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Showdown : the political clashes over United States policy in Nicaragua, 1981-1985

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SHOWDOWN: THE POLITICAL
CLASHES OVER UNITED STATES
POLICY IN NICARAGUA, 1981-1985

A Thesis Presented
to The Faculty of the
Department of History
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Arts

by
Brian Dean Benassai
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ABSTRACT

SHOWDOWN: THE POLITICAL CLASHES OVER
UNITED STATES POLICY IN NICARAGUA, 1981-1985

by Brian D. Benassai

This thesis studies the political tug-of-war between the Reagan Administration and the Congress over United States foreign policy in Nicaragua. Members of the Reagan Administration believed that the 1979 Sandinista Revolution posed a threat to the stability and the security of the Central American region and the United States. Democrats in Congress feared that the Administration would intervene militarily in the region and sought to limit Reagan's freedom of action.

The Administration's assessment proved correct as the Sandinistas sought to export their ideology. These findings were confirmed by a bipartisan presidential report. Congressional Democrats opposed Reagan on political grounds as they attempted to take control of foreign policy away from the President. In the end, Reagan emerged triumphant as Democrats eventually sided with the President.

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Introduction

The foreign policy of the Reagan Administration towards Nicaragua was one of the last great campaigns of the Cold War. Reagan sought to check the advance of Marxism in Central America by limiting the influence and potential of the Sandinista government. Political opponents sharply criticized and disagreed with the President's policy. In the end, the President emerged triumphant.

Reagan's effort in Nicaragua and Central America as a whole deserves attention for it is a microcosm of his Administration's international crusade against Communism. As one of the last of the great Cold Warriors, Reagan campaigned vigorously on a platform which included the neutralizing of Communism abroad. With a Communist threat mounting on America's southern border, Reagan had to take action in order to combat the potential menace of Communism.

In addition, Reagan believed he could not let domestic political opposition hamper his international efforts to enact what he believed was a just crusade, for that, too, would plant seeds of doubt in the minds and hearts of potential anti-Communist allies. Reagan's efforts show a President determined to keep his promise to the American people and not to compromise principles in the interest of "getting along" with the opposing political party.

Ronald Reagan's foreign policy towards Central America, and specifically towards Nicaragua, during the 1980s has come under intense scrutiny. There has been much discussion of the policy makers and the actions and counter-actions of the Administration and the Congress in the implementation of foreign policy.

In his book, *U.S. Policy in Central America: The Endless Debate*, Dario Moreno claims that consensus between the Executive and Legislative branches is needed for a sound and subtle foreign policy, and that "many recent studies have assessed the

breakdown of the containment of consensus."¹ If consensus is lacking, the policy is deemed a failure. It was this lack of Presidential-Congressional consensus, in Moreno's opinion, that inevitably gutted the Administration's foreign policy in Nicaragua and Central America.

Moreno contrasts President Jimmy Carter's approach to Central America with that of Ronald Reagan. Carter sought to control revolutionary governments and forces in Central America through a policy of human rights and economic control, thus reducing their dependence on the Soviet bloc or preventing the governments from becoming anti-American. Reagan, according to Moreno, saw the revolutions as Soviet inspired and thus a threat to the security of the United States. Therefore, the United States had to resist any possible Leftist takeovers in Central America with a more direct policy as any Leftist victory would compromise American national interests in the region and the hopes for democracy in Central America. Reagan took an activist role not only to accomplish his anti-Communist objectives in Latin America, but, at the same time, to make his actions a litmus test for his anti-Communist crusade abroad.

Moreno concludes that Reagan's policy was flawed because it was based on ideological differences. Reagan failed because he attempted to deal with the Leftist insurrections on ideological grounds. Moreno believes that if Reagan had focused on issues indigenous to the individual nations of Central America, Reagan could have been more successful in Central America.

The book published in 1987 which focused on the events in Central America and the Reagan Administration's response to those events, *At War in Nicaragua: The Reagan Doctrine and the Politics of Nostalgia* by E. Bradford Burns, takes a damning look at the

¹Dario Moreno, *U.S. Policy in Central America: The Endless Debate* (Miami, FL: Florida International University Press, 1990), 4.

Administration's policy towards Nicaragua, severely criticizing Reagan's policy of intervention and covert aid in Nicaragua. Down-playing the Nicaraguan military buildup and aid to Leftist rebels in the region, Burns makes a case that the Sandinista plan of reconstruction could have prospered had Reagan not intervened through covert action. He makes a case for developing the region economically and ends his work by supporting the idea of peace through negotiations.

Banana Diplomacy: The Making of American Policy in Nicaragua, published in 1988, criticizes Reagan's policy towards Nicaragua between 1981-1987. The author, Roy Gutman, a national security correspondent for *New York Newsday*, tends to focus more on the personalities involved than on the policy itself.

Gutman's book casts the players in the Nicaraguan policy, such as Robert McFarlane and Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, as members of a shadow government operating outside the President's control and thus contributing to the downfall of Reagan's Central American policy. Gutman implies that the Contras were an obsession for the President but that they were an unnecessary element of policy, as the objectives sought by the Administration could have been achieved through international diplomatic means. Gutman infers that the Administration, with its shadow warriors and its fixation on paramilitary forces, turned into a Banana Republic itself and overlooked possible potentials for peaceful solutions.

In 1989, Cynthia J. Arnson, a former Congressional staffer to Democratic Representative George Miller of California, wrote *Crossroads: Congress, the Reagan Administration, and Central America*. Arnson chronicled the legislative battles between a Congress bent on controlling foreign policy and an Administration with its own objective in Central America. Arnson, like Moreno, cites a lack of consensus between the Administration and the Congress as the reason for failure of foreign policy in Central America. She portrays the debate between Congress and the Administration as an

ideological dispute between an Administration seeking to limit Communist influence in the Central American region and a Congress fearing the creation of a new Vietnam. Arnson calls for a Congressional role in the implementation of foreign policy and criticizes the Reagan Administration for operating "without regard for a domestic consensus over the ends and means of policy and without exercising the restraint that should have been warranted by the absence of consensus."²

Some of the aforementioned works emphasize the failure of the Reagan Administration and the Congress to find common ground on the implementation of a proper policy towards Nicaragua and Central America. Others assert that the Reagan's strong, interventionist policy inevitably resulted in failure. Studies that criticize the Reagan Administration also indict Reagan for perceived failure, as Commander-in-Chief, to control his subordinates. They also charge that Reagan lacked a clear, definable, objective foreign policy for Central America.

The fault of most of the studies of Reagan's foreign policy with regard to Nicaragua and the Contras is that they tend to take a contemporary political view in their analyses rather than a historical perspective. Since they were written one or two years after the end of the Reagan presidency, these works necessarily contain a contemporary political analysis of the events. It is time to take a historical look at the events surrounding Reagan's foreign policy in Central America and Nicaragua.

Scholars fault either the Reagan Administration alone or the Congress and the Reagan Administration in tandem for the failure of foreign policy in Nicaragua. They criticize the Congress because it lacked a definable foreign policy of its own and because it was unable to stand up to a popular President. President Reagan is criticized by

²Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the Reagan Administration, and Central America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 206.

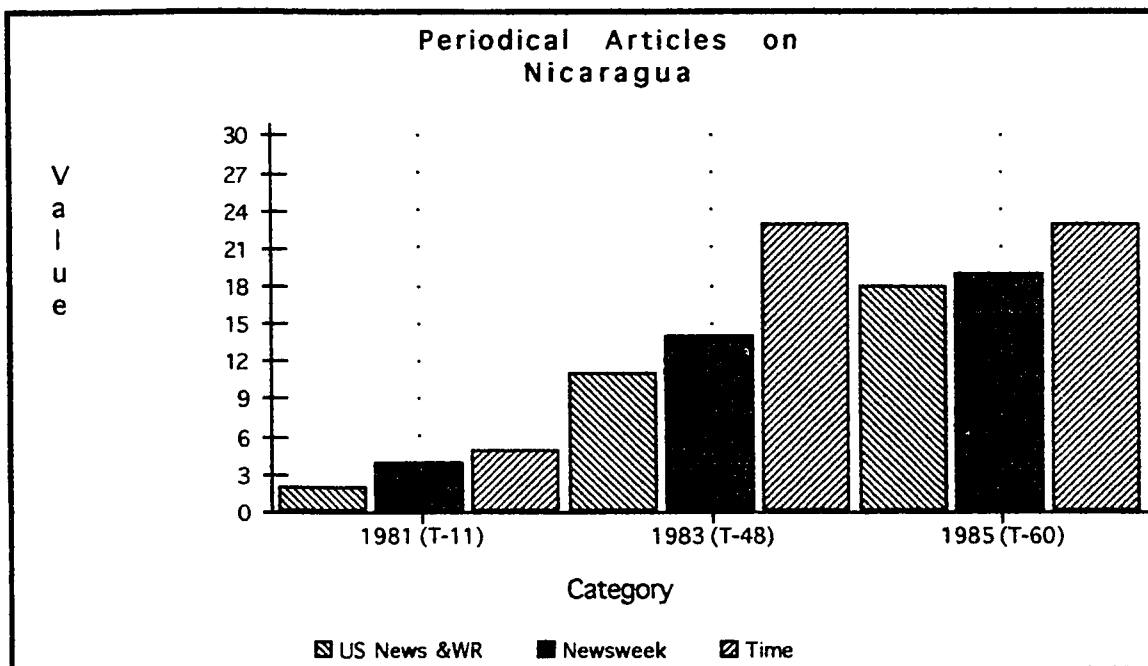
academics because he did not vigorously adopt diplomacy to implement his policy. However, scholars overlook the fact that President Reagan did include negotiations in his policy towards the Sandinistas but did so through a policy of "peace through strength." Reagan sought to use the Contra force to bring the Sandinistas to the negotiating table. In retrospect, the policy of the Reagan Administration was politically sound, but was stymied by the efforts of a Congress with its own agenda.

The policies of Reagan toward Nicaragua were in response to the Sandinista military buildup, which was aided by the Soviet Union and Cuba, as well as the threat from Marxist revolutionaries in the Central American region. Reagan wanted to neutralize the Communist influence of Nicaragua on other Central American nations to promote stability in the region. The policy sought to provide security to the Central American region and to the United States, while eventually insuring democracy in the region. Yet, Reagan had another goal in Central America--providing credibility to American allies about Reagan's international anti-Communism crusade.

Reagan was stymied for a time by a Democratically-controlled House of Representatives, which sought a more moderate, nonaggressive peace plan with the Sandinista government. Despite the limitations placed on him by the House, Reagan, through Cold War rhetoric and unwavering action, remained determined to implement plans for an offensive against international Communism. Reagan was able to enact a successful foreign policy against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua and prevent a potential Communist takeover of the Central American region.

Public knowledge of Nicaragua developed slowly at first but exploded when the Administration suddenly made Nicaragua a hot spot. The graph below illustrates the number of articles that deal with Nicaragua in *US News and World Report*, *Newsweek* and *Time* in three separate years. The number of articles demonstrates the increasing

interest in Nicaragua over the course of the Reagan Administration's policy in Nicaragua.³



For example, in 1981, before Nicaragua became a major focus of the Reagan Administration, *Time Magazine* had only five articles on Nicaragua, *Newsweek* had four and *US News and World Report*, two. In 1983, as the United States took a more active role in Central America, the number of articles dramatically increased with *US News*, *Newsweek* and *Time* publishing eleven, fourteen and twenty-three articles on Nicaragua, respectively. In 1985, with the debate over American involvement in Nicaragua and Central America in full swing, *US News*, *Newsweek* and *Time* published eighteen, nineteen and twenty-three articles, respectively.

³Subjects of the articles compiled for the graph were U.S. military aid to Nicaragua, military activities in Nicaragua, foreign military aid to Nicaragua, politics and government of Nicaragua, Nicaraguan military assistance, and the Contras.

Following the overthrow of the Anastasio Somoza Debayle regime in 1979, the Carter Administration hoped to keep the new Sandinista government from expanding its revolution across the borders of Nicaragua and sought to force the new government to maintain its promise to hold free elections. When Carter's policies failed to produce the desired results, he was severely chastised by his critics and especially by his successor, Ronald Reagan.

Reagan assumed the Presidency after promising in his electoral campaign to neutralize the spread of Communism around the globe and to restore American international strength as the leader of the free world. Central America soon became a pivotal focal point. With numerous Marxist or Communist-inspired revolutions developing throughout the region, Reagan took a firm stand to stamp out Communism in the United States' backyard.⁴ If he failed, as his predecessor had, to limit the spread of Communism, how could American allies around the globe endorse the anti-Communist crusade being waged by the United States? Furthermore, how could Reagan restore America to its former greatness if he failed so close to the borders of the United States? Central America would be the proving ground for the Administration's campaign.

To protect its southern border from the threat of Communism, the Reagan Administration was following traditions by other American Presidents to intervene--either directly or indirectly--in the affairs of Central America in order to counter threats of instability. Throughout its history, the United States has regarded Central America as its virtual backyard and has long taken a keen interest in the happenings to its south, for the turmoil faced by its Central American neighbors has posed a potential

⁴E. Bradford Burns, *At War in Nicaragua: The Reagan Doctrine and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987), 22; Christopher Dickey, *With the Contras: A Reporter in the Wilds of Nicaragua* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 69-70; Jane Mayer, and Doyle McManus, *Landslide: The Unmaking of a President, 1984-1988* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988), 3-17.

threat to the security of the United States. The United States has, too, taken notice when that turmoil has a European influence, as influence by European nations in the affairs of the West have posed a great threat to American security and freedom.⁵

⁵The United States has intervened--either militarily or economically-- in the following countries in the Western Hemisphere between 1850-1970:

1. Mexico
2. Honduras
3. Nicaragua
4. Cuba
5. Panama
6. Haiti
7. The Dominican Republic
8. Guatemala
9. Venezuela

1972-1980

In July of 1979, the Somoza family's domination of Nicaragua ended when the Sandinista revolutionaries finally succeeded in toppling a dynasty that had lasted over four decades. The revolution in Nicaragua would soon present a problem for not one, but two American presidents, for their foreign policies would have far-reaching effects both in the United States and abroad and these policies would reflect the opposite ends on the political spectrum. The revolution in Nicaragua would spell doom for the foreign policy of one president while becoming the focus of another Commander-in-Chief. It would also create an ideological division between political parties in the United States. How should this turmoil to the American south be acknowledged and how should America respond?

Before the overthrow of the government by Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the Somoza family held power in Nicaragua from 1936 until 1979. Support for the Somozas came through the United States, and the family's position in the government was protected by the Nicaraguan National Guard, or *Guardia Nacional* (GN). Nicaragua under the Somozas often supported United States-backed plans for the Central American region, such as the Alliance for Progress in 1961, and the country was a staging ground for the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961. The Somozas offered to send Nicaraguan troops to fight alongside American troops in both Korea and Vietnam.¹

Yet, the Nicaraguan economy suffered under the Somozas. The Somozas and many of their aides syphoned funds meant for the Nicaraguan economy for their own personal use. Many peasants were displaced when the local rich bought land *en masse* for cotton cultivation. Income began to become concentrated in the hands of a few Nicaraguans who made deals with foreign investors and centralized their wealth in local banks. The

¹John A. Booth, and Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), 30-31.

average Nicaraguan citizen had no means of support because of low wages, high consumer prices and inflation. When a 1972 earthquake in the capital city of Managua devastated many small businesses and commercial jobs, many Nicaraguans found themselves unemployed; those still employed were subjected to a stiff tax to pay for the reconstruction. Businessmen, including a number of Americans, had their businesses looted by GN troops during the earthquake's aftermath. Companies engaged in reconstruction found themselves squeezed out by the government, either by competition from state companies or GN harassment.² Since the population faced decreasing purchasing power and a depressed standard of living, class conflicts soon arose, giving birth to a new revolutionary movement.

Popular opposition to the Somozas came in the formation of unions and student organizations. The main opposition newspaper *La Prensa* ("The Press") under Pedro Chamorro was temporarily shut down by the government when the paper did an exposé of the government's misappropriation of earthquake relief funds and looting by GN troops. Many of these popular unions and organizations formed during the early 1970s as opposition parties to the Somoza regime and they sought to contest it in the upcoming 1974 election. One such organization, the National Sandinista Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*, or FSLN), founded in Nicaragua and developed in Havana in the early 1960s, gained prominence during this period.³ The FSLN took its name, the Sandinistas, from the former Nicaraguan revolutionary Augusto Sandino, and the organization carried out several sporadic terrorist campaigns after the mid-1960s

²Booth, 31, 55-56; Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1983), 226.

³Booth, 57-58; LaFeber, 164-65, 227.

while simultaneously gaining political strength and support in rural areas amongst the peasant population.⁴

Response by the Somoza regime between 1974 and 1977 was brutal. Somoza declared opposition parties illegal and bribed voters to rig the 1974 election, which he won by a twenty-to-one margin. After a brief hostage crisis in December 1974, when a unit of FSLN terrorists seized a group of Nicaraguan and foreign officials at a dinner party, the GN launched "search and destroy" missions in areas of suspected Sandinista sympathy. Initially, the GN achieved its objectives by killing many leaders of the FSLN, forcing a temporary schism in the organization. However, the GN inflicted atrocities on the innocent, many of whom were Catholic ministers or peasants.⁵

When Jimmy Carter assumed the Presidency in 1977, his foreign policy emphasized "human rights." The Carter Administration defined human rights as the abolition of torture and government atrocities and the securing of personal freedoms throughout Central America and Nicaragua. This policy had its roots in a report submitted by Robert Pastor, a member of the National Security Council (NSC).⁶ In addition to calling for improved relations with Cuba and a non-interference role toward Central American nations, the report also stressed human rights for the citizens of Central American nations. According to the report, the United States "must not continue

⁴LaFeber, 165.

⁵Booth, 58; LaFeber, 227-28.

⁶The report was co-authored by Robert Pastor, a member of the NSC and the Transnational Institute of the Institute for Policy Studies. This report served as an outline for Carter's later foreign policy. James R. Whelan, and Franklin A. Jaeckle, *The Soviet Assault on America's Southern Flank* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, Inc., 1988), 106.

to provide preferential aid treatment for countries that systematically violate the human rights of their citizens."⁷

Human rights would dominate the Carter Administration's foreign policy in Central America. The Administration saw Somoza's actions against the people as the source of Nicaraguan instability. Unlike Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, Carter believed that taking a stronger stance on the advocacy of human rights could quell internal chaos in Nicaragua.⁸

To enforce that policy of human rights, Democrats in the Congress and the Administration used purse strings to keep the Somoza regime in line. Led by Edward Koch in the House of Representatives and Edward Kennedy in the Senate, the Congress sought to cut off all military and economic aid to Somoza because of his human rights violations. The Administration compromised with the Congress by suspending economic aid in late 1977, but provided two and a half million dollars in arms for the regime. Somoza capitulated to the will of the Administration by granting amnesty to political prisoners and allowing an investigation of human rights violations in Nicaragua by the Organization of American States (OAS).⁹

Somoza's new stance did not ease the tensions. The plan backfired when, following the assassination of Pedro Chamorro on January 10, 1978, a series of uprisings and strikes against the government occurred and spontaneous attacks against GN posts by the populace drove troops from several communities. In August of 1978, an FSLN unit led by Edan Pastora captured the National Legislative Palace and took most of the lawmakers

⁷LaFeber, 229; Whelan, 77-78.

⁸Robert A. Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 50-51.

⁹LaFeber, 229-31.

hostage. The terrorist group negotiated a ransom, freedom for sixty Sandinista prisoners and passage from Nicaragua. The group's actions were supported by the public and, following the incident, the FSLN army increased its ranks to seven thousand.¹⁰

Somoza unleashed the GN in September of 1978 to pacify rebellious townships. Most of the casualties inflicted in the recapture of the rebel towns were against the civilian population and extensive damage to personal property and public services occurred. It was also around this time that the human rights investigation team from the OAS arrived in Nicaragua and recorded numerous atrocities by the GN forces against civilians.¹¹

The Carter Administration responded to the Somoza crackdown by suspending military and economic aid in 1979, reducing United States diplomatic personnel and publicly announcing opposition to the Somoza regime.¹² Faced with the loss of American support and money, the Somoza government stood alone.

While the Somoza government stood on its last legs, the Sandinistas geared up for the final offensive to take the nation. In February of 1979, the several splintered factions of the FSLN met in neighboring Costa Rica and merged into a single, coherent entity, with their primary goal the removal of Somoza and the GN. This meeting, too, formed what would later become the provisional government, the Government for National Reconstruction, or, using the Spanish acronym, the GRN.¹³

Having formed a political and administrative foundation for post-Somoza Nicaragua, the Sandinistas moved in late May from their Costa Rican bases in a final offensive

¹⁰Booth, 58-60; LaFeber, 231.

¹¹Booth, 59; LaFeber, 231-32.

¹²Booth, 60; LaFeber, 233; Whelan, 106.

¹³LaFeber, 232.

military campaign to take Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan National Guard of Somoza failed to halt the Sandinista advance and, after suffering numerous defeats, retaliated by attacking residential slums. Eventually, the GN was driven back to the capital at Managua.¹⁴

In an attempt to salvage American foreign policy, the Carter Administration petitioned the OAS to send an international peace keeping force to prevent a total collapse in Nicaragua. Carter's efforts to portray the FSLN as Cuban-sponsored proved futile and the OAS rejected the Americans' idea of intervention. The televised execution of ABC newsman Bill Stewart demonstrated the brutality of the Nicaraguan National Guard, turning public opinion against the GN and, subsequently, against Somoza.¹⁵ Faced with defeat, Somoza fled Nicaragua in July of 1979 for Miami and the GN capitulated soon afterwards. The Sandinistas proceeded to solidify their hold on the country.¹⁶

The GRN had a ruling junta with five members including of a businessman, a lawyer, a professor and the widow of Pedro Chamorro, Violeta Chamorro. The last member of the GRN junta was Daniel Ortega, a guerilla leader from an FSLN faction who had spent time in exile in Cuba. The junta carried out the executive functions of the provisional government.¹⁷

The Sandinista Front Directorate of the GRN controlled the military and the daily functions of the government. Members of the Directorate were mostly Sandinista military commanders, several of whom had spent time in Cuba. One member of the Directorate was Daniel Ortega. The Directorate supported State involvement in social

¹⁴Booth, 60; LaFeber, 233.

¹⁵LaFeber, 233-35.

¹⁶Booth, 60-61.

¹⁷Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *FY 1981 Foreign Assistance Legislation*, 96th Cong., 2d Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 12, 13, 14, 19, 20, 21, 28 March, and 16 April 1980), 415.

and economic activities, including the nationalization of certain companies and collective ownership of large landholdings. According to a report by the American Department of State, the Directorate stated a "commitment to political pluralism in Nicaragua and . . . denied any intentions of exporting revolution."¹⁸

In the wake of the Sandinista takeover, the Carter Administration sought to establish relations with the provisional government of the GRN, in the hopes of keeping the GRN politically moderate. Carter reversed his earlier condemnation of the revolution as Cuban-inspired when he said,

It's a mistake . . . for Americans to assume or to claim that every time an evolutionary change takes place . . . in this hemisphere that somehow it's a result of secret, massive Cuban intervention. . . . We have had good relationships with the new government. We hope to improve it.¹⁹

The Administration asked the GRN to expand its five-man junta with more moderates, to protect Americans currently in Nicaragua and to balance the junta with some former GN leaders in the new government. The junta guaranteed the safety of the Americans, but rejected the other demands.²⁰

The Nicaraguan people suffered between forty and fifty thousand deaths in their revolution, with one-fifth of the population without homes. The economy, too, was in shambles as the GRN inherited a one-and-a-half billion dollar debt from Somoza and an identical amount in property damage. Many of the industrial plants of the country were reduced to rubble during the war. In addition, important food crops that formed the crux

¹⁸Ibid., 415-16.

¹⁹Whelan, 99. Carter made this comment despite a State Department memorandum dated May 2, 1979, that Cuba was intensifying its support to the FSLN, as well as insurgent groups in El Salvador and Guatemala. Congress, House, Memorandum of Cuban Assistance to FSLN Rebels, 96th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record* (9 July 1979), vol. 125, pt. 14, 17677-80.

²⁰LaFeber, 235-36.

of Nicaragua's exports had gone unplanted.²¹ The GRN was not interested in American demands; it desired American money.

The Carter Administration sent twenty million dollars in aid after the installation of the new regime and later developed an aid package to allow American businesses to continue operating in Nicaragua and to repair the Nicaraguan economy shattered by the revolution. The businessmen were welcomed by the revolutionaries who wanted North American dollars to rebuild their nation, so much so that when radical labor unions tried to strike against American companies, Ortega expelled them from Nicaragua. Minimal nationalization of former Somoza properties and banks took place before further nationalization was halted.²² It appeared that cordial relations between the United States and the Sandinistas would be possible. Yet, the events over the fall of 1979 would gradually spell the doom for cordiality between the two countries.

Soon after the initial aid package was implemented, the Sandinistas delayed the free elections they had promised on the grounds that it would fragment the revolution. To certain Congressional members and conservatives, this delay meant the implementation of a Communist government.²³ In September of 1979, the Carter Administration developed a seventy-five million dollar aid package (five million in grant dollars, seventy million in credit) to aid Nicaragua, but the House of Representatives added numerous conditions on how the money should be spent by the Sandinistas, ranging from a two-thirds requirement for aid to be spent on the private sector to the banning of aid to projects that used Cuban personnel. The most prominent conditions were the demand for free elections and the requirement for the Sandinistas to respect human rights. A final

²¹Booth, 61; LaFeber, 238.

²²LaFeber, 238.

²³Ibid., 239.

condition was to be a guarantee by the Sandinistas that Nicaragua would not "export" its revolution to its neighbors.²⁴ This planted doubt in the Sandinista minds who realized that the revolution was not welcomed by the United States.²⁵

Conservatives in the Senate, too, doubted the political nature and objectives of the new government and questioned the logic of aiding the new regime. Republican Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina expressed this doubt in the Senate when he said,

I am deeply concerned that it appears that United States policy is supporting and encouraging the development of socialist regimes in Latin America and elsewhere under the guise of supporting human rights and democracy . . . these new regimes are fundamentally opposed to the ideals and principles that the United States stands for. They are totalitarian in politics, opposed to free enterprise, inclined to side with the Soviet [Union] . . . in international policies and basically anti-American. . . . Our aid programs have betrayed the American people, and they have betrayed those who we are supposedly helping.²⁶

An aid package of fifty-nine million dollars for Nicaragua was debated in early 1980 in the Senate, and that aid package came under intense conservative scrutiny. One concern was the number of Cuban aides and advisors to the provisional government. The State Department estimated approximately two hundred Cuban technicians were assisting the GRN, with twelve hundred more participating in a national literacy campaign and an additional two hundred Cubans serving as medical technicians. In addition, Cuba had approximately fifteen hundred teachers and medical personnel operating in Nicaragua in 1979 and 1980 and two hundred Cuban advisors active in the affairs of the Nicaraguan

²⁴Debate on how the money should be spent delayed the distribution of the funds until September of 1980. LaFeber, 239-41.

²⁵Burns, 20-21; LaFeber, 239-40.

²⁶*FY 1981 Foreign Assistance Legislation*, 410.

Ministries of the Interior, Information and Education, as well as in the Nicaraguan military.²⁷

Expressing concern over the Sandinistas proposal to nationalize certain properties, conservatives sought to uphold the Administration's stance on human rights by including the right to private property as a human right. The Department of State agreed to private property as a human right, but simultaneously proclaimed that it did not consider the "existence of a non-private property economic system *per se* to imply the denial of basic human rights."²⁸

The most pressing concern of the conservative element in the Congress was the political and ideological leanings of the junta and the Sandinistas, who would ultimately receive the funds and distribute them. Testifying before the Senate, William Bowdler, a State Department official, acknowledged that the Sandinista organization "as a whole" was Marxist, but some elements within the organization had non-Leftist leanings. However, the Congress had discovered a news article indicating that three members of the Sandinista Directorate had visited the Soviet Union and signed numerous agreements with the Communist Party in Moscow covering diplomatic and trade protocols and technical and cultural exchanges, with the Soviets offering a framework for economic assistance.²⁹

As this Directorate/Soviet agreement was an agreement between ideological parties and not governments, this cautioned Congressional conservatives who expressed concern

²⁷*Ibid.*, 445. In addition, Cuba had sent a military unit to fight along side the Sandinistas during the revolution and supplied the FSLN with five hundred tons of weapons and miscellaneous supplies. Whelan, 115.

²⁸*FY 1981 Foreign Assistance Legislation*, 448. In a published document, however, the Sandinistas advocated the massive redistribution of land, protecting "patriotic landowners" who supported the revolution, but eliminating the holdings of large landlords. Whelan, 386-87.

²⁹*FY 1981 Foreign Assistance Legislation*, 416, 444.

over the GRN's receiving the aid.³⁰ Their opinions on the GRN's political leanings were summed up by Senator Helms when he stated, "if it looks like a duck, and it walks like a duck, and it has webbed feet, and it quacks like a duck, then what is it?"³¹

The delay in the passage of the Congressional aid package, coupled with the sagging Nicaraguan economy, forced the GRN to expand diplomatic negotiations with the Soviet Union. Trade negotiations with the Soviet bloc soon followed which would have brought one hundred million dollars to Nicaragua to rebuild the country's agriculture, transportation and communications network and power generation systems. The junta and Sandinista Directorate took much more radical steps than the Americans would have liked. While the Sandinistas had begun creating their own army for Nicaragua and were enacting stricter controls over the country, they simultaneously began to funnel aid to rebels in El Salvador. In May of 1980, Violeta Chamorro and Alfonso Robelo, the two moderates of the junta, resigned from the body, believing the revolution had moved more to the Left than the two of them approved.³² The Directorate was beginning to eclipse the junta.

In June of 1980, the Congress finally passed an aid package of seventy-five million dollars to Nicaragua, primarily to counter the earlier Soviet offer. Congressmen feared the Nicaraguans would become a Soviet satellite just as Cuba had done twenty years earlier, but they also sought to prevent a default on Nicaragua's national debt that would have put numerous American and international banks in jeopardy.³³

³⁰Ibid., 416-17.

³¹Ibid., 416.

³²LaFeber, 239-40.

³³Ibid., 240.

The suspicions of Chamorro and Robelo about the course of the revolution proved correct as the Sandinistas began to move to the Left despite the conditions set forth in the American aid. In mid-1980, Defense Minister Humberto Ortega officially announced that free elections would be postponed until 1985. In November of 1980, following Ronald Reagan's election victory in the United States, the Sandinistas prohibited political opposition rallies and imposed a stronger domestic censorship policy. The junta also arrested certain citizens for being members of an alleged plot to subvert the government.³⁴

Ties with the Soviets and Communists also appeared to be gaining strength as Daniel Ortega, in March of 1980, visited Moscow for a meeting of Communist parties of nations around the world, where he was seated with the rulers of Poland and East Germany.³⁵ In July of 1980, Cuban leader Fidel Castro visited Managua to commemorate the one year anniversary of the Sandinista victory. Reportedly, Castro's presence in Managua captivated many FSLN leaders, including Humberto Ortega and Edan Pastora.³⁶ The Sandinistas also advocated "militant solidarity with fraternal peoples fighting for liberation" in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the United States.³⁷ The Carter Administration responded in the fall of 1980 by ordering the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to use approximately one million dollars to fund labor unions, political parties

³⁴Ibid., 239-41.

³⁵A Soviet specialist noted the significance of this event as the Soviets acknowledged that "the Sandinista regime [had] been admitted to the very exclusive club of governments that the Soviet Union regards as permanent, organic allies." Whelan, 115.

³⁶Dickey, 70-71.

³⁷Whelan, 392-93.

and a press opposed to the Sandinistas.³⁸ A United States-Nicaragua ideological showdown was inevitable.

³⁸Malcolm Byrne, ed., *The Chronology: The Documented Day-by-Day Account of the Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Contras* (New York: The National Security Archive, 1987), 3; LaFeber, 241.

1981

The election of Ronald Reagan in November 1980 and his ascendency to the Presidency on January 20, 1981, led to a United States-Nicaraguan showdown. Reagan had campaigned on reducing the Communist influence internationally and saw Central America, the United States' backyard, as the place to begin this crusade. In 1981, the Reagan Administration stated that the United States would neither support nor allow the further extension of Communism or its ideology around the globe. In addition, the United States would not stand idly by and permit more Nicaraguas, Iranian hostage crises, or Afghanistans to occur.

Reagan had seen Communist Red behind the Sandinista revolution, and he held onto this belief throughout his campaign for the Presidency. As far back as 1979, candidate Reagan had denounced the revolution as Communist inspired, believing the Sandinistas to be a "Communist menace" to the Central American region. He reiterated this point in a radio interview when he stated, "the troubles in Nicaragua bear a Cuban label. . . . There is no question that most of the rebels are Cuban-trained, Cuban-armed and dedicated to creating another Communist country in this hemisphere."¹ This was an extension of the Republican party's platform that the failure to prevent the Sandinistas' shift to the Left was due to Carter's foreign policy, one "not of constancy and credibility, but of chaos, confusion, and failure."²

The GOP platform charged the Soviet Union with using Cuba and Nicaragua as tools to extend Communist influence in Central America and linked the Soviets and their allies with terrorists who "reject the rule of law, civil order, and the sanctity of individual

¹Burns, 22.

²Dickey, 69.

human rights."³ Having seen one country fall to Marxism in the Western Hemisphere, Reagan's attention would soon turn towards another Central American country, El Salvador. Reagan's main concern as President was that the Nicaraguan revolution and its ideology would spill over into neighboring El Salvador. With the Nicaraguan military developing substantially with the help of the Soviet Union and Cuba, that scenario was within the realm of possibility. The Reagan Administration viewed Salvadoran unrest as fuelled by external forces, mainly through the flow of arms to the Salvadoran rebels by Communist bloc nations through Cuba and Nicaragua.⁴ Intelligence data would prove that the Administration's fears were well-justified.

The Nicaraguan army expanded to thirty-five thousand men, making it the largest standing army in Central America at the time of Reagan's inaugural. The regular army was augmented by a civilian militia of two hundred thousand men and women. In addition, Cuba supplied eight hundred military specialists to assist in training the army.⁵ The Soviet Union had begun to deliver one hundred twenty-five million dollars in supplies and military equipment, including twenty tons of grain and Soviet heavy tanks, and two Nicaraguan airfields were being restructured to accommodate Soviet MiG-23s, an advanced Soviet fighter jet.⁶

³Ibid., 70.

⁴Arnson, 54.

⁵Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Central America, 1981*, report prepared by Hon. Gerry E. Studds, 97th Cong., 1st. Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, March 1981), Committee Print, 7; Congress, Senate, "The Cuban Role in Nicaragua," 97th Cong., 1st. Sess., *Congressional Record* (20 October 1981), vol. 127, pt. 18, 24490-91; Alan Riding, "Fearful Nicaraguans Building 200,000-Strong Militia," *New York Times*, 20 February 1981, p. 2(A).

⁶"The Cuban Role in Nicaragua," *Congressional Record*, 24490; Congress, Senate, "The Nicaraguan Threat to Central American Peace," 98th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record* (28 April 1983), vol. 129, pt. 8, 10384.

Following the overthrow of the old Salvadoran regime by a military coup in October of 1979, the provisional government promised economic reforms and democratic elections in 1982. The provisional government was opposed by a coalition of Marxist-Leninist rebel groups aimed at creating a Leftist government. Salvadoran Communist party chief Shafik Handal visited the Soviet Union and other Communist nations in Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa in 1980 to seek assistance for his group while the guerrilla leadership conducted meetings with the Sandinistas in Managua in June of 1980.⁷

At the Managua summit, the Sandinista Directorate offered the Salvadoran guerrillas "a headquarters for the guerrilla directorate" and promised to exchange "advice and opinions" with the guerrillas and guaranteed that the Sandinistas would "contribute in material terms." The rebels launched an offensive against the Salvadoran government on January, 18, 1981.⁸

The Administration received intelligence that confirmed its fears that the Nicaraguans were channeling aid to the Salvadoran rebels. United States' intelligence reports showed that the Soviets, Cubans and Nicaraguans were training Salvadoran rebels and organizing their operations as well as providing the rebels with arms.⁹ Furthermore, the Director of the Defense Security Assistance Agency (DSAA) confirmed before the Senate that "a larger inflow of arms" was being channeled to El Salvador from Nicaragua through neighboring Honduras, with some weapons being left behind in

⁷"Text of State Department Document on Arming of the Guerrillas in El Salvador," *New York Times*, 20 February 1981, p. 4(A).

⁸Ibid.

⁹Alexander M. Haig, Jr., *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1984), 88-89.

Honduras and neighboring Guatemala. The Director also confirmed that a substantial supply of weapons from the Communist-bloc had been delivered to Nicaragua.¹⁰

The Administration's fears were reinforced when Edmund Muskie, Secretary of State under President Carter, stated that there was "no question" that Salvadoran rebels had been receiving Cuban arms via Nicaragua, "certainly with the knowledge and to some extent the help" of the Nicaraguan government.¹¹ The final convincing piece of evidence came when Salvadoran guerrilla documents captured by the Salvadoran army cited numerous deals with the Soviet Union and the Communist-bloc for arms to be delivered to the peninsula through Cuba. The documents also promised covert military support for the Salvadoran rebels.¹²

With Nicaragua already established as a Communist beachhead in Central America, the Sandinistas could provide weapons to insurgent groups in neighboring countries. The Administration could see the United States' geographic "southern flank" under attack in the Cold War. Should Central America fall to Communism, the sea of Communist Red could spread closer to both the southern border of the United States and the Panama Canal region, placing the areas in jeopardy from Communist harassment.

To Reagan and his Administration, the situation in El Salvador represented another march of international Communism into the Western Hemisphere. The isolation of

¹⁰Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *The Situation in El Salvador*, 97th Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 18 March, 9 April 1981), 28.

¹¹John M. Goshko, "Nicaragua Helping Arm El Salvador Leftists, Muskie Says," *Washington Post*, 30 January 1981, p. 20(A).

¹²Congress, House, "Soviet Aid to Guerrillas in Salvador Documented," 97th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record* (17 February 1981), vol. 127, pt. 2, 2303; Juan de Onis, "Soviet-Bloc Nations Said to Pledge Arms to Salvador Rebels," *New York Times*, 6 February 1981, pp. 1(A) and 7(A).

Nicaragua was key to neutralizing Sandinista and Communist influence in the Central American region. The President had to take action against Nicaragua.

Reagan began with the formation of an entity known as Core Group. This interagency body coordinated the State, Justice and Defense Departments, along with the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council. Secretary of State Alexander Haig selected Thomas O. Enders, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, to head the group. Members of the group met to formulate the Administration's policy towards Central America.¹³ The Administration was determined to present a coherent show of American will in foreign affairs.

Reagan terminated the remainder of the seventy-five million dollar grant from the Carter Administration, fifteen million dollars, and instead granted ten million in aid to El Salvador to interdict arms, supplies and personnel flowing into the country.¹⁴ The aid earmarked for Nicaragua had been, in the eyes of the Administration, misappropriated by the Sandinistas and could be used to finance aid to the Salvadoran rebels.

The Administration sought to convince the Congress of the need to assist El Salvador by highlighting the threat to the interests of the United States in the region. Haig called the Soviet incursion into the region a "hit list" by the Soviets with the specific objective of overthrowing the governments of Central America.¹⁵ Testifying before the Senate, Haig and Enders reiterated the Administration's pledge to aid the Salvadoran government against the rebels and linked the unrest in the country to Soviet and Cuban assistance. Haig also cited the delivery of Soviet MiG-23s to Cuba, along with sixty-three tons of

¹³*The Chronology*, 6; Dickey, 102-3.

¹⁴Congress, House, "U.S. Halts Nicaraguan Aid Over Help for Guerrillas," 97th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record* (17 February 1981), vol. 127, pt. 2, 2303.

¹⁵Bernard Gwertzman, "Haig Cites 'Hit List' for Soviet Control of Central America," *New York Times*, 19 March 1981, pp. 1(A) and 10(A).

war supplies to the island nation. Enders testified that "more Cubas" could develop that would be ideologically linked with the Soviet Union and would threaten "major strategic United States interests--the Panama Canal, sea lanes, oil supplies."¹⁶

Haig continued his appeal in an address before the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on February 20. He stated that Cuba and the Soviets were fermenting unrest in El Salvador by furnishing "several hundred tons of military equipment" to rebels in the country. Haig called for a halt to the arms flow to El Salvador from Nicaragua and the need for action in the region.¹⁷

The testimony of Haig and Enders before the Senate constituted a new "Domino Theory," that should El Salvador fall the way Nicaragua fell two years earlier, the United States would face a new triumvirate of Red, consisting of Cuba, Nicaragua and El Salvador, that would menace vital American interests in the Caribbean and Central American regions. This new triumvirate could soon topple other republics and governments in Central America, bringing the entire region under Soviet influence.

The assertion of the second Domino Theory before the Republican-controlled Senate was a direct appeal to those who still carried the memory of the loss of Vietnam. By equating Communist takeover in Central America with the one that befell Southeast Asia, the Administration got support from the Senate, both in the form of financial and political backing. Linking Cuba and Nicaragua to Salvadoran unrest justified taking action against Nicaragua.

Reagan wished to restore American credibility in international affairs following the debacles of Iran and Afghanistan during the Carter years, and that credibility would be

¹⁶Bernard Gwertzman, "Haig Pledges U.S. Will to Block Salvador Rebels," *New York Times*, 3 February 1981, pp. 1(A) and 8(A).

¹⁷"Excerpts from Haig's Briefing About El Salvador," *New York Times*, 21 February 1981, p. 6(A).

tioned to a strong foreign policy. Haig's speech before NATO served the dual purpose of reaffirming American resolve on issues of foreign and Western Hemispheric affairs and demonstrating the determination of the United States to take a stand against Communism internationally. Success or failure in Central America would affect how the Free World viewed America's determination to check Communism. Therefore, Haig's words declared that the Administration would firm on its international anti-Communist agenda.

Enders and the Core Group knew that direct action against Cuba would be impossible, due to the entrenched Cuban military, the lack of support by the American public, and the danger of intervention by the Soviets.¹⁸ However, El Salvador and Nicaragua would prove viable and strategic objectives due to their geographic position on the continent. The isolation of Nicaragua would stymie the spread of Communist influence in the region, for the Soviets and Cubans would have no distribution outlet on the continent to assist Leftist rebels in the region.

President Reagan issued a finding on March 9 that allocated nineteen million dollars for covert activities in Nicaragua and throughout Central America and for protecting the Salvadoran government from rebel insurgency.¹⁹ The finding emphasized improving intelligence sources, strengthening the political structure of El Salvador and interdicting arms to the rebels from the Sandinistas.²⁰ Training for this interdiction force began in camps in Florida and California. Reagan appealed to the Congress ten days later to repeal the Clark Amendment, which prohibited military or paramilitary assistance to anti-Communist rebels in Angola, saying the legislation restricted presidential authority.

¹⁸Dickey, 104.

¹⁹"A finding is a written statement by the president . . . outlining given CIA operations in general terms and establishing that in the president's judgement it is important to national security." Dickey, 104-5.

²⁰*The Chronology*, 7; Dickey, 105.

Reagan was denied his request as House Democrats threatened to vote against any foreign aid legislation that excluded the Clark Amendment.²¹ Reagan's request on the Clark Amendment tested whether the Congress would give him free reign in the implementation of policy towards Nicaragua.

The denial on the Clark Amendment demonstrated Congressional opposition to the Administration's policy in Central America. Congressman Gerry Studds, a Democrat from Massachusetts, submitted a report to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs recommending the suspension of military sales, training and economic assistance to Salvadoran troops or the government. He recommended that the United States consult with the United Nations and other Central American nations before making foreign policy decisions concerning the region, encouraging a "constructive role, through humanitarian aid, and diplomatic support."²²

House Democrats, too, advocated a passive policy towards the nations of Central America in the hopes that diplomacy and economic aid, much like that practiced under Carter, would alleviate hostilities in the region. No place was that better exemplified than in the report's recommendation on Nicaragua. The report strongly suggested open trade and negotiation between the United States and Nicaragua, including the resumption of economic aid, for the report concluded that American money would develop the Central American nation and keep it out of the Soviet sphere of influence. The report concluded that only if the United States was "objective, patient and restrained in its policy toward

²¹*The Chronology*, 7; Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Congress and Foreign Policy, 1981*, report prepared by the Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, 97th Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), Committee Print, 5; Gwertzman, "Haig Cites 'Hit List'," p. 10(A).

²²*Central America, 1981*, 29-31.

Nicaragua," taking a stance of peaceful coexistence with the Sandinistas, would it be able to bring stability to the region.²³

With the Vietnam War still fresh in their minds, House Democrats sought an approach begun under the Carter years of economic control over a particular country in order to bring about peaceful compliance with American wishes. Their plan envisioned developing the infrastructure and economy of a beleaguered country and developing through such aid a mutual friendship and alliance that would keep the country out of the range of Soviet and Cuban influence and negate the need for indirect or direct intervention.

House members openly questioned the President's policy. Democratic Congressman David Bonior of Michigan said that the Administration's anti-Sandinista forces training in Florida and California, called Somocistas, were terrorists, bent on toppling the Sandinista government with "their weapon[s of] terror." To Bonior, this was a contradiction in Reagan's anti-terrorist policy. Bonior called for the Congress to withdraw funding for such as a terrorist organization.²⁴

Democrats challenged the legality of the training camps for the Somocistas, which they felt violated of the Neutrality Act of 1794. That act barred the United States government from acting as a sanctuary to foreign insurgents operating against a country with whom the United States was at peace.²⁵ Francis Mullen of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) testified before the Senate and confirmed that the Administration was not violating the Act when he stated American law did not prohibit training on private

²³Ibid., 12-15.

²⁴Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Assistance Legislation for Fiscal Year 1982 (Part 7)*, 97th Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 23, 26, 30 March, and 8 April 1981), 39-41.

²⁵*Foreign Assistance Legislation, 1982*, 61; *The Situation in El Salvador*, 37-38.

property as long as automatic weapons were not used during training. Articles and documents later indicated that the exiles trained with wooden and unloaded weapons on property not belonging to the government.²⁶

The attacks by the Democrats against the Somocista forces developing in Florida and California were the first attempts by the Congress to limit the President's Central American policy. By challenging the legality of the President's proposals and highlighting fears of a potential Vietnam-style quagmire, the Democrats were positioning themselves to defeat the Administration's policy.

The President understood the potential impact of Congressional opposition; negative public opinion could severely affect the Administration's foreign policy. If the Democrats were allowed to succeed, the Administration's plans to limit the effectiveness of Nicaragua and restore democracy to the region would be scuttled.

The Administration could succeed only by taking decisive action to demonstrate the effectiveness of its policy. That action came on August 11 with the quiet dispatch of Thomas Enders to Managua for a diplomatic summit. While meeting with the Directorate, Enders waded through Sandinista denials over aid to Salvadoran rebels to express concerns by the United States about the Nicaraguan military buildup and aid to Leftist rebels. Enders reiterated American demands that Nicaragua stop fermenting unrest in the region in order to prevent a rupture between the two countries. Enders left Managua the same day.²⁷

The visit by Enders served two strategic purposes. One illustrated American resolve that Nicaraguan interference in Central American affairs would not be tolerated. A second

²⁶Robert Lindsey, "Foes of Nicaraguan Regime Train in California," *New York Times*, 18 January 1982, pp. 1(A) and 6(B); *The Situation in El Salvador*, 37-39.

²⁷Dickey, 109-11.

purpose was to fend off mounting dissent in the Congress. The Enders visit was diplomatic leverage against those who opposed the Administration's policy. Should developments between the two countries deteriorate and should the Sandinistas take a more active role in aiding Leftist rebels, the Administration could justify its policy against Nicaragua on grounds that diplomatic means were attempted and failed; therefore, the Administration had only one option left--intervention.

Enders made a case for direct action by the Administration when he testified before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in September on the situation in El Salvador. Enders cited the substantial arms buildup of the rebels and listed several attacks by the insurgents on the civilian population, underscoring the damage and casualties.²⁸ When questioned by Congressman Gerry Studds on the possibility of negotiations between the rebels and the Salvadoran government, Enders firmly replied,

The point is that a series of proposals have been made which remain without any response. There is no point in trying to negotiate with yourself in order to see whether you can imagine something which might appeal to oneself . . . the reality down there is that the violent left does not wish to pick up the opportunities for discussions and talks open to it. There is no point in making hundreds of hypothetical questions.²⁹

Enders's comment before the Committee underscored the need for action in Nicaragua. For months the Administration had been chronicling the arms flow to Nicaragua from the Communist bloc and the subsequent supply of arms and materiel to the Salvadoran rebels. The Democratic element in the Congress had been opting for a policy of economic development and containment of Nicaragua and El Salvador through negotiations and aid. Enders's statement showed that the State Department recognized that

²⁸Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *U.S. Policy Options in El Salvador*, 97th Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 24 September and 5, 19 November 1981), 25-30, 33-34.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 35.

dialog between the rebels and the Salvadoran government was not possible due to consistent reluctance by the rebels.

Enders said that the insurgency in El Salvador would continue without some form of direct action by the United States, and the rebels would continue to receive aid from Nicaragua and the Soviet bloc. Therefore, the policy options favored by the Democrats would not be feasible. The only hope of preventing the second Domino Theory from coming to fruition was through direct assistance to El Salvador and intervention in Nicaragua. Enders's comment, coupled with the failed diplomatic visit to Managua in August, discredited the Democratic plan for Central America and affirmed the Administration's stance that only a strong foreign policy would stabilize the region.

Action came late the following month with the launching of "Halcon Vista," three-day joint United States-Honduran military maneuvers designed to "detect and intercept hostile coastal incursions."³⁰ The exercises not only boosted Honduran military efficiency but also showed the Nicaraguans that the United States was beginning to move against Sandinista influence in the region.

Secretary Haig testified before the Congress that the Administration had been studying similar moves near Nicaragua and Cuba. These maneuvers would be psychological leverage against the Sandinistas and Cuba to intimidate them into ceasing aid to the Salvadoran rebels and would send a message that such actions by the two Communist governments would entail consequences that would "exceed whatever advantages they seek for themselves."³¹ Haig down-played the fears of a new Vietnam eruption by stating, "we have no plans for putting Americans in combat any place in the world," but he gave

³⁰*The Chronology*, 9.

³¹John M. Goshko, "Haig Won't Rule Out Anti-Nicaragua Action," *Washington Post*, 13 November 1981, p. 16(A).

Congressional Democrats reason to take notice of the Administration's motives when he refused to give Congressman Studds assurance that the United States would not undertake efforts to overthrow the government of Nicaragua.³²

In November, the Administration began the final phase of its plan. On November 16, Reagan approved National Security Decision Directive Seventeen, which called for open economic and military assistance to friendly Central American nations, maneuvers and deployments by the United States military in the region, and coordination with other nations to conduct covert operations against the "Cuban Sandinista support infrastructure in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Central America."³³

Having learned lessons from Vietnam, the Administration would not commit United States personnel to Nicaragua, but would use Nicaraguan personnel to determine the political outcome in their country. The Core Group, working in conjunction with the NSC, drafted a strategy for Central America with the specific objective of limiting, if not neutralizing, Cuban and Nicaraguan influence in the region through political and paramilitary operations.³⁴ On November 16, the CIA created a twenty million dollar plan to construct a five hundred man paramilitary unit to enforce the NSC doctrine, its objectives being popular support for a nationalistic, anti-Cuban, anti-Somoza opposition force to be used against the Sandinistas. It was to conduct intelligence, paramilitary and political operations in Nicaragua.³⁵

On November 23, Reagan approved NSDD 17. It appropriated twenty million dollars for the CIA's paramilitary force to create a military and political opposition front against

³²Ibid.

³³Dickey, 112.

³⁴NSDD 17 as cited in Dickey, 111-12.

³⁵*The Chronology*, 10; Dickey, 111-12.

the Sandinistas. A Presidential finding in December of 1981 sponsored this activity, indicating that national interests justified the existence of this force.³⁶ The Administration's plan of direct action in Central America through covert action in Nicaragua was underway.

The President's opponents, like Reagan's predecessor, believed that economic aid and consensus strategy would develop the region and limit the need for aid from the Soviet bloc. They rejected Reagan's proposals as too interventionist and likely to cause further ruptures in inter-American relations and push Nicaragua towards the Soviet bloc.

However, they failed to see that such a policy had failed in the previous administration. Reagan linked events in the region and concluded, unlike his opponents, that events in individual countries were not isolated, but were part of a larger plan orchestrated by the Soviets and Cubans. His predecessor's policy was too passive and lacking in direct action, a weak foreign policy that lacked a definable direction.

Reagan knew that aid and development would not change the ideology of a country, nor would it insure neutrality on the part of the Sandinistas. Therefore, in order to fulfill his objectives in Central America, Reagan knew he would have to focus on a strategic point that, if contained or neutralized, would limit Cuban and Soviet influence in the region. Nicaragua, due to its geographic position to El Salvador and the rest of the Central American region, would become the target.

³⁶*The Chronology*, 10.

1982

The year 1982 opened with the Administration's Central American policy in full swing, well on its way to checking a Communist advance on its southern flank. What the Administration had yet to face was the mounting opposition to their policy by the United States Congress. Initially in 1982, the Administration pushed forward with the continuation of its Nicaraguan policy, but it would soon find itself eclipsed by objections by Democrats in the Congress. By the end of the year, the Administration would find itself on the defensive concerning its Central American policy.

The Administration's policy against Nicaragua had continued in earnest at the onset of 1982. Reagan increased the intensity of covert operations by appointing William Clark to head the National Security Council (NSC). Clark was an avid supporter of covert operations, and he instituted a fierce program designed to increase covert activity in the Nicaraguan campaign.¹ By early February, the opposition force endorsed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) doubled their ranks to one thousand men, and Reagan announced that he had encouraged "political and paramilitary operations against the Cuban presence in Nicaragua," although the anti-Sandinista force had not yet been made public.² The increased activity coincided with intelligence obtained by two Nicaraguan defectors who revealed that Nicaragua would soon receive Soviet combat aircraft.³

By March, members of the Administration believed that they gathered enough evidence to warrant their covert policy against Nicaragua. They presented their policy to

¹Moreno, 104.

²Lou Cannon, "Reagan Silent on Options in Salvador, Nicaragua," *Washington Post*, 19 February 1982, p. 5(A); *The Chronology*, 13.

³Reuter, "Soviet Planes in Nicaragua, Defectors Say," *Washington Post*, 9 March 1982, p. 14(A).

the American public on March ninth to explain their justification for targeting Nicaragua. In a press conference held at the State Department, the deputy directors of both the CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) displayed aerial reconnaissance photos that backed up their claims of the strong military buildup underway in Nicaragua. The photos revealed the expanded airfield runways which could accommodate Soviet MiG fighter jets; Nicaragua's acquisition of heavy weapons and armored vehicles, including Soviet tanks; the buildup of the standing army and civilian militia, and the almost three hundred percent increase in active military garrisons designed on the Cuban model.⁴

The theme of the press conference revolved around the implication that Nicaragua could use its developing military muscle to menace the Central American region. This opinion was reinforced by CIA Deputy Director Bobby Inman's statement that the Nicaraguans could "move much more easily into Central American countries,"⁵ implying that the situation in El Salvador could become more volatile should the United States take a neutral stance. The conference coincided with the public disclosure of the anti-Sandinista paramilitary force designed to conduct "political and paramilitary operations against the Cuban presence and Cuban-Sandinista support structure in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Central America." The purpose of the force was to interdict weapons flowing from Nicaragua to El Salvador.⁶

The Administration's findings on the military buildup were augmented by a Congressional statement by House Intelligence Committee Chairman Edward Boland, a

⁴John M. Goshko, "U.S. Shows Photos to Back Up Charge of Nicaragua Buildup," *Washington Post*, 10 March 1982, pp. 1(A) and 16 (A).

⁵Ibid.

⁶Patrick E. Tyler, and Bob Woodward, "U.S. Approves Covert Plan in Nicaragua," *Washington Post*, 10 March 1982, pp. 1(A) and 16(A).

Democrat from Massachusetts. Boland confirmed a CIA report that both Cuba and Nicaragua were providing arms and assistance to rebel insurgents in El Salvador.⁷

The Administration took action on the international scene as well. Jeane Kirkpatrick, the American ambassador to the United Nations, described the growing totalitarian nature of the Sandinista regime as she cited the "extension and consolidation of power" by the Sandinistas over various facets of Nicaraguan society. Before the United Nations Security Council, she attacked the Sandinistas' claims of intervention by the United States into Nicaraguan affairs as "baseless" and "extravagant."⁸

The Administration presented Nicaragua as a threat to Central American stability, linking its meteoric military buildup to an attempt to establish itself as the dominant power in the region through a policy of destabilization of its neighbors, backed up by assistance from the Cubans and Soviets. However, the Administration would soon face growing opposition on both the international and domestic fronts.

Nicaragua fired the first warning shot against the Administration's anti-Sandinista policy on the day of the press conference when the Sandinista government stated that a regional revolt would ensue should the United States take strong action in Central America. To the Sandinistas, the defense of Nicaragua would "be expressed throughout the region."⁹ The Sandinistas attempted to entrench themselves politically in the region, reinforcing the notion that the Sandinistas would not be easily removed from power without inflicting chaos on the region. Six days later, a national emergency was declared

⁷Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The Role of International Security Assistance in U.S. Defense Policy*, 97th Cong., 2d Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 10 March 1982), 30.

⁸Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, *The Reagan Phenomenon-and Other Speeches on Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy, 1983), 63, 184-85.

⁹Christopher Dickey, "Nicaragua Sees Regional Revolt if Invaded," *Washington Post*, 10 March 1982, pp. 1(A) and 17(A).

in Nicaragua following the destruction of two bridges in the country by the CIA opposition force.¹⁰

Later in May, Daniel Ortega made a trip to Moscow where he conferred with Soviet leaders and declared plans for a socialist future for Nicaragua. He requested Soviet economic aid and left the Soviet Union with pledges of support for development of Nicaraguan industries, communications networks and agriculture along with the possible acquisition of more Soviet military equipment.¹¹ The Soviet aid was to augment a one hundred thirty million dollar package in Cuban technical assistance geared towards developing industries and education and medical services.¹²

The increased government activity of the Sandinistas gave the Administration credibility and authority to prosecute its policy in Central America. However, the increased activity by the Sandinistas served to increase the opposition to the Administration's Central American policy. The Core Group had initiated a plan to increase pressure on Nicaragua through covert action and turn the country's attention away from its neighbors.

Yet, the increased militarism of the Sandinistas served to scuttle the Administration's plans because the actions of the Sandinistas fuelled the growing fears of Democrats in the Congress of a potential military entanglement in Central America. In the minds of Congressional Democrats, the Congress would have to begin a concerted effort

¹⁰*The Chronology*, 14; Dickey, *With the Contras*, 131-34.

¹¹Christopher Dickey, "Journey to Moscow Expected to be Crucial to Nicaragua's Future," *Washington Post*, 5 May 1982, p. 18(A); Dusko Doder, "Soviets Pledge Economic Aid for Nicaragua," *Washington Post*, 10 May 1982, p. 20(A).

¹²"Nicaragua, Cuba Announce \$130 Million Aid Agreement," *Washington Post*, 7 April 1982, p. 21(A).

to wrest control of foreign policy away from the President in the hopes that Congressional Democrats might be able to bring stability to the region.

Congressman David Bonior (D., Mich.) launched the first Congressional salvo against the President's policy when, on the House floor, he urged the President and the country to examine a peace plan offered by Mexican President Lopez Portillo as the United States' "last, best chance" for peace in the region.¹³ The initiative called for Cuba and the United States to open dialogues, which would then lead to talks between the United States and Nicaragua, with Mexico acting as intermediary. Once those relations were established, the initiative called for the United States to annul any threats against Nicaragua and disarm the anti-Sandinista forces. This would lead to a series of non-aggression pacts between Nicaragua and the United States and between Nicaragua and her neighbors. The Sandinistas, in turn, would renounce acquisition of more military equipment and the export of arms to insurgents in Central America.¹⁴

Democrats in the Senate held similar beliefs to those of Bonior. Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island believed the Administration was pushing Nicaragua to the Communist side through a policy of harassment. Citing a "good faith" initiative on a recent trip to Managua, Pell stated that the Sandinistas would be willing to create a border patrol that

¹³Congress, House, "Mexican Initiative Holds Out Hope for Peace in Central America," 97th Cong., 2d Sess., *Congressional Record* (23 February 1982), vol. 128, pt. 2, 2008-10.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 2009-10. Portillo made this proposal in Managua in a speech where he cited the similarities between the Mexican and Sandinista revolutions. *Ibid.*, 2008-9. The Administration later rejected the plan on grounds it did not wish to have Mexico act as an intermediary and the Sandinistas would not allow neutral observers to verify their compliance with any treaties. "U.S. is Said to Rule Out a Plan for Sandinist Talks," *New York Times*, 1 May 1982, p. 4(A).

would stop all arms traffic out of Nicaragua. Pell further reiterated the necessity for negotiations between the United States and Nicaragua.¹⁵

The Congress hoped that stability and peace could be achieved through non-aggression pacts. Many Congressional Democrats thought the Administration's policy, already having pressed the Sandinistas into the Communist bloc, would potentially commit American military forces to the region.¹⁶ Congressman John Burton, Democrat of California, reiterated this point quoted former Senator John Stennis by stating, "When you send the American flag you send an American commitment and you send our honor and certain things will happen."¹⁷

Furthermore, House Democrats saw that they needed to promote the position of their policies if they hoped to implement their foreign policy goals in Central America. This was emphasized in the remarks of Congressman Johnathan Bingham (D., NY) that the Congress could not "passively hope that the Reagan administration will not entangle us in military and paramilitary operations in Nicaragua."¹⁸ By implying that the Congress was being too "passive," Bingham made a case for a more active Congressional role in both the formation and implementation of foreign policy. Therefore, the Congress would have

¹⁵Congress, Senate, "Senator Pell's Remarks on El Salvador," 97th Cong., 2d Sess., *Congressional Record* (2 March 1982), vol. 128, pt. 3, 2773.

¹⁶Congress, House, "Department of Defense Appropriations Bill, 1983," 97th Cong., 2d Sess., *Congressional Record* (8 December 1982), vol. 128, pt. 21, 29462; Congress, House, "Prohibition of Covert Operations in Nicaragua," 97th Cong., 2d Sess., *Congressional Record* (16 March 1982), vol. 128, pt. 4, 4261-63; Philip Taubman, "C.I.A. is Making a Special Target of Latin Region," *New York Times*, 4 December 1982, pp. 1(A) and 7(A).

¹⁷"Department of Defense Bill," *Congressional Record*, 29462.

¹⁸"Prohibition on Covert Operations," *Congressional Record*, 4262.

to accomplish the dual objectives of proposing its own initiatives while simultaneously discrediting and restricting the objectives of the Administration.

Having made their proposals for negotiations and non-aggression pacts known, Congressional Democrats moved to impede the Administration's policy by questioning the reliability and objectives of its policy. Congressman Benjamin Rosenthal of New York opened this particular front by attacking United States assistance to El Salvador. Rosenthal used the peace initiative of Mexico as reason to down-play the significance of El Salvador. He concluded that if Mexico viewed Central American security interests as different from those of the United States, Mexico's views should supersede the opinions of the United States since Mexico was geographically closer to the region.¹⁹ By diminishing the importance of El Salvador, the Democrats could scuttle the Administration's anti-Sandinista policy as Nicaragua and El Salvador would no longer constitute security risks to the United States.

The assault on the Administration's policy continued as the Congress began to question the reliability of intelligence gathered from Central America. A report to the Congressional Committee on Intelligence cited numerous instances of weaknesses on American intelligence gathering in El Salvador and Nicaragua, which included acceptance of skeptical information from the Salvadoran government and a lack of objectivity in analyzing intelligence data.²⁰ The report concluded that "the intelligence process . . . deserves the constant watchfulness of intelligence professionals,"²¹ suggesting that covert activities of the CIA should be subordinated to Congressional approval.

¹⁹*Role*, 46.

²⁰Congress, Subcommittee on Oversight and Evaluation, Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, *U.S. Intelligence Performance on Central American Achievements and Selected Instances of Concern*, 97th Cong., 2d Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 22 September 1982), Committee Print, 4.

²¹*Ibid.*, 23.

The Congress expressed additional doubts over the reported military buildup in Nicaragua. On March 24, the DIA presented a briefing to the Congress which was identical to the March ninth briefing. However, the Congress doubted the Sandinistas intended to use their military in the way projected by the DIA.²² Furthermore, the House Intelligence Committee had begun to doubt the effectiveness of the Administration's plan, since intelligence reports could not verify that arms shipments from Nicaragua to El Salvador were being effectively halted.²³

The Congress was suspicious of the Administration's motives in Nicaragua, fearing it was seeking the overthrow of the Sandinista government. Congressional suspicions arose when Alexander Haig failed to clarify the Administration's motives in Nicaragua in 1981, and the boldness of the Administration's plans created concern in the Congress. Members of the Senate Intelligence Committee (SIC) expressed concerns that the President was not keeping the Congress fully informed on developments in Central America. With the reported disclosure in late 1982 by leaders of the anti-Sandinista force, known by now as the Contras (Spanish for "against"), who openly expressed the hope of overthrowing the Sandinista regime,²⁴ Congressional suspicions were further increased.

Democrats concluded that if they were able to wrest control of American foreign policy from the President, and if they took greater control over the course of American international affairs, Democrats would be able to alter Administration policy, including the President's international anti-Communist agenda. This would give the Congress a tactical advantage over the President in related affairs, for the Congress would have

²²Ibid., 21.

²³Arnson, 103.

²⁴Taubman, 1(A) and 7(A).

proven that it had the power to seize control of public policies. In the future, events would be determined by the Congress rather than the Administration, not only in foreign policies, but in domestic affairs as well.

Congressman Michael Barnes of Maryland reiterated Democratic beliefs in negotiations to alleviate the Salvadoran/Nicaraguan conflict, and, referring to the Administration's Contra policy as "stupid," Barnes introduced H.R. 5828, a bill to prohibit any form of covert aid or action in Nicaragua.²⁵ To the Democrats' dismay, the proposal and similar measures introduced in both the House and the Senate went down to defeat.²⁶ The defeat of these proposals convinced Democrats that they needed to limit the Administration's plans by limiting the funding for their policies.

In late July, with the Fiscal Year 1983 Intelligence Authorization under consideration, a stronger bill was drafted in a secret Congressional meeting of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. The committee conferred and amended the intelligence authorization bill with the express purpose of limiting covert activity in Nicaragua.²⁷ The bill would later be introduced in December by Edward Boland of Massachusetts; it would have prohibited the appropriation of any funds that would work toward overthrowing the Sandinista government, or that would provoke a military engagement between Nicaragua and its neighbor, Honduras.²⁸ The amendment was to be added to the intelligence authorization bill and would eventually bear Boland's name.

²⁵Congress, House, "Legislation to Prohibit Military or Paramilitary Activities Against Nicaragua," 97th Cong., 2d Sess., *Congressional Record*, (15 March 1982), vol. 128, pt. 4, 4167; United Press International, "Covert-Action Bar in Nicaragua Urged," *Washington Post*, 16 March 1982, p. 16(A).

²⁶Arnson, 104.

²⁷*The Chronology*, 17; "Department of Defense Appropriations Bill," *Congressional Record*, 29466.

²⁸"Department of Defense," *Congressional Record*, 29468.

On December eighth, the intelligence authorization bill was debated on the House floor as part of a Department of Defense appropriation bill. Tom Harkin, Democrat from Iowa, offered an amendment to prohibit funds for the CIA to coordinate "military activities in or against Nicaragua."²⁹ Congressional Democrats campaigned vigorously for the passage of the amendment. Gerry Studds (D., Mass.) attacked the policy of covert operations as one doomed to failure, since the Administration believed it could "place a group of thugs and murderers . . . back in power in Nicaragua."³⁰

Throughout the debates, Democrats reinforced the need to open dialogues and peace initiatives with the Cubans and Sandinistas. In addition, numerous analogies and comparisons to the Vietnam scenario were made and cited as reasons to pass the Harkin Amendment.³¹ Ron Dellums, Democrat from California, foresaw a firestorm in Central America if covert operations were allowed to continue for he stated the covert raids "threaten[ed] to engulf the entire region in warfare."³²

Conservative opposition to the amendment attacked it as soft on Communist aggression. Republican Robert Dornan of California described the necessity of supporting the Contras in order to "keep freedom alive" in Nicaragua, much like the Administration was attempting to do in El Salvador and Afghanistan. Dornan denounced the ideas of non-aggression pacts and peace initiatives, stating that the history of Leftist governments was one of entrenched power; he stressed the need for more direct action against the Sandinista government.³³

²⁹Ibid., 29457.

³⁰Ibid., 29463.

³¹Ibid., 29459-62.

³²Ibid., 29461.

³³Ibid., 29465-66.

As the debate on the Harkin amendment continued, Boland introduced his amendment as a substitute to Harkin's amendment. Boland pushed for his amendment for he believed it could regulate any covert activity of the Administration in Central America, since the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, of which Boland was a member, reviewed the use of covert operations monthly. Furthermore, as the Intelligence Committee was privy to all intelligence data gathered in the region, the scope of covert operations could be brought under the control of the Committee if necessary.³⁴

The purpose of the amendment was to keep the Contras in line with the original objectives as stated by the Administration: prevent the flow of arms to Salvadoran rebels from Nicaragua and reduce Nicaraguan and Communist influence in the region. However, the amendment made Administration covert operations in Central America subject to Intelligence Committee regulation and oversight. As Boland admitted, the Committee had the ability to terminate" activities which can get out of control or which would threaten to involve this Nation or its allies in a war."³⁵ Therefore, the Intelligence Committee and the Congress would be in position to negate the Administration's policy should the Committee or the Congress believe that the Administration superseded their original objectives. Although they could not control policy, Congressional Democrats could control the purse strings and could terminate aid if conditions warranted.

After ten minutes of debate, Harkin yielded to Boland's legislation and withdrew his own amendment from consideration; this allowed the Boland amendment to be voted on in the House. The final vote was unanimous, 411-0, with twenty-two abstentions. Both the amendment and the intelligence authorization bill were passed and incorporated into a two

³⁴Ibid., 29466.

³⁵Ibid., 29466.

hundred thirty-one billion dollar defense spending bill which was approved and sent on to the Senate.³⁶

In the Senate, Democrat Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York offered a similar measure to the Boland Amendment but the Senate failed to vote on it, instead opting to observe the provisions of the Boland amendment. The measure was endorsed by the Senate on December 22 and was soon signed into law.³⁷ The White House declared it would comply with the amendment, as the appropriations bill contained various aid packages that the Administration wished to enact immediately without forestalling the distribution of the aid with a philosophical debate.³⁸ However, the Administration still wished to vigorously pursue its policy in Central America. The stage was now set for confrontation.

The Administration could not afford to have this political opposition hold it back. Not only would it limit the scope of potential future operations, but it would make its policy appear as if it were being controlled by the Democrats in the Congress. The Democrats' proposals for Central America contained no provisions or guarantees that the Sandinistas would honor the terms of the proposals to the same degree as the United States and, in some cases, the proposals surrendered United States sovereignty in foreign policy decision making to other nations.

Despite the passage of the Boland Amendment, the Administration emerged from 1982 determined to press forward with its original policy in the coming year.

³⁶Associated Press, "House Votes to Bar U.S. Help to Rebels Fighting Nicaragua," *New York Times*, 9 December 1982, p. 8(A); "Department of Defense," *Congressional Record*, 29468-69.

³⁷Bernard Weinraub, "Congress Renews Curbs on Actions against Nicaragua," *New York Times*, 23 December 1982, pp. 1(A) and 6(A). As the Boland amendment was placed on an appropriations bill, it was valid only for the life of the appropriation, therefore, it expired after Fiscal Year 1983. Arnson, 106.

³⁸Weinraub, p. 1(A) and 6(A).

However, in order to make his policy successful, Reagan would have to make a more convincing argument for his policy not only to the Congress, but to the American public as well. The goal for stability in Central America would prove a challenge for Reagan for even though Congressional Democrats were only able to manage the passage of a spending restriction bill, their concerns had gained momentum, as had their numbers with the acquisition of eighteen seats in the House following the 1982 midterm elections.³⁹ This momentum would catch the public eye and the two opposing viewpoints would eventually come down to an ideological clash.

³⁹"How the Parties' Control has Shifted," *San Jose Mercury News*, 3 November 1982, p. 15(A).

1983

In 1983, the unstoppable force of the Administration's Central American policy met the immovable object of Congressional opposition. Tensions that had been fostering on both sides of the political spectrum finally came to a clash. In 1983, both the Administration and Democrats in the Congress would publicly compete in a war of opposing ideas, and the Administration emerged triumphant, despite initial setbacks with the Congress.

In order to succeed with its objectives in the face of Democratic opposition and restrictions, the Administration took its case for aid to the Contras to the American public. By capitalizing on anti-Communist Cold War beliefs, it cast Nicaragua in league with the Soviets and Cubans and as the force behind Central American turmoil, fermenting an unrest in the region that could closely affect the United States. In an April 15 speech, George Shultz, who replaced Alexander Haig as Secretary of State in mid-1982, launched the Administration's sales pitch to the public. He stated that Nicaragua had plans of subversion and conquest in Central America, that all nations in the region were in jeopardy as "target[s of] subversion from Nicaragua" and that the Soviets had plans to use Nicaragua as a base for nuclear missiles which could strike at the United States in five minutes.¹

Shultz portrayed the Nicaraguan situation as threatening not only to Central American nations but to the United States as well. Days earlier, Nicaraguan Defense Minister Humberto Ortega had said that if asked by the Soviets to place missiles on Nicaraguan soil, "we will examine the proposal and make our own decision."² Shultz

¹Don Oberdorfer, "Shultz Says Nicaragua Aims at 'All of Central America'," *Washington Post*, 16 April 1983, p. 18 (A); "President Reagan's Address on Central America to Joint Session of Congress," *New York Times*, 28 April 1983, p. 12 (A).

²Oberdorfer, "Shultz", p. 18 (A).

emphasized the strategic value of geography in the Cold War as a Communist Central America, along with Cuba in the Caribbean, would be geographically positioned at the underbelly of the United States and could threaten the nation should Communist influence spread further north. He made this clear when he said, "Central America is so close that its troubles automatically spill over onto us, so close that the strategic posture of its countries affect ours."³

The Administration's concerns over the Nicaraguan advance addressed the potential threat to neighboring Honduras. The nation of Honduras had traditionally seen its neighbors as potential threats and its feared a potential attack.⁴ Honduras had ample reason to fear Nicaragua when on April eighth, Nicaraguan radio announced the creation of a new board to export Marxism to Honduras.⁵ Shultz's speech coincided with a resolution of inquiry by Representative Tom Harkin (D., Iowa) requesting documents and details by the Administration to continue paramilitary operations in Nicaragua.⁶

Before a joint session of the Congress televised to the nation on April 27, Reagan reiterated the strategic value and importance of Central America to the United States. The President discussed how Nicaragua's anti-American presence in the region and a destabilized Central America could harm two-thirds of all United States foreign trade and oil shipments which passed through the Panama Canal. Reagan added that should a crisis develop in Europe requiring American assistance, half of all NATO supplies would pass

³Ibid.

⁴Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *U.S. Policy in Honduras and Nicaragua*, 98th Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 15 March 1983), 3-4.

⁵"President Reagan's Address," *New York Times*, p. 12 (A).

⁶Oberdorfer, "Shultz", p. 18(A).

through the Canal.⁷ A Nicaragua or Central America allied with the Soviets would neutralize potential American efforts overseas. Reagan emphasized Nicaragua's military potential by mentioning its current twenty-five thousand man army "supported by a militia of fifty thousand. It is the largest army in Central America supplemented by two thousand Cuban military and security advisors."⁸

The President gave the impression that Nicaragua would not change its ideology or its anti-American sentiment without outside influence when he stated,

The Government of Nicaragua has imposed a new dictatorship; it has refused to hold the elections it promised; it has seized control of most media and subjects all media to heavy prior censorship. . . . The people still have no freedom, no political rights and more poverty. Even worse than its predecessor, it is helping Cuba and the Soviets to destabilize our hemisphere.⁹

While addressing the potential Nicaraguan threat, Reagan moved to quell potential fears that it might become a Vietnam of the 1980s.

We do not seek [the Government of Nicaragua's] overthrow. Our interest is to insure that it does not infect its neighbors through the export of subversion and violence. Our purpose, in conformity with American and international law, is to prevent the flow of arms into El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Costa Rica. . . . To those who invoke the memory of Vietnam: There is no thought of sending American combat troops to Central America.¹⁰

Reagan recognized the importance of maintaining American credibility abroad when he stated toward the end of his address,

If the United States cannot respond to a threat near our own borders, why should the Europeans or Asians believe that we are seriously concerned about threats to them? . . . The national security of all the Americas is at

⁷"President Reagan's Address," *New York Times*, p. 12(A).

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

stake in Central America. If we cannot defend ourselves there, we cannot expect to prevail elsewhere. Our credibility would collapse, our alliances would crumble, and the safety of our homeland would be put in jeopardy. . . . Who among us would wish to bear responsibility for failing to meet our shared obligation?¹¹

Having cast the Sandinistas as the "bad guys" in Central America, Reagan publicly endorsed his "good guys" opposing the Sandinistas, the Contras. In a May fourth press conference, Reagan referred to the Contras as "freedom fighters" opposing a "government out of a barrel of a gun," fighting a revolution that had betrayed its original principles. Reagan mentioned in the May fourth press conference that the fighters had been "betrayed" by the Sandinistas when they did not follow through with their original revolutionary objectives, including free elections.¹² By describing the Contras as freedom fighters, Reagan had elevated them from common guerrilla fighters to a group with a purpose and a mission--freedom and democracy for Nicaragua.

Yet, the American public's doubts on the President's plan matched those of the Democrats in Congress. A poll conducted by the *Washington Post* found that many Americans believed that the Communists were acting covertly in Central America to absorb the region, but only three in ten saw it as a serious threat. Furthermore, increased American involvement in the region was opposed by the public by more than three to one.¹³ Reagan combatted this belief in a news conference on July 26 when he stated that "there is no comparison with Vietnam and there's not going to be anything of

¹¹Ibid.

¹²"Transcript of President's News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Matters," *New York Times*, 5 May 1983, p. 22(D).

¹³Barry Sussman, "Spreading of Communism Considered Lesser Threat," *Washington Post*, 25 May 1983, pp. 1(A) and 20(A).

that kind in this." Reagan denounced his critics as spreading suspicion of "an ulterior purpose" in Nicaragua.¹⁴

Opposition to Reagan's policy continued in the Democratically-controlled House of Representatives. Chairman of the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs Michael D. Barnes of Maryland took the first shot by denouncing the Administration's Nicaraguan policy and the United States' support of Honduras. The Administration increased military assistance to the Hondurans and made agreements for greater American accessibility to Honduran airfields. To Barnes, the Administration was "fanning the flames" of a potentially volatile situation "rather than proposing solutions."¹⁵

Barnes also claimed that the Administration was "making a bad situation into what could be disaster" by sponsoring Sandinista opposition. Barnes maintained that, "in spite of the will of the Congress," the Administration was providing "help to the groups that were attempting to overthrow the Government of Nicaragua."¹⁶ Barnes introduced a bill in early March to expand the Boland Amendment. The bill would reinforce the terms of the original amendment, make Congressional and Administration policy "absolutely clear" that the United States had no objectives nor any intent to overthrow the Sandinistas, and state that the United States would abide by existing treaties with Central American nations. Eventually, this would become the Boland-Zablocki bill, H.R. 2760. The bill would also prohibit American support of military or paramilitary forces or operations to overthrow the Sandinistas.¹⁷

¹⁴Lou Cannon, "Reagan Says US Seeking Peace in Central America," *Washington Post*, 27 July 1983, pp. 1(A) and 16(A).

¹⁵*U.S. Policy in Honduras and Nicaragua*, 1.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 1.

Republicans attacked H.R. 2760 as it included no provisions forcing Nicaragua to honor the neutrality of other Central American nations. In addition, the bill, by terminating support, could expand the regional conflict and eventually draw in American personnel.¹⁸ Congressman Henry Hyde, Republican of Illinois, defended the use of covert action and summed up the Conservative view on the Nicaraguan situation by stating,

Deterrence is not measurable. . . . The stakes are freedom versus slavery, and we had better understand what the stakes are, and not trust to negotiate everything with people whose only aim is to overcome you and overwhelm you and to spread the revolution.¹⁹

Congressional debate on the legality and morality of the Administration's policy continued. The day after Reagan's address to the Congress, Congressman Robert G. Torricelli, Democrat from New Jersey, who returned on April 11 from a fact-finding mission in Central America with Congressman Berkley Bedell, Democrat of Iowa, attempted to discredit the President's remarks by submitting his findings on the House floor. After meeting with Sandinista leaders, the two Congressmen were told that Nicaragua had no intentions of receiving Soviet missiles and that success for American policy lay in appealing "to the best . . . aspirations of these struggling people."²⁰ Certain Congressional members also expressed fear that covert action in Nicaragua could prompt a skirmish between Nicaragua and her neighbors that could expand into a regional war.²¹

¹⁸Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Concerning U.S. Military and Paramilitary Operations in Nicaragua*, 98th Cong., 1st. Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 18 May, and 6, 7 June 1983), 54-56.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 21-22.

²⁰Congress, House, "Report on Trip to Nicaragua and El Salvador," 98th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record* (28 April 1983), vol. 129, pt. 8, 10453-54.

²¹Congress, House, "Remarks of Silvio O. Conte of Massachusetts on Covert Actions in Nicaragua," 98th Cong., 1st. Sess., *Congressional Record* (14 April 1983), vol. 129, pt. 7, 8664.

The House Democrats were also finding allies within the Administration with Thomas O. Enders, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. On April 12, Enders addressed the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on American policy toward Nicaragua. Enders cited Honduran-Nicaraguan border conflicts currently raging in the area and the "dangerous situation" that could develop if the Cubans or Soviets should enter on the Nicaraguan side. Enders also noted the Sandinistas' reluctance to negotiate with American officials on bringing a peaceful settlement to the Central American conflict, but he stated the Department of State was "not going to give up" in its quest to seek negotiations, fearing the situation could escalate without some attempt at dialogue.²² Enders then made a statement to the Republican-controlled Senate that would give House Democrats fuel for their cause against Reagan and the Administration.

Clearly there is a better way. It is through dialog and negotiation. . . . The answer is democratization and dialogue among neighbors. The purpose of U.S. policy in the area is to create conditions in which the area can be removed from the East-West conflict, the import of offensive weapons and mutual support for insurgencies ended, and the democratic transformation of each society achieved, . . . negotiations among all the Central American countries and negotiations within countries can provide an opportunity for all groups to compete in the voting booth rather than on the battlefield.²³

The Administration, in an attempt to keep the Contras alive, opened negotiations on May 24 with House Democrats on a plan which would permit the Congress to vote on covert operations in Nicaragua once a Presidential finding was submitted to the Congress. Should the finding state that the operation was in the national interest, the Congress would vote on and, if necessary, veto the operation within thirty days. However, the

²²Congress, Senate, "The Nicaraguan Threat to Central American Peace," 98th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record* (28 April 1983), vol. 129, pt. 8, 10383-86; Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Policy Towards Nicaragua and Central America*, 98th Cong., 1st Sess., (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 12 April 1983), 9-10; Moreno, 106-7.

²³*U.S. Policy Towards Nicaragua and Central America*, 10-11.

House Democrats expressed doubt that the Administration would actually allow the Congress to veto covert operations and expressed further concern over the growing numbers of the Contra force and the increasing amount of Contra activity.²⁴

The House opposition to the President's plan increased when the House met in a secret session to debate the necessity of the covert war on July 19. Representatives Don Edwards and George Miller, both California Democrats, returned from a fact finding mission to Central America and fuelled Congressional fears by stating that "there's a big invasion going on right now" and the "secret war in Nicaragua is much more extensive than the American public has been led to believe."²⁵ Republican Congressman Don Ritter from Pennsylvania, invoking the Monroe Doctrine, countered their statements by indicating the Cubans and Soviets had employed a "massive commitment" of arms to Leftist forces in the Central American region.²⁶ Faced with mounting opposition in the House, Reagan stepped up his own counter-offensive.

At the suggestion of National Security Council (NSC) Director William Clark, Reagan dispatched Jeane Kirkpatrick on the Administration's own fact finding trip to Central America. She returned after ten days stating the Salvadoran government and army were demoralized over the shaky status of American support. In Kirkpatrick's view, possible talks of negotiations by Enders and the State Department would endanger the anti-Communist plan.²⁷ The NSC under William Clark took a more aggressive posture, beginning with the reassignment of Thomas Enders as ambassador to Spain on May 27 on

²⁴Don Oberdorfer, "White House Seeks Accord in Dispute Over Nicaragua," *Washington Post*, 25 May 1983, pp. 1(A) and 20(A).

²⁵George Lardner, Jr., and Fred Hiatt, "House Meets in Secret on War in Nicaragua," *Washington Post*, 20 July 1983, pp. 1(A) and 10(A).

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷Moreno, 104-6.

grounds that Enders had compromised the position of the Administration and the President.

Contra activity was augmented to the point where the original five hundred man force had increased to ten thousand by July 1983, according to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).²⁸ The Contra attacks, too, became more aggressive. The Contras stepped up their attacks against Nicaraguan port facilities and oil pipelines, and raids were conducted to establish liberated zones in Northern Nicaragua, close to the Honduran border. A Presidential finding of July 26 stated that the Contras were unable to significantly halt arms shipments to El Salvador. In a policy of reciprocity, the finding suggested the Contras attack the Sandinistas to the same degree that the Salvadoran rebels were attacking the Salvadoran government.²⁹ That same finding also pushed for more Contra aid to fund a larger force of upwards to twelve to fifteen thousand men.³⁰

The American military launched large-scale military exercises in conjunction with the Honduran military on July 21 with twelve thousand American troops and two United States Navy battle groups. Code-named Operation Big Pine II, the plan was to be a show of force to the Sandinistas and their Leftist allies in the region but also to "convince Americans that they are threatened by the Soviet and Cuban presence in the region."³¹ A similar action, Operation Big Pine I, had taken place in February with two thousand United States personnel.³² Internationally, Reagan used diplomacy to persuade Western

²⁸*The Chronology*, 30; Fred Hiatt, "CIA Operation in Nicaragua," *Washington Post*, 27 July 1983, pp. 1(A) and 14(A); Moreno, 107-8.

²⁹Hiatt, pp. 1(A) and 14(A); Moreno, 108.

³⁰Hiatt, pp. 1(A) and 14(A).

³¹Lou Cannon, "Maneuvers Part of a New Latin Plan," *Washington Post*, 22 July 1983, pp. 1(A) and 14(A); Moreno, 108-9.

³²Lardner, pp. 1(A) and 14(A).

European countries to halt any potential shipments or sales of military equipment or military hardware to Nicaragua.³³ Reagan's noose around the Central American Leftists and the Sandinistas was beginning to tighten.

The aggressive policy suggested by the NSC set the theme and goals of the President's plan in Central America: keep the pressure on the Communists constant, consistent and heavy. However, the House was unfettered by Reagan's boldness in the domestic and international area. After three days of debate, the House voted on July 28 to end support for covert operations against Nicaragua, 228-195, with the passage of H.R. 2760.³⁴

At this point, the House Democrats had their victory--they stood up to the Administration and won. Reagan and the hard-liners in the Administration suffered an embarrassing setback in the implementation of their policy. However, this was but one battle that had been lost--a new campaign was about to commence.

The Administration sought support from the Senate, in particular, the Senate Intelligence Committee (SIC). The Committee initially rejected the Administration's plans for an increased scope of operations for the Contras but indicated that they would favor continuing the Contra operation if their military objectives could be made agreeable to the SIC. On August 3, CIA Director William Casey briefed the SIC on the need for covert operations in Nicaragua. On September 20, Casey submitted a proposal to the committee which called for expanding the Contras to fifteen thousand men, and he emphasized the need to attack Nicaraguan economic installations. This plan was found agreeable by the SIC.³⁵

³³Moreno, 109.

³⁴*The Chronology*, 34; Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Congress and Foreign Policy, 1983*, report prepared by Hon. Dante B. Fascell, 98th Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 51.

³⁵Arnson, 136-37; *The Chronology*, 34, 37.

This coincided with a Presidential finding on September 19 which emphasized the need for renewed Contra support. The finding reiterated the need for funding the Contras to prevent the flow of arms through the Central American region and forcing the Sandinista government to turn their attention toward their own country and away from its neighbors. In addition, the finding stressed the objective of forcing the Sandinistas to "cease provision of arms, training, command and control facilities and sanctuary to the leftist guerillas in El Salvador."³⁶

The finding included an additional spin: future operations would attempt "to bring the Sandinistas into meaningful negotiations and constructive, verifiable agreement with their neighbors on peace in the region."³⁷ If the United States increased the pressure on Nicaragua directly, the Sandinistas' ability to export its assistance to Central American rebels would be limited. Furthermore, negotiations, once sought so eagerly by the House Democrats, could ultimately be pursued but, as a more crucial strategic political victory for Reagan, the Administration would set the agenda. The finding appealed to the SIC since it allowed the United States to "seek support of and work with foreign governments and organizations as appropriate to carry out this program."³⁸ The number of supporters for the Contras could increase and, thus, they would not be the sole responsibility of the Administration or the United States.

On the day before the House would vote again on renewing Contra aid, the President defended the right of the United States to use covert activity as a tool of foreign policy. Giving the speech at a time when the Contras had accelerated their attacks against the

³⁶*The Chronology*, 37.

³⁷Amson, 137; *The Chronology*, 37.

³⁸Amson, 137.

Sandinistas, Reagan stated he did "believe in the right of a country, when it believes its interests are best served, to practice covert activity."³⁹

However, the House did not agree with Reagan's assessment of the policy's goals and on October 20, in a vote on a military appropriations bill, voted 227-194 to deny American support for the Contras. Led by Edward Boland (D., Mass.), the House Democrats believed the Administration's policy had become irresponsible and uncontrollable by escalating attacks to economic targets, such as the ports and oil pipelines. However, the overall bill was passed by the House 243-171 and sent onto the Senate.⁴⁰

Boland expressed the House Democrats' concern when he stated the Administration was "waging war in Nicaragua--and make no mistake about it, this is exactly what the United States is doing. . . . Military victory is the Administration's bottom line."⁴¹ As an additional insult to the President's plan, the House Appropriations Committee reported a bill to prevent the Administration from using the CIA's contingency funds to assist operations in Nicaragua without Congressional approval.⁴² The contingency funds, used for CIA "emergencies" abroad, could have easily funnelled much needed dollars to the Contras. The ideological deadlock continued but Reagan still had one option left--the Republican-controlled Senate.

The Senate, since the authorization of the September 19 finding, wished to continue support of covert operations in Nicaragua. A bill introduced by SIC Chairman Barry

³⁹Joanne Omang, "Reagan Defends U.S. Right to Use Covert Activity," *Washington Post*, 20 October 1983, pp. 1(A) and 30(A).

⁴⁰Hedrick Smith, "House Again Votes Against Financing Nicaragua Rebels," *New York Times*, 21 October 1983, pp. 1(A) and 8(A).

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

Goldwater (R., AZ) earlier in March stated that funding for covert actions in Nicaragua could continue provided the President authorized a finding to the Senate outlining the necessity for and range of covert operations in that country. The bill was eventually passed by the SIC.⁴³ The SIC's deputy chairman Daniel Moynihan stated that the scope of covert operations in Nicaragua had been reduced by the Administration in accordance with the SIC's final wishes, thus limiting operations to intercepting Sandinista aid to Leftist insurgents in Central America.⁴⁴ With the policy redefined and made clear, the Senate on November 3 appropriated by voice vote nineteen million dollars to continue covert operations in Nicaragua and incorporated into the appropriations bill. Supporters of the bill had reiterated Reagan's belief that "covert aid had long been recognized as a tool of foreign policy."⁴⁵ In order to head off a stalemate on passage of the bill, a compromise would have to be reached.

House and Senate members conferred on a new military appropriations bill for fiscal year 1984. It was here that a compromise was finally reached. In exchange for requiring the CIA to petition the Congress for additional funding for covert operations in Nicaragua and preventing the CIA from using its contingency funds to aid the Contras, the House would agree to appropriate funds to the Contras.⁴⁶ After three days of debate, the Goldwater bill was amended and the House and Senate on November eighth adopted the \$250 billion military appropriations bill which included twenty-four million dollars to

⁴³*Congress and Foreign Policy, 1983, 52.*

⁴⁴Arnsion, 138; Martin Tolchin, "Secret U.S. Action in Nicaragua Gets Senate Approval," *New York Times*, 4 November 1983, pp. 1(A) and 8(A).

⁴⁵Tolchin, "Secret," pp. 1(A) and 8(A).

⁴⁶Arnsion, 138; Martin Tolchin, "Sandinistas' Foes to Get New U.S. Aid," *New York Times*, 19 November 1983, p. 8(A).

the Contras.⁴⁷ In the end, the Reagan Administration triumphed--funding of the covert war in Nicaragua would continue as would his Central American policy, albeit with funding limitations.

The President and Administration knew that deterrence, not negotiations, in Central America would stabilize the region, insuring the hopes for democracy, and reducing the Communist influence in the region. Yet, Reagan included the possibility of dialogue in his plan in an attempt to gather further support from House Democrats and a wavering American public. Those talks would be implemented not through appeals and requests, but through direct action by the use of covert aid. The idea of peace through strength was conceived in 1983 and would become paramount in the promotion of Reagan's policy.

⁴⁷*Congress and Foreign Policy, 1983*, 53; Tolchin, "Sandinistas'," p. 8(A)

1984-1985

The years 1984 and 1985 saw both the potential for the demise of the President's Central American policy and its eventual success. Initially, Reagan's policy seemed doomed to capitulation when, following Congressional backlash over a reported Central Intelligence Agency role in the mining of the harbors of Nicaragua, funding for the Contras was terminated. The objectives sought by the Democrats appeared to be coming to the forefront. However, the Administration, led by the President, maintained its original goals and objectives for Central America--containment of the Sandinistas and Nicaragua--and in 1985, they were able to resume their plan. Combined with bipartisan support, Reagan and his Administration were able to promote their objectives in Central America and eventually secure a successful foreign policy in Central America by using the Contras.

On July 19, 1983, President Reagan issued Executive Order 12433, commissioning a bipartisan study to investigate the interests of United States in Central America and foreign threats to those interests. The study group, containing members of both the Administration and Congressional Democrats and headed by former Nixon Administration Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, was to provide advice to the President and the Congress on the best course of foreign policy towards Central America. The report was officially made public on January 11, 1984.¹

The report analyzed the implications to American interests in the region and for the region itself. It addressed the damaging effects anti-democratic insurgencies had on promoting stability to the region, mainly due to their extreme ideology and their potential to undermine democratic governments. The report also cited the dangers that Marxist-Leninist regimes like the Sandinistas would represent to the United States and

¹*The Chronology*, 51.

their Central American allies in times of conflict, as those regimes would tend to side with the Soviet bloc.² It further stated that Communist regimes near the southern border of the United States would strain American military border defense resources, threaten shipping lanes, and reduce the influence of the United States internationally. The report concluded that the "triumph of hostile forces in what the Soviets call the 'strategic rear' of the United States would be read as a sign of U.S. impotence."³ Therefore, according to the report, the future of the Central American region was based on the United States enacting three principles--democratic self-determination, encouragement of economic development and cooperation in dealing with security threats to the region.⁴

The bipartisan report declared, in regards to Nicaragua, that the Sandinistas would "pose a continuing threat to the region" and therefore, conditions had to be created in "which Nicaragua [could] take its place as a peaceful and democratic member of the Central American community."⁵ To accomplish these objectives and the original three principles proposed by the report, the Commission recommended that the United States "recognize the linkage between democratization and security in the region," develop a regional peace system to monitor compliance with peace provisions and endorse

²United States, National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, *The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America* (New York: MacMillian Publishing Company, 1984), 104, 109-11.

³Ibid., 111.

⁴Ibid., 14-16.

⁵Ibid., 5, 129, 136-37.

continued aid to the Contras" to promote negotiations for a regional settlement in Central America."⁶

The conclusions of the bipartisan commission presented a new opportunity for the success of the President's policy. Now, the Contras could be used to bring the Sandinistas to the bargaining table. Reagan, using the objectives and policies outlined in the report, could actively pursue peace and democracy in Nicaragua and Central America through negotiations. In effect, they would endorse a policy of peace through strength.

With the proposals and objectives set forth by the Commission and with increased United States-Nicaragua tensions following the downing of an American military helicopter by the Sandinistas, the Senate took the first step in granting aid to the Contras. On March 13, the Senate Intelligence Committee (SIC) approved twenty-one million dollars in aid. The following day, the Senate Appropriations Committee (SAC) approved the aid as an amendment to a one hundred fifty million dollar African drought package.⁷ When Republican Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska quoted the President in stating that the overthrow of the Sandinistas was not the objective of the Administration, the Senate voted 76-19 to endorse the package. The bill passed despite warnings from House Speaker Thomas O'Neill (D., Mass.) that the bill would face strong opposition in the House of Representatives.⁸

⁶*Report of the President's Commission*, 136; Hedrick Smith, "Kissinger Panel Reported to Back Aid to the Nicaraguan Guerrillas," *New York Times*, 9 January 1984, pp. 1(A) and 4(A).

⁷B. Drummond Ayers, Jr., "Senate Unit Backs Aid for Salvador," *New York Times*, 15 March 1984, pp. 1(A) and 13(A); Francis X. Clines, "One Senate Panel Approves Aid for the Nicaraguan Rebels," *New York Times*, 14 March 1984, pp. 1(A) and 4(A); Edward Cody, "Nicaragua Says it Shot Across Border at Chopper," *Washington Post*, 18 January 1984, p. 28A.

⁸Hedrick Smith, "Sandinistas' Foes and El Salvador Win a Senate Vote," *New York Times*, 6 April 1984, pp. 1(A) and 4(A).

Despite the Administration's initial victory for its plan in the Senate, its hopes for passage of the aid were short-lived. Nicaragua in early April filed a complaint against the United States in the World Court on charges that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had assisted in the mining the ports of Nicaragua. The Congress quickly responded on April 10 when the Senate voted 84-12 to condemn the mining. The House followed suit two days later with the passage of House Congressional Resolution 290, which forbade the appropriation of funds for the mining of Nicaraguan ports, 281-111.⁹ With the disclosure of the mining, O'Neill charged that the President's policy was "morally and legally indefensible." O'Neill further declared that the House would deny the Contras the twenty-one million dollars in aid, which caused concern in the Administration when Intelligence officials announced that the twenty-four million dollars in funds allocated to the Contras in 1983 would expire by mid-April.¹⁰

In wake of the incident, ten Congressional Democrats, including Michael Barnes of Maryland, Edward Boland of Massachusetts and House Majority Leader James Wright of Texas, drafted the "Dear Commandante" letter to Daniel Ortega. In the letter, the Congressmen pledged their support in opposing any United States military action against Nicaragua and urged Ortega to press forward with free elections. The Congressmen stated that those who "support violence" against the Sandinistas would have "far greater difficulty in winning support for their policies" in the future.¹¹ The letter was exposed

⁹Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The Mining of Nicaraguan Ports and Harbors*, 98th Cong., 2d Sess., H. Con. Res. 290 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 11 April 1984), 1, 59; Martin Tolchin, "House Vote Opposes Mining of Nicaraguan Ports," *New York Times*, 13 April 1984, p. 4(A).

¹⁰Philip Taubman, "House to Block Aid for Rebels, O'Neill Asserts," *New York Times*, 10 April 1984, pp. 1(A) and 6(A); Tolchin, "House Vote," p. 4(A).

¹¹Congress, House, "Dear Commandante," 98th Cong., 2d Sess., *Congressional Record* (24 April 1984), vol. 130, pt. 7, 9748-49; Steven V. Roberts, "Letter to Nicaragua: 'Dear Commandante'," *New York Times*, 20 April 1984, p. 14(A).

by Georgia Republican Newt Gingrich who saw the letter as a violation of the separation of constitutional powers, undercutting the President's policies and his efforts to negotiate with a foreign government.¹²

The fallout over the disclosure of the letter allowed the Administration to retrieve some political face. As both Barnes and Boland were members of committees privy to sensitive information regarding Nicaragua, their letter could be interpreted by the Administration as a potential compromise of national security as well as Presidential authority in foreign policy. With a national election approaching, if the President's policy were scuttled by the Congress, Reagan would be able to capitalize on the issue at the polls by portraying the Democrats as Sandinista sympathizers.

Reagan pressed forward with his plan on May ninth by taking the issue to the American people. In a national address on Central America, he clearly stated his objective of promoting "democracy and economic well being" in the Central American region, despite Cuban and Nicaraguan efforts, "aided and abetted by the Soviet Union," to forestall the process. Reagan used the Sandinistas' forestalling free elections as proof that they were not committed to peaceful solutions. Reagan further cited the Sandinistas' demonstration against Pope John Paul II's visit to Managua and their genocidal policy against the indigenous Miskito Indians of Nicaragua as evidence that the Sandinistas would not change their political ways without some form of domestic opposition.¹³ The Senate had endorsed the President's plan by defeating two Democratic proposals to terminate aid to the Contras. The bills were sponsored by Edward Kennedy of

¹²"Dear Commandante," *Congressional Record*, 9748; Roberts, p. 14(A).

¹³Congress, Senate, "The President's Address on Central America," 98th Cong., 2d Sess., *Congressional Record* (10 May 1984), vol. 130, pt. 9, 11705-7.

Massachusetts and Daniel Innouye of Hawaii; they were defeated 61-31 and 58-38, respectively.¹⁴

The Administration's attack on the Sandinistas continued when the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) uncovered evidence of Sandinista involvement in cocaine smuggling to the United States. An affidavit confirmed that Sandinista military personnel had assisted in transferring cocaine to planes bound for the United States and that the operation was coordinated by Frederico Vaughan, an aide to the Nicaraguan Minister of the Interior, Thomas Borge. A surveillance photograph by the DEA augmented the charges as it showed the cocaine-loading operation and placed Sandinista military personnel, Vaughan, and Pablo Escobar at the site.¹⁵ Congressman William Broomfield, Republican of Michigan, attacked the Sandinistas for "trying to weaken the fabric of American society by the introduction of more narcotics into our country."¹⁶

The Administration received further justification for the continuation of the President's policy when Bayardo Arce, a member of the Sandinista Directorate, described the upcoming free elections in Nicaragua as "bothersome" and "out of place." He declared that the elections "would not have been scheduled had it not been for U.S. pressures." Arce maintained that with a Sandinista victory, a "red constitution" could be established and the "facade of political pluralism" could be removed with the Sandinistas

¹⁴Martin Tolchin, "Senate Bars Limit on Military Role in Latin America," *New York Times*, 19 June 1984, pp. 1(A) and 11(A).

¹⁵Congress, House, "The Seamier Side of the Sandinistas," 98th Cong., 2d Sess., *Congressional Record* (9 August 1984), vol. 130, pt. 17, 23623; Mary Thornton, and Joanne Omang, "DEA Agent Avers Sandinista Officials Abet Cocaine Smuggling into U.S.," *Washington Post*, 20 July 1984, p. 24(A). Pablo Escobar was a high ranking member of the Medellin Drug Cartel.

¹⁶"Seamier Side," *Congressional Record*, 23623.

emerging as the dominant factor in Nicaraguan politics without the future need for elections.¹⁷

Reagan now had evidence of Sandinista activity that had a direct impact on American society and the American social structure. Yet, his plans would come up against a formidable obstacle: negative public opinion. By mid-1984, only thirty-seven percent of the voting public had any knowledge of the happenings in Nicaragua and the majority of that block had taken the same view of some Democrats that involvement by the United States in Central America would spur a new Vietnam. Furthermore, the Contras, characterized as militant rebels, represented a contrary view to Reagan's "Morning in America" campaign, which portrayed Reagan's America as non-violent and benevolent. Presidential pollster Richard Wirthlin convinced the reelection staff that the issue of the Contras was "pure poison" to the success of Reagan's reelection bid. Therefore, the Reagan reelection campaign opted to keep Central America and the Contras from becoming a campaign issue that could damage the President. As a result, the Administration decided not to pursue the issue vigorously for the remainder of the election year.¹⁸

The inaction by the Administration gave its opponents the opportunity to seize the initiative. House opposition, led by Boland, used the upcoming Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1985 (Public Law 98-618) to prohibit funding for the Contras by any government agency involved in "intelligence and intelligence-related activities."¹⁹

¹⁷Juan O. Tamayo, "Nicaraguan Decries Need for Vote," *Washington Post*, 8 August 1984, p. 18(A).

¹⁸Mayer, 15-17.

¹⁹*The Chronology*, 66-68; Congress, House, "Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1985," 98th Cong., 2d Sess., *Congressional Record* (11 October 1984), vol. 130, pt. 23, 32246. The National Security Council (NSC) was deemed exempt from the prohibition for unlike the National Security Agency, an entity of the United States Government listed in the Authorization Act, the NSC was regarded as an extension of the Executive Branch and was not listed in the act. Therefore, the NSC was "not covered in the prohibition." Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North was placed on non-reimbursement detail to

As the House had yet to authorize aid to the Contras as the Senate did in April, both houses were forced into a joint resolution. Boland proposed another amendment on October 11 to prohibit any funds for supporting the Contras until February 28, 1985. After the set date, fourteen million dollars in funds could be allocated for the Contras should the President certify that the Sandinistas were supporting insurrectionist forces in Central America, and providing that the request for a release of the funds was approved by a joint resolution of the Congress.²⁰ As the provision required the support of both houses, either house could terminate the funding with a simple majority vote. The amendment, which became known as the Second Boland Amendment, or Boland II, was agreed to and passed by the House in mid October.²¹ If the Democrats failed in their attempt to implement their own policies, they still would emerge victorious for they stymied the President's plans.

Nicaragua held elections on November fourth and the Sandinistas overwhelmingly trounced their opponents, capturing sixty-three percent of the vote, with the two major opposition parties receiving eleven and thirteen percent. Both the United States and Sandinista opposition candidates maintained that fraud had been rampant in the election and that the results had been determined in advance due to extensive Sandinista control over the components of the electoral process.²² The President's policy appeared to be in

the NSC, as he received no payment for his service with the Council. *The Chronology*, 66-68; "Intelligence Authorization Act," *Congressional Record*, 32246.

²⁰Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1984*, report prepared by the Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, 98th Cong., 2d Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985), Committee Print, 35; "Intelligence Authorization Act for FY 1985," *Congressional Record*, 32248-49.

²¹*The Chronology*, 66-67; *Congress and Foreign Policy 1984*, 35.

²²Gordon Mott, "Sandinista Claims Big Election Victory," *New York Times*, 6 November 1984, p. 3(A).

a state of collapse. However, events would soon turn in favor of the Administration, beginning on November sixth, 1984.

Election night 1984 provided the second Reagan landslide. Reagan secured fifty-nine percent of the popular vote and five hundred twenty five electoral votes against his opponent Walter Mondale, who secured only thirteen electoral votes. By 11:07 EST, Reagan had become the first President since Eisenhower to secure consecutive landslides. Furthermore, the GOP wrested seventeen seats in the House away from the Democrats.²³

Momentum for the new Administration offensive began with the reelection of the President by a substantial margin. Following his triumphant victory at the polls, Reagan took the lead in reviving his Central American policy. To resume pressure on the Sandinistas, United States military personnel and vessels were dispatched to the region to conduct military exercises.²⁴ At the beginning of 1985, a Contra leader publicly appealed for continued United States support in order to prevent the further erosion of the Democratic process in Central America.²⁵ The revived momentum of the President's policy became even more apparent in the State of the Union Address delivered on February sixth, 1985, where the President announced what would later become known as "The Reagan Doctrine." The address focused on all facets of the President's vision for America, ranging from economic issues to social matters to the exploration of space. The final portion of the address was reserved for foreign affairs. In that section, Reagan called for American solidarity with those peoples "who are risking their lives--on

²³"The Landslide," *San Jose Mercury News*, 7 November 1984, p. 20(A); Mayer, 17.

²⁴Fred Hiatt, "Battleship Set for Latin Deployment," *Washington Post*, 27 July 1984, p. 18(A); Fred Hiatt, "Seven Exercises Going on as U.S. Continues Nicaragua Pressure: Managua 'Designs' on Neighbors Seen," *Washington Post*, 14 November 1984, pp. 1(A) and 22(A).

²⁵Joanne Omang, "Sandinista Foe Backs 'Contra' Aid," *Washington Post*, 4 January 1985, p. 18(A).

every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua--to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours since birth."²⁶

Reagan went further when he said,

The Sandinista dictatorship of Nicaragua, with full Cuban Soviet-bloc support, not only persecutes its people, the church and denies a free press but arms and provides bases for communist terrorists attacking neighboring states. Support for freedom fighters is self-defense and totally consistent with the OAS [Organization of American States] and UN [United Nations] charters. It is essential that the Congress continue all facets of our assistance to Central America. I want to work with you to support the democratic forces whose struggle is tied to our own security.²⁷

Reagan's statement immediately put the Democrats on the political defensive. When Reagan declared that he wanted to "work" with the Congress, he publicly called for a union of the Executive and Legislative branches to formulate and apply a successful policy in Central America. Reagan had extended an olive branch to the Congress in a call for unity on the issue.

The Democrats appeared intimidated in their response to the President's State of the Union Address. In the response, Democratic National Committee Chairman Paul G. Kirk, Jr. confirmed that the "resounding reelection victory" of President Reagan was regarded as a "placement of trust by the American people." Arkansas governor Bill Clinton, who narrated the response, acknowledged that the Democrats had been delivered a "resounding defeat" in November and stated the party "knows it has to change."²⁸ While the Democrats were busy regrouping following the election, Reagan and the Administration

²⁶"Text of President Reagan's State of the Union Address," *Washington Post*, 7 February 1985, pp. 16(A) and 17(A).

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸Helen Dewar, "Democrats Defensive in Response," *Washington Post*, 7 February 1985, pp. 1(A) and 17(A).

promoted the policy outlined in the Kissinger report--use the Contras to pressure the Sandinistas and bring the Nicaraguan government to the peace table.

The Administration pressed its proposals to the Congress and the public. In a letter to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Secretary of State George Shultz clearly defined Administration objectives in Nicaragua as not to destabilize or overthrow the Sandinista government, but to bring about "changes in behavior" by the Sandinistas. These changes called for ending support for Nicaragua by Communist nations, severing Nicaragua's ties to Cuba and the Soviets, reducing of the Sandinista military, and fostering true democracy in the region. Through diplomatic, economic and political pressures and activities, the Administration sought to convince "the government of Nicaragua that its aggressive and destabilizing behavior carries a price."²⁹

The Department of Defense documented that within 1984 alone, eighteen thousand metric tons of Soviet military equipment were delivered to Nicaragua. The Sandinistas were in possession of one hundred fifty T-55 tanks, fifty Howitzer artillery pieces and a number of sophisticated Mi-24 Hind attack helicopters. The Department of State concluded that such a buildup constituted a direct threat to the Central American region and urged strong action to counter potential aggression, declaring that "*Laisser passer* is not an option."³⁰

Shultz reiterated that the Administration's policy, "with its elements of pressure, is the only one that has any chance of influencing the Sandinistas to abandon their destabilizing and repressive behavior."³¹ Reagan backed up the need for continued

²⁹Congress, House, "U.S. Policy Toward Nicaragua," 99th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record*, vol. 131, no. 17, daily ed. (21 February 1985), E 570-71.

³⁰Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Soviet Posture in the Western Hemisphere*, 99th Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 28 February 1985), 7, 14, 22.

³¹"U.S. Policy Toward Nicaragua," *Congressional Record*, E 571.

pressure on Nicaragua in a public press conference on April fourth when he cited instances of negotiations between the Contras and Sandinistas that had been refused by the Nicaraguan government.³²

In late February, Administration spokesmen cited the fact that Nicaragua declared that it had cancelled further MiG purchases and sent one hundred Cuban military advisors back to Cuba as evidence that their policy was working. In light of this event, Reagan submitted a finding in April to the Congress to increase aid to the Contras.³³

The final push in the President's policy came with an address and initiative by the President on April fourth. The February 28 waiting period set forth in Boland II was now past, and Reagan called on the Congress to allocate the fourteen million dollars mentioned in Boland II towards non-lethal humanitarian aid for the Contras. The Reagan initiative called for talks between the Contras and Sandinistas, mediated by the Catholic Church, and a sixty day cease-fire between the two factions. Should the talks fail, more money would be allocated for military aid for the Contras.³⁴ In a radio address in mid-April, Reagan continued his call for renewed Contra aid as he described the Soviet-bloc's aid to the Sandinistas over the past year while the Congress had withheld funds from the Contras. Using a *New York Times* article as a reference, Reagan said that the Sandinistas pinned their "hopes on Congress" that it would block further aid to the Contras. Coupled with the

³²"Transcript of President Reagan's Remarks on Central America," *Washington Post*, 5 April 1985, p. 23(A).

³³Congress, Senate, "Report on U.S. Support for Democratic Resistance in Nicaragua-Message from the President-PM34," 99th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record*, vol. 131, no. 41, daily ed. (3 April 1985), S 3996; Don Oberdorfer, and David Hoffman, "Administration Dismisses Nicaraguan Overtures as Insignificant," *Washington Post*, 1 March 1985, pp. 1(A) and 15(A).

³⁴David Hoffman, "Reagan Launches New Initiative for 'Contra' Aid," *Washington Post*, 5 April 1985, pp. 1(A) and 22(A).

Sandinista military buildup, Reagan declared the Contras would be "most vulnerable" if the Congress failed to appropriate aid.³⁵

Debate over the issue raged in both houses of the Congress on April 23 as the bill came up for a vote. The Congressmen had acknowledged in their debates that the Contras had neither the manpower nor the military resources to successfully overthrow the Sandinistas. Furthermore, they concluded that fourteen million dollars in humanitarian aid would serve the President's objectives in bringing the Sandinistas to the bargaining table.³⁶ Members of the Congress, including many Democrats, recognized that the Administration did not seek the overthrow of the Sandinistas.

Democrats in the Senate, too, acknowledged the necessity for maintaining pressure on Nicaragua in order to maintain the potential for peace proposals. David Boren of Oklahoma reiterated this point when he stated, "remove all American pressure, remove it now, send a message to [the Sandinistas] that we will not support the Contras That is a guaranteed way to torpedo negotiations, to torpedo any movement towards freedom in Nicaragua."³⁷ Sam Nunn of Georgia declared a "No" vote on aid to the Contras would be interpreted by the Sandinistas and the Soviet bloc as "the end of all aid for the Contras; a victory for the Sandinistas; withdrawal of the U.S. from further active involvement concerning Nicaragua. I feel these results are unacceptable."³⁸

³⁵Congress, Senate, "Radio Address of the President to the Nation," 99th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record*, vol. 131, no. 47, daily ed. (22 April 1985), S 4434-35.

³⁶Congress, House, "Making Appropriations for Aid to Nicaragua," 99th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record*, vol. 131, no. 48, daily ed. (23 April 1985), H 2310, H 2366; Congress, Senate, "Funds for Supporting Military or Paramilitary Operations in Nicaragua," 99th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record*, vol. 131, no. 48, daily ed. (23 April 1985), S 4586.

³⁷"Funds for Supporting," *Congressional Record*, S 4592-93.

³⁸Congress, Senate, "Coalition for a Democratic Majority," 99th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record*, vol. 131, no. 48, daily ed. (23 April 1985), S 4595.

As debate on the issue continued in the Senate, seventy-five minutes before the final vote was taken, President Reagan delivered a letter to Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole of Kansas. In it, Reagan reiterated that the fourteen million dollars would only go to humanitarian aid but added that, as long as the Sandinistas honored the cease-fire and a reduction in their arms buildup, the Administration would "resume bilateral talks with the Government of Nicaragua." Furthermore, the Administration would encourage its representatives to press the cease-fire and church-mediated negotiations between the Contras and Sandinistas. The letter also stated it would "favorably consider" economic sanctions against the Sandinista government.³⁹ The letter was later relayed to the House.

The call for further non-belligerent actions against the Sandinistas was designed to appeal to Democrats who had long opposed the President's policy and sought negotiations through dialogue. Congressman David McCurdy, Democrat of Oklahoma, urged his fellow Democrats to support the measure when he declared, "Americans are confused . . . by congressional procrastination and debate. They are looking for coherence and a sense of vision . . . Foreign policy requires military strength; it also requires skillful use of diplomacy and economic tools."⁴⁰ When the votes were finally tallied, the Senate passed the measure, 53-46, with one abstention. However, the House defeated the same measure, 248-180, with five abstentions.⁴¹

No sooner had the debate over the humanitarian aid ended than events developed that would turn the tide in favor of the President's policy. On April 24, the day after the

³⁹"Funds for Supporting," *Congressional Record*, S 4622-23; Joanne Omang, and Margaret Shapiro, "Senate Approves, House Defeats 'Contra' Aid," *Washington Post* (24 April 1985), pp. 1(A) and 20(A).

⁴⁰"Making Appropriations," *Congressional Record*, H 2378.

⁴¹"Funds for Supporting," *Congressional Record*, S 4624; "Making Appropriations," *Congressional Record*, H 2427.

Democrats defeated the humanitarian aid, Radio Sandino in Nicaragua announced that Daniel Ortega would depart for the Soviet Union in search of obtaining further Soviet aid.⁴² Soon after Ortega departed for the Soviet Union, reports surfaced that the Sandinistas had carried out repressive tactics against synagogues and churches of Miskito Indians and had practiced forms of intimidation against the Catholic Church in Nicaragua.⁴³

The new evidence and revelations dumbfounded most Democrats who had voted against the humanitarian aid. Many saw it as a betrayal by Ortega and the Sandinistas that defeated the Democratic position on Central America. Both Ortega's trip and the revelation of oppressive tactics against established religions in Nicaragua, in the minds of the Democrats, proved the President correct--the Sandinistas were strongly influenced by the Soviets and were not serious in pursuing negotiations without some form of internal influence. Therefore, stronger action would have to be enacted. House Speaker O'Neill acknowledged that the trip by Ortega "embarrassed" the Democrats and House Majority Leader Wright decried Ortega for "flaunt[ing] the fact that the Congress refused to send military aid" to the Contras.⁴⁴ Ortega's visit and the religious oppression also ended the notion that the Sandinistas' activities were promoted by the actions of the Administration and the Contras.⁴⁵ In wake of their embarrassment by Ortega, Congressional Democrats sought cooperation with the President and the Administration.

⁴²Arnsion, 184-85; Whelan, 287.

⁴³Congress, House, "The Persecution of Religions in Nicaragua," 99th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record*, vol. 131, no. 72, daily ed. (4 June 1985), E 2536.

⁴⁴Margaret Shapiro, and Joanne Omang, "Speaker Says House May Aid 'Contras'," *Washington Post*, 7 May 1985, pp. 1(A) and 4(A).

⁴⁵Margaret Shapiro, "Contra Aid Presages Renewed U.S. Role," *Washington Post*, 14 June 1985, p. 18(A).

On May 1, President Reagan issued an Executive Order terminating all trade with Nicaragua. Certain Congressmen conceded this action was "a step in the right direction" and called for sterner forms of pressure on Nicaragua should the Sandinistas again act out of line with the United States.⁴⁶ The House soon drafted H.R. 2577, a new bill to not only support the appropriation of humanitarian aid, but to reverse the Second Boland Amendment. In the debate on passage of the aid, Democrats linked their betrayal by Ortega, the religious oppression, and Reagan's overwhelming victory in 1984 to the appearance of Democratic softness on Communism as they debated the passage of the aid. The renewed Democratic position on the bill was illustrated by Congressman Dan Daniel of Virginia.

I do not believe we, as Members of Congress, should place the President in a position of being forced to accept a strategic threat to our security interests. Yet, if adopted, the Boland amendment will have exactly that consequence Last fall, we were trampled at the polls in the Presidential election. The score for the States was 1 to 49. Post election polls indicated that one of the reasons for the political loss was the perception that the Democrats were soft on defense. If we fail now to oppose the spread of communism in this hemisphere, and we are once more perceived to be soft on defense, and communism, then we could be shut out completely in the next election. We cannot afford the luxury of temporizing or compromising with marxism in this hemisphere.⁴⁷

The House vote was called on June 12. The Second Boland Amendment was terminated by a vote of 232-196, allowing intelligence agencies to aid the Contras. The vote for humanitarian aid, which was increased to twenty-seven million dollars, passed by a substantial margin of 248-184, although the aid could not be distributed by the CIA or the Pentagon. Many Southern Democrats sided with Republicans on the vote on grounds

⁴⁶Congress, House, "Slamming the Trade Door Shut on Nicaragua," 99th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record*, vol. 131, no. 55, daily ed. (2 May 1985), E 1924.

⁴⁷Congress, House, "Supplemental Appropriations Bill, 1985," 99th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record*, vol. 131, no. 78, daily ed. (12 June 1985), H 4147-48.

that they did not wish to appear soft on Communism.⁴⁸ Reagan and the Administration had finally triumphed--aid to the Contras would continue, with bipartisan support, and Sandinista influence would be checked in Central America.⁴⁹ The President's objective of bringing stability to Central America would now progress unimpeded. In the end, Reagan prevailed with bipartisan support.

⁴⁸Steven V. Roberts, "House Reverses Earlier Ban on Aid to Nicaraguan Rebels; Passes \$27 Million Package," *New York Times*, 13 June 1985, pp. 1(A) and 12(A); Shapiro, p. 18(A).

⁴⁹In 1986, the Administration would ask for one hundred million dollars in military aid for the Contras to augment the humanitarian aid. After some initial debate, Congress agreed to appropriate the funds. Arnson, 190-98.

Conclusion

President Ronald Reagan's policy towards Nicaragua developed out of a perceived necessity to protect the area from a growing threat of Marxist expansion. The Sandinista revolution originally developed as a response to an oppressive regime. However, when its moderate intentions of free elections and political plurality were postponed, the Carter Administration and the Congress delayed their response to the Nicaraguan revolution. During that delay, the Sandinistas received aid from the Soviet bloc and thereafter their ideology moved further to the Left. By the time the Carter Administration responded to the situation, it was too late to prevent the Sandinistas' ideological shift.

The credibility of the United States had been damaged during the Carter Administration by such incidents as the Iran hostage crisis, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Sandinista revolution. In Reagan's view, inactivity or a lack of perceived strength in foreign affairs was the reason why the world did not take the United States seriously in the international arena. That lack of strength allowed the Soviet Union and its allies to be aggressive around the globe.

A strong foreign policy reinforced with a strong American will, would restore American credibility and political strength. That policy would begin with the United States taking action against Nicaragua and bolstering democratic regimes in Central America. In Reagan's view, that would demonstrate American resolve and send a message that international Communist aggression would no longer be tolerated.

Reagan's strategy of using an indigenous fighting force to check the advance of the Sandinistas worked as it did not commit regular American military personnel or resources to the effort. Rather, the local force would maintain pressure on the

Sandinista government to moderate its actions. In doing so, Reagan sought to avoid public criticism.

Opposition came from a party and a Congress which carried memories of a failed foreign policy in Vietnam and perceived parallels between Vietnam and the President's Central American policy. To the Democrats, Reagan's plan was too aggressive. They feared it might create a further rift in East-West relations and perhaps be a prelude to open hostilities. The Democratic logic stressed that, through diplomatic talks and economic development, regimes like the Sandinistas could be enticed into abandoning their Leftist politics and adopt democracy. To enact these options, the Congress would have to take control of foreign policy away from the Oval Office. However, the reasoning of the Democrats was flawed. While their proposals would have guaranteed United States neutrality in the affairs of other nations, they did not insure equal compliance by the Sandinistas or the Soviet bloc.

The Sandinistas received substantial support from the Soviet bloc in the form of weapons and military hardware, military and technical personnel, and financial and military aid during the early 1980s. While the Democratic proposals may have promoted the development of internal economic resources or encouraged political diversity, they could not have changed the political ideology of the Sandinistas. Support by the Soviet bloc would force the Sandinistas to adopt a more Leftist political stance rather than one that would have satisfied the United States. This was indicated in the Sandinistas' actions and agenda, which included a substantial military buildup, support for anti-democratic insurgencies in Central America, cocaine smuggling, and denunciation of free elections. The Democrats maintained good intentions, but good intentions alone would not bring about change in Central America. Direct action was needed.

Reagan recognized the need for strength to deter Communist growth in Central America. The tool for that policy of strength would be the Contras. Although they possessed neither the manpower nor the materiel to defeat the Sandinistas militarily, the Contras, through sporadic military operations against the Sandinistas and through the interdiction of arms shipments, did possess the ability to limit the Sandinistas' potential to export their ideology. Furthermore, if the Contras could be used to apply further pressure on the Sandinista leadership, the Administration would bring some form of stability to the region.

Despite mounting opposition, Reagan did not compromise. Reagan believed that a strong Contra force would limit the influence of the Sandinistas and help halt the spread of Communism in the United States' geographic backyard. Reagan maintained pressure on the Sandinistas in spite of opposition from the Democrats. However, to flank that opposition, Reagan employed tactics to bolster support for his plan.

Reagan attempted bipartisanship for his plan. Through the Kissinger Commission's report, Reagan sought to end political infighting on the issue and present a united effort of peace through strength in Central America. But, only after the true nature of Sandinista politics was exposed was a united effort finally achieved.

Reagan's conflict with the Congress over Central American policy demonstrates how he sought stability in the region. While he continued to seek aid for the Contras, Reagan used Cold War rhetoric and maintained a determined stance, indicating to his opponents that he would not alter his principles despite political opposition.

Reagan's policy was consistent. The key to his success was to maintain the political offensive. By forcing his opponents to react to his policies, Reagan was able to move forward with his plans and stay ahead of his opponents.

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