elections because of the million or two new black voters and because both labor and women's groups are more actively involved. This electoral party is needed to mobilize votes, but it has rarely survived the election by more than a few months. Then the governing party takes over—a party that is strikingly similar in Democratic and Republican administrations, because it is the party of the corporate oligarchy that controls and sets our priorities as a nation.

Neither Mondale nor Hart appears inclined to challenge the traditional governing party, though both would allow for a bit more input from constituents of the electoral party. But for those who want to see a new and truly different set of principles governing our social policies, a victory for either Mondale or Hart is a necessary first step. As long as an administration like Reagan's is in office, the left has no space to develop on its own and still be relevant. ■

Nicaraguan elections are a big step forward

The decision of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua to hold general elections on November 4 is unprecedented in the history of revolutions led by socialists. It is especially gratifying that the Sandinista leadership has taken this step in spite of the war being waged against it by Reagan administration surrogates from Honduras and Costa Rica, a situation that could well have served as a reason for indefinite postponement.

The elections, combined with an extension of the partial amnesty for opponents of the regime, should serve as a way of measuring the degree of popular support enjoyed by the Sandinistas. Everyone, even the Reagan administration, expects that the government will win a large majority when the votes are counted—which is one reason for the administration's refusal to welcome the elections or to commit the United States to acceptance of

their results.

There were no such hesitations among most other democratic governments. The socialist governments of Spain, Sweden and France, as well as the Socialist International all applauded the announcement of the November 4 elections. Representatives of Mexico, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic and Argentina saw potential in the move for a normalization of relations in Central America. Former Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez observed that the United States now "should change its position on the Nicaraguan political process." And in West Germany both the ruling Christian Democratic Party and the opposition Social Democrats said they consider the announcement of the elections "an important demonstration of the Sandinista government's will to maintain a system of pluralist democracy."

Inside Nicaragua, the opposition parties—the Social Christians, Social Democrats, Constitutionalist Liberals and the Democratic Conservatives—are leaning toward abstention. They are holding out for supervision of the elections by the Organization of American States (OAS), which was demanded by Secretary of State George Shultz, and categorically rejected as a denial of Nicaragua's sovereignty by Sandinista leaders. Members and leaders of the opposition who favor participation, like the president of the Constitutionalist Liberals, are being pushed aside, apparently so that the Reagan administration will have a group inside Nicaragua to use as legitimation for its refusal to recognize the elections as a major step in the direction it claims to want Nicaragua to take.

We do not know how fully open and democratic, even with the best of intentions, an election can be under the wartime conditions prevailing in Nicaragua. But we also welcome this indication that the principle of democratic pluralism is finally being recognized by socialists who have come to power through armed insurrection. ■