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The Drumbeat of Revolutionary Power

By Karl Hess

Fire from the Mountain: The Making of a Sandinista, by Omar Cabezas
New York: Crown, 233 pages, \$13.99

Campeño: The Diary of a Guatemalan Indian, translated and edited by James D. Sexton, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 448 pages, \$22.50

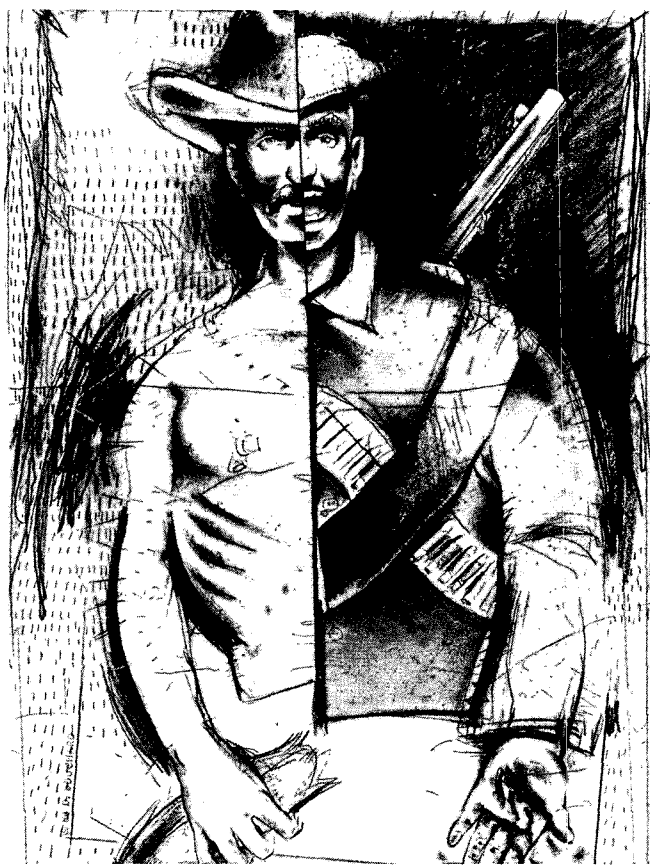
It is very appealing to read a book about revolutionary experiences that do not include the consolidation of power. *Fire from the Mountain* is one such book.

It is appealing because many of us love the underdogs of this world, perhaps considering ourselves perpetual bow-wows of the breed. And, in fact, if the author and his cause went no farther than this book—a good, grungy look at the muddy, mosquito-bitten, day-to-day chores of evading a national army while preparing to overthrow the government that has dispatched it to kill the author and his con-

freres—you might rest the tome comfortably on your shelves as a powerful reminder that shooting wars and shooting revolutions are just one hell of a lot more abrasive than the John Wayne movies make out.

Alas, the folks who are the subject of the book, and the author himself, Omar Cabezas, went on to wield power as the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. And there are in the book a few hints of just how they might do it.

For example, the author describes one of the first truly successful attacks by a guerrilla unit on a national guard base. "They'd never been attacked in the



RICHARD BOUCHARD

mountains; now all of a sudden the bullets were flying. It was chaos inside; they were killing each other in the confusion, and the compas [guerrillas] beat an orderly retreat, victorious. They executed several local judges. It was a fantastic moment for the guerrillas, which was clouded only by the death [of one of the guerrillas]."

It is an unfortunate but apparently inevitable result of power gained through violence that murders are regarded as executions, thus lethally stating a belief in the righteousness of the cause as superior to life itself. Such revolutions, and certainly the Sandinista one is no ex-

ception, are social-reform movements gone bloody, establishing new organs of suppression as surely as they demolish old ones.

Even in the American Revolution, as soon as a proper constitution made the guerrilla leaders, such as George Washington and even Thomas Jefferson, believe that their once-heroic work on the battlefield had now become heroic government, the steady drumbeat of power could be heard by all alert citizens as they were asked to pay taxes for the reduction of their status from citizens to mere voters. Today, as the Sandinista government treats its opposition very much in the way that the ousted government once treated the Sandinistas, you find grim reminders of the bayonet basis of all such power in Nicaraguan school textbooks that use hand grenades as symbols in practicing addition and multiplication.

Are all revolutions by violence doomed sooner or later to this sort of fate? A better question is whether all governments founded upon the absolute monopoly of violence in their given geographical areas are suppressive of freedom, even though at different levels or rates. My own and very personal observational prejudice is to say, "Yes, they are."

The second book under review here provides some evidence for an alternative. Just as the first book is (I must admit) a stunning report of the transformation of a soft-bodied, rather soft-minded campus show-off into a reasonably tough young man who got into the killing-for-cause business in a serious way, the second book is to me an altogether lovely and compelling story of a simple man, already tough in his stubborn dedication to personal honor, who, as a peasant farmer and leading light in a small farming cooperative, faced the temptations and the abuses of bureaucratic power with a marvelously calm sense of self-esteem; an unconquerable man who just wants to be left alone so that he and his neighbors can get on with their lives without having the entire weight of so-called society descend upon them like an avalanche every time some new gang takes power and becomes, in effect, "society."

This fine book is a diary kept by the

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peasant, or *campesino*, at the behest of the editor, who does a useful job of annotating it so that events are put into understandable perspective. The book makes it possible to realize that, if the object of revolution ever should become the destruction rather than the reconstruction of power over people, folks like the Guatemalan Indian Ignacio and even thee and me could do rather well at making a free and livable world where we live and as we live.

In his foreword to the book (which is one of those rare books for review that I firmly intend to keep forever), James D. Sexton, the editor, suggests, as do many geopoliticians, that Guatemala might be the key to the future of Latin America and, indeed, to our own future should we become involved in an Afghanistan-style engagement there. (Isn't it, by the way, far more illuminating to refer to such involvements as an Afghanistan-style one rather than as "another Vietnam"?) Sexton adds to his somber description of the Guatemalan battlefield the poignant observation that there is "an urgent need to know more about what life is really like for the peasants who make up the majority of these people. Despite some ethnographies on Vietnam, we knew very little about the peasants from their own perspective. And to my knowledge, not a single autobiographical account emerged from a peasant despite the fact that this class bore the brunt of the destruction inflicted from both sides."

There is not in Sexton's editing or Ignacio's diary-keeping much of that smarmy-marmy crap about peasant uprisings with which the publicists of revolutionary coups often try to justify their rise to power, perhaps for the shuddering adulation of armchair guerrillas who love violence as a spectator sport but could be expected to faint at the sight of real blood, particularly their own. Ignacio's diary is not a denial of the possibility of actual peasant uprisings. Rather, it is a quiet affirmation of them but an affirmation that they are most productive of peasant freedom when, as with Zapata in Mexico, they are uprisings to obtain freedom and not to obtain power. That such freedom-seeking revolutions are usually wiped out by the power seekers is a challenge to future imaginations rather than an absolute denial of efficacy.

But it also is a challenge to rethink the way in which long changes occur in the world. I am disposed, personally, to believe that these long changes come about through the perfection and use of new tools, material and intellectual,

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rather than by violent upheavals in government organization charts. Thus, the world truly was revolutionized by Boolean algebra even though the event that got the headlines at the time had to do with the work of Karl Marx. Also, those who believe that the assassination of Abraham Lincoln was a pivot of history should pause and consider that, in the same year, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was founded. On which event does the long change of the world, as we now see it, more truly turn?

Don't get me wrong and assume that I'm envisioning Ignacio as some sort of John Galt in peasant garb. Unlike the individualist protagonist of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, Ignacio is not a hero of the epic sort. Nor is he an ideologue of any sort. He is, however, hard-working, skeptical of authority, an obviously good friend-in-need in his neighborhood; in short, a survivor whose flag is that of his own self-respect. He may not be Atlas bestriding the world, but he is an image that will long bestride my imagination. A man of simple but real quality.

Although Ignacio is not a free-enterpriser, having always lived under government planners, he is a sort of closet free-marketer. One of his most productive sessions with the bureaucrats was upon discovering that he and his fellow cooperative members could get a better price for their coffee than a nearby buyer was offering. When they used their new profits to buy land, they seemed to come closer than most revolutionary governments to realizing the uncounted benefits of private land ownership.

Ignacio displays many commonsense flashes of wisdom. He understands that there is a difference between people and political parties, for instance, never succumbing to the fashionable university notion that people can always be treated in lumps as parts of factions, never requiring or deserving consideration as individuals.

Incidentally, in *Fire from the Mountain*, the author makes it perfectly clear that individualists are anathema to the revolutionary party to which he belongs and whose orders (handed down as though from some distant god) he follows without deviation. When "They" speak, he jumps. It is also interesting that he hardly ever was able to ascertain just who "They" were, although he was daily risking his life for "Them." Unlike the sensible Ignacio, he chose to believe that he was serving society rather than the

leading elite.

At one point, Ignacio comes up with this inscription-worthy comment: "Long live the people, now that the hombres who esteem the people are in power." As Ignacio, of course, is constantly discovering, it is the power that always is esteemed, and if people are going to "long live," they are simply, in the long run, going to have to do the work, do the job of preserving themselves and their

freedoms where they live and by themselves.

With so many patient people such as Ignacio on the face of this planet, it is possible to dream that it is possible. Perhaps if John Galt could live a while with Ignacio...

Karl Hess, a formal political speechwriter, now works in wood, welds, and writes in West Virginia.

Is Illiteracy an Establishment Conspiracy?

By David Brudnoy

Illiterate America, by Jonathan Kozol
New York: Doubleday, 270 pages, \$25.95

Illiteracy is "in," like AIDS and word processors. Not necessarily understood, but fashionably discussed, journalistically overkilled, and much used for political purposes. Secretary of Education William Bennett is miffed that his report on reading, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, drew little attention when it appeared earlier this year. In *USA Today* Bennett opined, "If we did for everybody what we do for some in the teaching of reading, we could go a long way toward getting rid of this problem of illiteracy."

That national newspaper's own research, reported in a sidebar to the Bennett interview, indicated that 26 million people in the United States can't read and 46 million people cannot read proficiently. That same research showed other startling figures: the pool of adult illiterates is growing by about 2.3 million persons each year; of the 158 members of the United Nations, the United States ranks 49th in literacy; most classified as illiterates have actually completed high school; and in the past five years, book reading in the under-21 age group has declined from 75 percent to 62 percent. Only 44 percent of those who *can* read *do* read books.

Just how *USA Today* came up with those precise figures is an interesting question. How anybody comes up with exact percentages in an area as murky as this defies easy answer. And the casualness of the assertions is not confined to mass-audience newspapers, as evidenced in a jacket squib to Jonathan Kozol's new book, *Illiterate America*. Kozol, the previous author of *Death at an Early Age* and other studies of the woeful state of American learning and life, tells us on the front cover of his book that

"one out of every three adult Americans *cannot* read this book."

Evidently, though, two out of every three adult Americans *have* read the book, or at least bought it, since it is drawing tremendous attention. Even booksellers have come into the Kozol circle. At the annual convention of the American Booksellers Association in San Francisco in May 1985, Jonathan Kozol was the star attraction, preaching the word and throwing around his own grab bag of statistics: \$120 billion a year is lost in productivity in the United States owing to illiteracy; the expenditure of a mere \$10 billion a year to combat adult illiteracy would dramatically cut into the problem; and on into the long fuzzy night of the numbers game.

Illiterate America is solid in some of its documentation, passionate in its hand-wringing, intriguing in its anecdotal evidence, and questionable in its prescriptions. Mr. Kozol, whom I have known for many years, is a man of impeccable integrity. When he recounts an incident, I take it as true.

These incidents, moreover, are not unique to Jon Kozol. Like the author, I occasionally have found when taking a youngster to a restaurant that his eyes only apparently scanned the written word, leading invariably to an order of something familiar, whether or not the item was in fact on the menu. Why? Because the kid can't read well enough to choose from the words before him. We have all heard of the occasional high school graduate whose parents sue the school board when at last they realize that their child has been graduated from school but cannot read the diploma. These are fascinating stories. But what