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Group Accuses Channel 1

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN

In the last three years, as the conflict between the Sandinist Government of Nicaragua and American-backed guerrillas has heated up, WNET-TV, Channel 13, in New York, has broadcast three documentaries on that Central American country. Now, a decision not to offer a fourth documentary film has led to charges that the public-television station is presenting a one-sided, pro-Sandinist point of view.

The accusations are being made by

the American Catholic Committee, an anti-Communist organization of lay Catholics headed by James McFadden, who is a former New York City Labor Commissioner. The committee, which claims to have about 250 people associated with it in the New York area and a network of contacts elsewhere in the country, was founded in January 1982.

The committee has sponsored a half-hour documentary on Nicaragua, which has been governed by the Sandinist regime since the 1979 revolution. The film, produced by Mr. McFadden, presents material dealing with purported Government repression in Nicaragua against the press, the Roman Catholic church and independent labor unions. The committee did not visit Nicaragua or film in the country itself. Its documentary, entitled "Nicaragua: A Model for Latin America?" includes interviews with Nicaraguan exiles in New York and film footage from Nicaragua acquired from film libraries.

Questions Raised

Mr. McFadden says that his film's critical view of the Sandinists distinguishes it from the other documentaries that Channel 13 has broadcast, all of which, Mr. MacFadden charges, have been pro-Sandinist and against the Reagan Administration's policies there.

The dispute between Mr. McFadden and Channel 13 raises questions about the degree to which public television can give equal treatment in its documentary programs to differing points of view, particularly on issues as controversial as American policy toward the Nicaraguan revolution.

Officials of both Channel 13 and the Public Broadcasting Service, which distributes many programs around the country, point out that most documentaries that reach the air are produced, not by the stations themselves, but by independent film makers. Public television buys those it deems suitable for putting on the air, but the choice available to it, the public-television officials say, does not always allow different points of view to be shown on the air.

When Channel 13 decided not to broadcast the committee's documentary, Mr. McFadden wrote a letter, dated June 9, to Channel 13's president, Jay Iselin, in which he said, "We are now convinced that Channel 13 has a conscious policy of slanting opinion in support of the Sandinistas and denying fair coverage to opposing points of view."

16 Nightly Programs on Issue

Mr. Iselin and others at Channel 13 deny Mr. McFadden's charges of one-sidedness. They argue that the station has used the best materials it had available to it at any given time in its coverage of Nicaragua, and that the documentaries it has presented should be seen as only one element in the station's coverage of the situation there.

13 of Pro-Sandinist Bias

Since 1978, members of Channel 13 say, the station's regular nightly news interview program "The MacNeil-Lehrer Report," has devoted 16 programs to the Nicaragua issue. "It's a matter of how we've covered the story overall," Mr. Iselin said.

The decision against broadcasting the American Catholic Committee's film, Mr. Iselin said, was not made on political grounds: "It was judged to be interesting in terms of its insights, but it was dated and not necessarily the most pertinent way to get across information. We thought we had a better way to handle this information."

Jerome Toobin, Channel 13's director of news and public affairs, said of Mr. McFadden's documentary, "I found that program very poorly produced." Responding to Mr. Iselin's contention that the film was dated, Mr. McFadden said the Sandinists' closing of newspapers and their suppression of the Catholic church's hierarchy were continuing actions that had not been shown in other documentaries.

PBS Aide Comments

Mr. Iselin, referring to the station's decision to broadcast its earlier documentaries on Nicaragua, said, "We wanted to start to surface a situation and we used the best material that we had available at the time."

An official at PBS headquarters in Washington, Barry Chase, said that public television played a "passive role" on documentaries. "We tend not to have the structures — not to mention the money — to go out and do our own pieces or even to make sure they're done the way we would want them to be done."

Mr. Chase, who is PBS's director of current-affairs programming, added that it had been difficult to find good

documentaries on Central America supportive of the Reagan Administration's policies: "People who decide to go and spend typically two years, using their own money, shooting film, and sometimes risking their lives tend not to be supportive of the status quo."

All three of the Nicaragua documentaries presented on Channel 13 were distributed by PBS. The first, shown in 1981, was "Nicaragua: These Same Hands," a one-hour film produced by the independent World Focus Films of Berkeley, Calif. PBS said it showed the "reconstruction" that followed the Sandinists' seizure of power and "examines the new Nicaraguan society from a cultural perspective."

3d Film Shown June 5

The second documentary, "From the Ashes — Nicaragua Today," was broadcast in 1982. Made by the Women's Film Project, an independent film producer, with financial help from the National Endowment for the Humanities, it focused on a working-class family in Nicaragua that expressed enthusiastic support for the Sandinist revolution. Following the showing of the film, Channel 13 offered a half-hour program called "Nicaragua Update," which included criticism of the film by a journalist, Georgie Anne Geyer of the Universal Press Syndicate, and footage of anti-Sandinist testimony by Reagan Administration officials.

The third film was "Target Nicaragua" presented June 5. It was produced by the Institute for Policy Studies of Washington, a public-policy organization, and showed Nicaraguan peasants describing atrocities committed by what the film contends were American-sponsored anti-Sandinist forces operating from sanctuaries in Honduras.