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Richard H. Ullman

AT WAR WITH NICARAGUA

The Reagan Administration is at war with Nicaragua. Like other wars the United States has fought since 1945 it is an undeclared war. It is also a small war. No U.S. serviceman has yet fired a shot, but American-made bullets from American-made guns are killing Nicaraguans, and the President of the United States has made the demise of the present Nicaraguan government an all-but-explicit aim of his foreign policy.

Indeed, the President and his closest advisers seem obsessed with Nicaragua, and their obsession has infected their government at all levels. There is ample evidence that no issue of foreign policy—not arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union, not the Middle East, not Poland or Afghanistan, not the spiralling economic tensions within the Western Alliance, not the Latin American debt crisis, not even the civil war in El Salvador—so preoccupies senior officials. Like the much larger war against North Vietnam half a generation ago, the war with Nicaragua touches every sphere of foreign relations. Armed with "talking points" prepared in Washington, American diplomats plead for support from friendly governments around the world, putting additional weight on alliances already sorely strained. Adducing implausible economic criteria, American representatives to international financial institutions use their blocking votes for the political purpose of denying Nicaragua access to funds, and in doing so make it easier for other governments to use the same institutions for purposes antithetic to long-term American interests.

In his speeches and press conferences, the President describes the Nicaraguan leaders the way he does the Russians and the Cubans: all are Marxist totalitarians implacably hostile to the United States and prepared to use terror and deceit to maintain their own power and to undermine their neighbors. But a special hostility is reserved for the Sandinist regime in Managua. Its very existence seems to affront. How dare a nation of 2.5 million provoke a

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superpower 100 times larger, Mr. Reagan implies. His recent pronouncements on Nicaragua recall the question attributed to an English king obsessed with an overly independent Archibishop of Canterbury: "Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?"

To rid Nicaragua of its meddlesome regime the Administration has chosen an exile army, backed by American military power. For nearly two years the Central Intelligence Agency has paid, supplied, and trained a force of counterrevolutionaries—"contras," as they are universally called—based in Honduras just across the border from Nicaragua. That force now numbers about 10,000 men. The CIA is said to want to increase it to as many as 15,000. Simultaneously, the Department of Defense is pouring resources into Honduras' army (its air force is already the best in Central America) and into building additional air strips and perhaps also naval facilities to make it easier for the United States rapidly to bring in its own forces. And in early August U.S. army, marine, and air force units began preparing for an unprecedentedly long six months of training maneuvers with Honduran forces—including, for much of the period, 5,700 U.S. combat troops ashore—while two carrier task groups took up patrolling positions off Nicaragua's Atlantic and Pacific coasts.[1]

Nicaraguans are convinced that the Reagan Administration would like nothing more than to provoke a full-scale war between themselves and the Hondurans, one that Nicaragua would appear to have started, as a pretext for taking direct military action. They are mindful that General Gustavo Alvarez Martínez, commander of the armed forces and politically the most powerful figure in Honduras, has said that no government in the region will be safe so long as the Sandinistas rule Nicaragua. "Everything you do to destroy a Marxist regime is moral," he told reporters in late July.

For their part, however, the Sandinistas are determined to avoid a provocation. They are therefore fighting with one hand tied behind their back, the hand that would strike the contras in their Honduran bases and training camps. Although widely accepted principles of international law would give them ample license to do so, the Nicaraguans have prudently elected not to make any incursions in force across the border so as not to give General Alvarez

[1] The President himself has been singularly disingenuous in describing these maneuvers. In his press conference of July 26, he described them as simply like past maneuvers in the area—in effect routine—and expressed surprise that their announcement had aroused such worldwide attention. *The New York Times*, July 27, 1983. But the largest previous land exercise in Honduras involved 900 U.S. troops and lasted only six days. One other maneuver to which Mr. Reagan made reference, in Panama for the defense of the Canal, was also of brief duration and involved 3,000 U.S. troops as part of a combined inter-American force. And there is no precedent for the scale or proximity, let alone the intent, of the naval deployments.

the excuse he seems to be seeking for a U.S.-backed holy war. Except for occasional short forays in pursuit, they have therefore elected to wait for their enemies to come over. Before the contras reach Nicaraguan territory, however, they disperse into small units much more difficult to locate and destroy. They are nevertheless numerous enough to do fearsome damage to the poorly armed communities that lie near the border.

The Administration has assured Congress that the counterrevolutionary "freedom fighters" strike at military targets. Reality is different. On a tour of rural development projects in August I saw farm buildings devastated by mortar fire or by the torch. And I heard many accounts of peasant families being kidnapped and taken across the border, often never to return, and of assassinated teachers, health workers, and agricultural technicians. The Nicaraguans claim that since March 1982, when the intensity of incursions substantially increased, the contras have killed more than 700 persons. Most of these victims have been unarmed civilians. A few have been civilians in uniform—hapless militiamen posted on isolated guard duty. Very few have been members of the regular armed forces. There is no reason to think that the Sandinistas have exaggerated these losses. They can scarcely gain by heightening the impression that they cannot protect their own supporters.

Spokesmen for the contras in Honduras—their political organization is the so-called Nicaraguan Democratic Front, or FDN—say that the purpose of their invasion is to furnish a rallying point for disaffected Nicaraguans who would like to join them in opposing the Sandinistas. Thus far the only group that has responded in any number to their appeal has been the Miskito Indians of Nicaragua's Atlantic coast, whom the Sandinistas alienated by insensitively harsh treatment at the beginning of their rule.[2] Among the majority *mestizo* population, particularly among the poor campesinos who live in the mountainous territory near the border, the effect has been precisely the opposite. They are well aware that the contra forces in Honduras are led by, and contain within their ranks, many former members of the feared and hated National Guard, the instrument with which the Somoza family ruled Nicaragua for four decades. They see the contras as threatening the benefits that have come to them since the revolution—land, schools, health clinics, and an intangible but crucial sense that for the first time in their lives the state has *their* welfare in mind. In a dozen peasant com-

[2] The Sandinistas now freely admit that their treatment of the Miskitos has been characterized by disastrous errors. On August 3, 1983, at a press conference announcing the release from detention of 46 Miskitos and promising the early release of those still detained, Interior Minister Tomás Borge reviewed the record with a frankness that the Sandinistas' opponents would have found difficult to improve upon.

munities I heard the same thing from scores of people: Nothing had rallied them to the Sandinist cause as much as the contras had done.[3]

Behind the contras, moreover, they see the United States. A page from a year-old copy of *Barricada*, the Sandinist party newspaper, tacked to the wall of a campesino hut in a new farming cooperative less than ten miles from the Honduran border, encapsulated the history of U.S.-Nicaraguan relations as most Nicaraguans see it. *A 126 años el enemigo es el mismo*—"After 126 years the enemy is the same"—the banner headline proclaimed. The accompanying text began with the murderous expedition of the freebooter William Walker in 1856. It ended with Ronald Reagan's embrace of the contras.[4]

II

For most of that dismal history, few Americans have had any interest in or concern for Nicaragua. But Nicaragua's agricultural and mineral resources (there were once flourishing gold mines) have been of intense concern to a small number of Americans, and it was the protection of those private interests that for so many years motivated official U.S. policy. That is no longer the case. In an era of burgeoning investments abroad, those in Nicaragua are barely of significance now.

Washington's earlier concern for the defense of private economic interests has been replaced by a preoccupation with Nicaragua as a pawn on the East-West chessboard. President Reagan and his advisers seem to regard as irrelevant ancient history the fact that many Nicaraguans feel that the Sandinistas liberated them as much from the interventionist hand of the United States as from a harsh dictatorship that exploited the entire country as its private plantation. They are unmoved by the efforts the new regime has made

[3] The contras operating from Honduras should be distinguished from the much smaller force of roughly 1,000 men now fighting the Sandinistas from positions along the border with Costa Rica in the south. This force is under the leadership of Edén Pastora Gomez—the famed "Commander Zero" of the revolution, who broke with his colleagues over what he considered to be their betrayal of the goals for which they had fought in common. Until recently, when he reportedly made an agreement for collaboration with the FDN, Pastora has eschewed association with former Somocistas, including members of the *Guardia*. But his force is so small, and the terrain to which it has access is so remote and sparsely populated, that it can be at most a nuisance, not a serious threat. Moreover, in contrast to the FDN contras, Pastora's force has received little, if any, U.S. support.

[4] Other events that Nicaraguans invariably recall are the U.S.-backed overthrow of at least one president (José Santos Zelaya, in 1909), the frequent intervention of the Marines, including their almost continuous occupation of the country from 1912 to 1933, and the creation of the National Guard, making possible the Marines' withdrawal. Works to consult include, for the early period, Wilfred Hardy Calcott, *The Caribbean Policy of the United States, 1890–1920*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1942; and, for the later period, Richard Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty: A History of the U.S.-created Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua and the Somoza Family*, Maryknoll (N.Y.): Orbis Books, 1977.

to put idle land at the disposal of peasants willing to work it, to teach vast numbers of illiterate adults to read, or to transform rural health conditions. And they are openly disbelieving of its assertion that the national elections it has planned for 1985—the first since "the triumph" (as it is called) of 1979—will be truly open and competitive.

The Administration's concern, instead, is with the Sandinistas as carriers of a revolutionary virus that came from the Soviet Union by way of Cuba, and with which they will surely attempt to infect the rest of Central America. They will do so, the President has said, because they are dogmatic Marxist-Leninists committed to monolithic totalitarian rule at home and to the propagation of violent revolution abroad. As such, they could not be believed even if they were to promise not to interfere in their neighbors' internal affairs. The clear implication—Mr. Reagan has stopped just short of saying so explicitly—is that it is fruitless to seek regional peace by means of negotiations, for the Sandinistas will break any agreement they sign.[5]

It is of course possible that the President—and the recently established "Outreach Working Group on Central America" in the White House Office of Communications, whose primary function seems to be to whip up domestic support for the Administration's Nicaragua policy—may be correctly characterizing Nicaraguan political reality. Despite their protests to the contrary, the Sandinistas may indeed be pursuing a planned process whose end result will be a state in which all dissenting views will be ruthlessly stifled and in which power will be every bit as centralized as it is in Cuba. Their insistence that they want a mixed economy, not a collectivized one, and their repeated appeals to the many Nicaraguan entrepreneurs and planters who were not Somocistas to stay and continue producing for the benefit of the nation (and themselves), may be intended simply to lull them into keeping their capital at home until the time is ripe for sudden and universal expropriation. Their efforts to incorporate the views of opposition parties into the three laws now being prepared to govern the 1985 election—one detailing the rights and obligations of parties, a second laying out electoral procedures, and a third establishing rules of access to mass media—may also be window dressing designed to cover a prepackaged Soviet-style landslide.

Certainly there are disturbing signs. Nicaragua's habitual voting

[5] The Administration has insisted that any commitment the Nicaraguan government might make not to supply arms to the insurgents fighting in El Salvador must be accompanied by air-tight verification provisions because in their absence the Sandinistas would surely cheat. Yet U.S. officials also say that they think it impossible that satisfactory verification mechanisms can be devised.

with the Soviet bloc on major issues before the United Nations undermines the Sandinistas' claim to be following a foreign policy of nonalignment. So does the guiding role that Cubans evidently play in Nicaragua's armed forces and in its intelligence and internal security apparatus. While the Sandinistas may rationalize that role by pointing to the external threats that Nicaragua faces, they are likely to find that military and security services once grown fat and pervasive, as they surely will under Havana's tutelage, cannot easily be made to wane or to relax their grip.

It is dismaying, as well, that some leading early supporters of the revolution have felt that they had no alternative but to leave Nicaragua and go into exiled opposition.[6] And while the Sandinistas may be persuaded of the inherent justice of their decision, taken soon after they came to power, not to hold national elections until they had taught an illiterate peasantry to read and thereby to make informed political decisions (and, they also said, to assure that they themselves would not be swept into office by a tide of irrational enthusiasm), a visitor may be excused for being skeptical: by 1985 the peasantry will indeed be literate, but it is likely to be indoctrinated as well.

It may also be intimidated. There are many indications of a bullying zeal, particularly at the grass roots level, that belie the earnest disquisitions on the crucial importance of pluralism that a visitor hears repeatedly from Sandinist leaders. Particularly jarring to North Americans are the neighborhood "Committees of Sandinista Defense" (CDS) that perform useful (and necessary) police functions but too often combine them with ideological vigilantism. Disconcerting also are the revolutionary slogans stencilled or (as is usually the case) scrawled like graffiti on every wall. They may be the more-or-less spontaneous products of youthful enthusiasm, but their effect cannot help but be intimidating. There are, indeed, competing messages—usually staid appeals to support other political parties—but they are much less prevalent, and sometimes (unlike the Sandinist slogans) they are defaced.

Other indicators are less visible but equally unsettling. I heard accounts of a neighborhood medical dispensary sponsored by the Catholic Church and supplied with drugs by the Agency for International Development and other U.S. sources being vandalized by young members of a local CDS resentful of the fact that, owing to the critical shortage of foreign exchange, the regime's own dispensaries are much less adequately supplied. More disturbing, of

[6] See the eloquent statement by one such figure, Arturo J. Cruz, "Nicaragua's Imperiled Revolution," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1983, pp. 1031–1047.

course, are the prepublication censorship and occasional shutdowns of the press, which in practice affects only *La Prensa*, the most popular of Nicaragua's three daily newspapers and the only one that is an opponent of the regime. (The censorship of *La Prensa* is curiously ambivalent, however. Each day the newspaper is permitted to make photocopies of the material the censors delete and to distribute them to a list of subscribers that includes all foreign embassies. And it also posts a set of the photocopies on a bulletin board in front of its building, there to be read by any passers-by who choose to do so.)

Like other derogations from the rights and liberties promised by the Sandinistas in the Fundamental Statute they promulgated at the time of their victory in 1979, censorship is part of the State of Emergency declared in March 1982, after two important bridges were blown up by the contras. The other emergency measures include suspension of the right to liberty and *habeas corpus*, the right to freedom of travel, and the rights of association and peaceful assembly. Even the most critical domestic opponents of the Sandinist regime do not accuse it of being draconian in applying these restrictions, however. And they readily agree that the torture, summary execution, and other abuses of the person that are commonplace in a number of other Central and South American states are virtually unknown.[7]

Nicaragua in mid-1983 strikes a visitor as a bundle of contradictions. There are substantial departures from the civil and political liberties that North Americans take for granted, but the regime's opponents are not afraid to speak their minds. *La Prensa* is hobbled but not muzzled; its editors feel that it is still worth their while to continue publication. There is a functioning independent human rights commission (as well as a regime-sponsored commission) that copiously documents what it considers to be the regime's abuses. Opposition parties continue—warily—to criticize the Sandinistas. An important part of the Catholic hierarchy (including the outspokenly confrontational Archbishop Obando y Bravo) openly opposes the Sandinistas; other influential churchmen (and women), including many of the Protestant pastors who work among the Miskitos and the English-speaking black population of the Atlantic coast, strongly support the regime.

Although the Sandinistas hold a majority of seats in the 51-

[7] For a balanced and thorough account of the state of human rights in Nicaragua, compiled from a wide variety of sources including the U.S. Department of State and the Permanent Commission on Human Rights (a Nicaraguan organization avowedly in opposition to the regime), see *Nicaragua: Comments on the Nicaraguan Government's Report to the U.N. Human Rights Committee*, issued by The Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights, New York, March 1983.

member Council of State that makes Nicaragua's laws, their practice is to legislate by a consensus that includes the representatives of the opposition parties and of the social and economic organizations (trade unions, chambers of commerce, farmers' organizations, etc.) that are not Sandinist. When draft legislation meets with opposition, it is modified until it gains general approval. Even severe critics of the Sandinistas concede that the Council (whose members are each elected by their particular organizations) has thus far functioned as a genuinely deliberative and pluralist legislative body. Finally, it should never be forgotten that Nicaragua under the Sandinistas is no longer a state in which the bulk of the population is terrorized by its own armed forces. In that respect it is nothing like a repressive as some of its neighbors.

If Nicaragua is less repressive than many other Latin American states, it is also far less repressive than the Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe to which the Reagan Administration routinely compares it. The comparison with Eastern Europe is also on the minds of the Sandinist leaders themselves. In private conversations they indicate that they are fully aware of the danger that the so-called Patriotic Revolutionary Front, the governing coalition of parties including their own (itself confusingly bearing the label of front—the Sandinista National Liberation Front, or FSLN), will degenerate into a fig-leaf organization in which the lesser parties play only token roles, like the patently bogus "fronts" that mask communist power in Eastern Europe.

They are also well aware that, because they reject liberal standards for civil and political liberties, they may find themselves on a slippery slope in which increasing pressure from abroad will impel them to impose increasingly severe restrictions at home and thus alienate many who now support them. They insist that they want to escape this dilemma and to move in the direction of a more open and pluralistic society. At the same time, however, they say that while they welcome "constructive" dissent, their society is still too fragile to withstand the corrosive effects of criticism based on deliberate misinformation.

The message is familiar. It has been heard many times, and not only from the leaders of developing societies. Nearly all politicians welcome dissent—until they perceive it as undermining their personal position or otherwise making it more difficult for them to govern. Politicians professing democratic aims are most severely tested, of course, when the goals of pluralism and efficiency directly conflict. Many—particularly those who seek to transform their societies—fail the test and opt for efficiency at the expense of

pluralism. They are especially prone to do so when they see themselves facing a severe external threat. Alas, there is no reason for optimism that the present leaders of Nicaragua will move in the direction of a more liberal society. Very few leaders of impoverished Third World countries (even those who lack any far-reaching social vision) have done so.

Yet that does not mean that Nicaragua will inevitably go the way of Cuba. There are, indeed, some Sandinistas who would like to move in that direction. Humberto Ortega, the Minister of Defense who spent years in Cuba while exiled under Somoza, said in a speech to the armed forces in August 1981 (a speech to which U.S. officials constantly refer) that Sandinism and Marxism-Leninism are one and the same. But many other Sandinist leaders would disagree. They say that they are Marxists, but Christians as well—indeed, some are Catholic priests—and that while Marxism gives them a means of analyzing social forces, Christianity gives them a set of goals. They reject the coercion inherent in Leninist practice.[8]

Nicaragua today strikes a visitor as being no more easily comparable with Cuba or Czechoslovakia than with Mexico—whose revolution a generation and a half ago (we too often forget) also seemed profoundly frightening to North Americans and which is still today ruled by a single dominant party. And if there are no grounds for optimism that it will evolve in the direction of Western parliamentary democracy, there is no firmer basis for predicting that it will slide very much farther down the slope that ends in a cruel and monolithic totalitarianism. Certainly Nicaragua now is not the repressive communist dictatorship that figures in so many of President Reagan's speeches. North Americans and Western Europeans long resident there find simply bewildering the Administration's characterizations and the blatantly dual standard that it employs when it compares Nicaragua with other states of the region. Roberto Cardenal, one of the senior editors of *La Prensa*, might have had the Reagan Administration in mind as well as the U.S. Congress when he told our visiting group: "When your Senators and Congressmen come down here, they are interested in their own politics, not in ours."

[8] One of the most bewildering aspects of revolutionary Nicaragua is its complex structure of government. The FSLN is not a party in the conventional (either Western or Soviet) sense. It is a loose collection of individuals and of associated popular organizations, with no prescribed set of ideological tenets. The nine *Commandantes* who form the FSLN directorate are all professed Marxists, but many members of the Nicaraguan cabinet are not, and some are not members of the FSLN. The cabinet serves under the three-member "Junta of Government" (including two Sandinistas) which is the nearest thing Nicaragua has to a head of state. Laws are made by the Council of State. They are subject to veto, however, by the Junta. On more than one occasion, when the two organs have been deadlocked, the Junta has given way.

III

The Administration's characterizations of Nicaragua's politics are not only inaccurate. They are also corrosive in their effect. "Marxist Nicaragua"—connoting a Soviet-style regime—is no more apposite today than "Marxist Portugal" was in 1975. Yet the phrase has become reality for most Americans, just as it has become a staple of the editorial writer's lexicon in even those newspapers that strongly oppose the Administration's not-so-covert war.

Similarly, the Administration's critics in Congress seem to feel an obligation to season their speeches opposing an increased U.S. military involvement with blanket denunciations of the Nicaraguan government. They do so, undoubtedly, for self-protection, so as not to appear naïve, or "soft on communism." Surely, they reason, the importance of their central objective—halting a potentially disastrous military adventure—is justification enough for their uncritical acceptance of a caricature version of the complex and ambiguous Nicaraguan reality.

The tactic is doubly misguided. Leaving aside its intellectual shoddiness, it has two harmful political effects. First, characterizing the Sandinist regime as merely another communist dictatorship and tool of Soviet policy does in fact make it easier for the Administration to gain public and congressional acquiescence for escalating the scale of war against it. Second, it makes it more difficult for legislators to object to other policies the Administration has directed against the Managua government.

These are in the economic sphere. The Administration has denied Nicaragua access to credits available from U.S. official sources, and it has made a major and largely successful effort to cut off Nicaragua's access to funds it might otherwise receive from the three relevant international financial institutions—the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Inter-American Development Bank. The United States has traditionally been the principal market for virtually all of the Nicaragua's exports. Last May the Administration reduced by 90 percent Nicaragua's quota for sugar imports into the United States, severely crippling Managua's ability to earn foreign exchange. And over the past two years Nicaragua has found fewer U.S. customers for some of its other export products, another result of the general climate of hostility that the Reagan Administration has engendered.

The combination of restrictions on its ability to borrow abroad and a diminished U.S. market for its exports has made Nicaragua critically short of hard currency. That has made it difficult to obtain

spare parts and replacements for machinery made in the United States or in other Western countries. The result is that at all levels of Nicaragua's predominantly agricultural economy—on the many big estates still in private hands, on the very large numbers of smaller private farms, on the rural cooperatives, and on land once belonging to the Somoza family and now made into state farms (20 percent of total farming land)—there are tractors, harvesters, crop-dusting aircraft, and other machines standing idle rather than productively employed. Moreover, a principal tactic of the contras has been to destroy agricultural resources. They have leveled farm buildings and warehouses, killed livestock, and burnt many acres of coffee bushes (especially costly, since new ones require five years growth before bearing fruit). All these factors have substantially diminished both Nicaragua's export earnings and its supplies of foodstuffs for domestic consumption. And the need to ration hard currency has led as well to shortages of medicines and petroleum products.

These shortages have made life in Sandinist Nicaragua more grim than it otherwise might be. They have led to grumbling and to disenchantment with the regime, especially among businessmen and the owners of large farms—undoubtedly the effects that the Reagan Administration had hoped they would have.

Yet the Administration would be ill-advised to count these results a success. Almost certainly they will not be sufficient to undermine the regime. Unless conditions of life grow very much harder, the Sandinistas will retain the loyalty and the support of the large number of peasant smallholders and salaried rural and urban workers who still judge themselves to be net gainers from the economic, social, and psychological effects of the revolution. Indeed, for the short term, at least, the regime is likely to use these hardships, as it has the depredations of the contras, to win greater loyalty from them.

On the other hand, the disaffection of businessmen and wealthy farmers may lead them to abandon the country, thus giving over their property to state control and making both the economy and the political system just that much less pluralistic. In any event, the more militant members of the regime will see in these externally imposed hardships a justification for tightening discipline and increasing central control. And enforced isolation from the Western market economies will lead to greater dependence on the Soviet Union and its allies.

It is probable, therefore, that the policies now being pursued by the Administration will lead to exactly the outcome that will be

most harmful to the long-term interests of the United States. The wars on the borders cannot succeed in toppling the Sandinist government without the direct involvement of U.S. armed forces. The contras are well trained and well armed, but they are far outnumbered by the Sandinistas, who have at their disposal 25,000 regular troops augmented by 55,000 reservists and militia personnel whose job it is to defend the districts where they live and work. Many of the latter have only rudimentary training and inadequate weapons, but they have thus far borne most of the burden of the fighting, and they seem to have acquitted themselves reasonably well.

Despite the intense effort the Pentagon is now making to arm and train the Honduran army, it is unlikely that the impressed peasant boys who make up a high proportion of its ranks will sufficiently share General Alvarez's crusading zeal to fight bravely on Nicaraguan soil. The Hondurans would almost certainly not be able to launch an effective attack without substantial and highly visible U.S. assistance. Because their doing so—even in response to Nicaraguan border-crossing retaliatory blows against the contras—would be a clear violation of the charters of the Organization of American States and of the United Nations, they and their U.S. patrons would surely be branded as aggressors and ordered to desist. While it is conceivable that the Reagan Administration might seek to evade such strictures, it is not likely that the Congress would long allow it. The Sandinistas would therefore survive, wounded but not killed, and more inclined to seek protection from Moscow and Havana.

The Administration's economic measures cannot fail but be similarly ineffective at exerting decisive pressure on Managua. Thus the only conceivable result of American policies, if they continue on their present course, will be a Nicaragua domestically more militarized, more monolithic, and more repressive than today, and in its foreign policy more stridently anti-American, more dependent on the Soviet Union and on Cuba, and therefore more willing to do their bidding.

IV

In much of the discourse about Central America these days—in the off-the-record musings of senior American officials, in the editorials of newspapers that approve the Administration's policies, and in the speeches of Congressmen and Senators—the point is made that the United States has a right, even a duty, to control events "in its own backyard." That is how most of the world expects

a superpower to behave, we are told, and it is how one should behave. A principal contention of the foreign policy section of the Republican Party's 1980 platform was that the Carter Administration had critically weakened the United States by not acting like a superpower; among other derelictions it had allowed the "Marxist Sandinista takeover" of Nicaragua.

Those who advance arguments like these often go on to make an equation between Central America and Eastern Europe. Just as the Soviet Union should not be expected to tolerate a potentially hostile (because ideologically divergent) regime in any of the countries on its periphery, they assert, the United States should not be expected to do so in Central America. In each instance, the security of a superpower is at stake.

The implication of this equation is profoundly disturbing. It means that after nearly four decades of political combat, Americans are content to see their country equated with its principal adversary along two crucially important dimensions—the degree to which its security may be threatened by the very existence of ideologically divergent neighbors, and the amount of license it should have to bring pressure to bear upon them. If Americans indicate that they expect their government to behave the way the Soviet government behaves, and for the same reasons, why should foreigners expect more of it? There are many young and not-so-young persons in Western Europe and the Third World who profess not to be able meaningfully to distinguish between the United States and the Soviet Union. Both seek hegemony. Neither will tolerate political diversity within its sphere of influence. Neither deserves aid or comfort or political support.

Yet the equation is not valid. The pressure that Moscow has applied against Poland, like its invasions of Czechoslovakia and Hungary earlier, has been universally condemned. Moscow reacted so harshly because political change within its sphere *does* threaten the Soviet Union—because the Soviet regime, like those of Eastern Europe, lacks ultimate political legitimacy among those it presumes to govern. If workers in Warsaw or Prague succeed in changing their governmental structures, workers in Leningrad or Kiev or Tashkent would be likely to try to follow their example. Only by assuring that fundamental questions are never asked on its periphery can the Soviet regime assure its survival within its own homeland.

The threat to Soviet power is thus profound and primarily political. A Poland or Czechoslovakia whose population had enjoyed genuine self-determination would threaten Moscow whether or not

it were armed. It is difficult to imagine a greater indictment of the Soviet regime two-thirds of a century after Lenin's seizure of power.

By contrast, political change in Central America poses no political threat to the United States, because the legitimacy of its governing structure is not in doubt. Revolutionaries who throw off a repressive regime in Nicaragua or Guatemala do not call North American institutions into question.

Nor do they pose a truly serious military threat. Even in the worst (and least probable) case—the establishment of Soviet bases on its territory—Nicaragua could not seriously harm the United States. The Soviets would be operating with long and vulnerable lines of supply. If they were ever to set up a base in Central America or the Caribbean for military actions against the United States, its allies (including other Latin American nations), or the strategic shipping lanes, the United States could deploy overwhelming power against it. Compared to the resources Moscow would have to devote to maintaining a base in the region, the cost to the United States of neutralizing it would be slight. Moreover, in an era of intercontinental missiles, firing nuclear weapons from nearby bases conveys no real benefit. And there are no plausible ways in which the Soviets could profit by attacking North America with conventional weapons.

The issue of Soviet (or even Cuban) bases is a straw man, however. Despite the U.S. Administration's rhetoric, no one within it expects that bases will be established. A more probable development might be a Nicaraguan or other revolutionary Central American state without foreign bases but armed to the teeth with Soviet-supplied military equipment.[9] Such a state would not threaten the United States. But nor could it realistically threaten its neighbors. Under the Rio Treaty of 1947 the United States is committed to come to the aid of other American states under military attack. Does anyone doubt that it would do so if the aggressor were Nicaragua? U.S. officials complain about the quantity of Soviet-bloc arms Nicaragua is receiving—and then admit privately that in the absence of a full-scale invasion from Honduras there is not the slightest chance that the Sandinistas will risk their own downfall by using their new weapons to strike across the border.

[9] Nicaragua, it should be noted, is nowhere near this position. Its air force is still substantially weaker than that of Honduras. It would remain so even if it were to receive the ten Soviet MiG fighters that are allegedly waiting to be flown in from Cuba. And while its army may have received substantial quantities of tanks and other heavy military equipment from Moscow and its allies (the U.S. government alleges this to be the case, but has not specified the quantities), it still suffers from serious deficiencies. One notable deficiency is in the arming of the reservists and militiamen upon whom it relies for the bulk of the fighting on the Honduran border. Many of those I saw were armed only with antique World War II rifles that give them nothing like the firepower of the M-16-armed contras.

They sometimes go on to argue, however, that even if the probability of an overt Nicaraguan attack on other Central American states is negligible, the very existence in their midst of a heavily armed, Soviet-supported Nicaragua would be profoundly unsettling and ultimately destabilizing. There may be substance to this fear. But their supposition points more to the underlying lack of legitimacy, and therefore the fragility, of the governments of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador (Costa Rica, Panama, and Belize have no such problems) than it does to any logical chain of causation. Popular governments with the assurance of ample military support from the United States in the event they are the victims of aggression scarcely need fear Nicaragua.[10]

The real issue, of course, is not the political or military threat that Nicaragua poses to the United States, or even its potential military threat to its neighbors, but the political threat represented by its revolutionary ideology and its willingness to support insurgent movements elsewhere in Central America, most notably in El Salvador. I have called this a political rather than a military threat because no one has yet provided evidence that the flow of arms from Nicaragua has been of sufficient magnitude significantly to affect the course of the Salvadoran civil war. For their part, of course, the Sandinistas do not publicly acknowledge that they have supplied arms. If Washington had firm evidence of any shipments, they state, surely it would release it. Apparently good evidence does not exist. Knowledgeable U.S. officials admit that despite intensive intelligence collection efforts and reliable information that substantial quantities of Soviet-supplied light infantry weapons have reached Nicaragua, very few arms shipments to El Salvador have actually been observed, and that months go by when none at all are detected. They also concede that the Salvadoran guerrillas have had such easy access to arms from a range of other sources that at no time since 1981, and probably not before, have they been critically dependent on supplies that might have reached them from Nicaragua.

[10] It is worth noting, incidentally, that all three of these countries that cause the Administration so much evident concern are considerably more populous than the Nicaragua whose military prowess will supposedly destabilize them. Their populations figure in the Administration's threat scenarios in yet another way, however. They will be the source of refugees—millions, the President has suggested—who will flood into the United States and sorely strain its social fabric. This projection seems more an effort to play upon racist fears than to depict reality. The refugees who fit the Administration's scenarios—those who flee revolutionary regimes—are likely to be relatively few and from the educated middle and upper classes; like their predecessors of the Cuban exodus of 1959, they would fit easily and productively into U.S. society. On the other hand, the military confrontation that the Administration seems intent on fostering would produce precisely the kind (although probably not the quantity) of refugees it presumes to fear: peasants fleeing repressive authoritarian regimes and a widening war.

Administration officials insist, however, that the Sandinistas have nevertheless played an important role in the Salvadoran insurgency. Managua has been a safe haven where the civilian politicians and the military leaders of the insurgency can meet to plan and coordinate their strategies, from where they can send instructions to their fighting forces in the field, and where they can receive advice from Nicaraguan—and, no doubt, Cuban and Soviet—comrades. The Sandinistas acknowledge this role. They enjoyed a similar haven and similar facilities in Costa Rica during their revolution against Somoza. They say that by assisting the Salvadorans now they are repaying a debt. And they are well aware that they themselves provide models for the Salvadorans and for revolutionaries in other Central American countries—living proof that movements such as theirs can triumph over a government that, at least until its last months, enjoyed substantial support from the United States.

It is likely that this role and the way the Sandinistas insist upon playing it, more than any other factor, has made Nicaragua the object of the Reagan Administration's outrage. But a visitor to Managua and to Washington during the late summer of 1983 must come away baffled by the Administration's obsession with Nicaragua. As supporters of the side that Washington opposes in the Salvadoran struggle, the Sandinistas are undoubtedly an annoyance and an impediment. But their contribution has scarcely been decisive. To behave as if it were, to assert that under their leadership Nicaragua poses a dire threat to the stability of the Hemisphere and to the security of the United States, and on that basis to launch an unacknowledged but deadly war against them, evinces a frame of mind that future historians are likely to discuss more in terms of pathology than in those of logic.

It may be that the Administration is acting primarily from frustration born of the dreary war in El Salvador. "Our side" there has been guilty of atrocities that neutral observers feel far exceed in horror and in scale those of their opponents. Moreover, their forces have thus far exhibited considerably less zeal and fighting ability. How natural it is in conditions of moral, political, and military ambiguity to attribute one's failures to the malevolence of outsiders. And how much easier it must be to ratchet up the military and economic pressure on Nicaragua than to make real progress in the messy war on the other side of the Gulf of Fonseca.

V

Public statements about the crisis in Central America by President Reagan and his principal advisers contain no hint that they have

any clear notion of what sort of outcomes the United States can realistically hope to bring about, and what outcomes might prove truly harmful.

In considering this range of outcomes, they might usefully reflect on what it would mean if they were to win their war against the Sandinistas and the contras were to come to power. The contras would have done so only with considerable help from the Honduran armed forces, and almost certainly from our own as well. Few Nicaraguans would regard as liberators a mercenary army made up of many members of the same *Guardia Nacional* that had terrorized their country for Somoza. The rest of the world would surely consider them American puppets, and it would hold the United States accountable for their actions both at their moment of victory and afterward. Many Sandinistas would retain their arms and melt into the mountains to continue the war.

Meanwhile, the United States would have to prevent the Guard from committing excesses, no easy task. It would also have to hold the ring while some semblance of democractic politics was reestablished. Who could participate? What of the Sandinistas? What of the parties to their left? Would Somocistas flooding back from Miami be permitted to reclaim their estates from the thousands of peasants now farming them? Since they funded the contras until the CIA stepped in, would they not demand—and receive—a return on their investment? The United States would face a political dilemma like the one the Soviet Union faces in Afghanistan. Unlike in Afghanistan, however, there would be international journalists in every urban *barrio* and rural community. (After all, we would not have overthrown the Sandinistas to have a closed society.) They would remind the Administration of its fine words about democracy. Could the United States acquit itself honorably? The odds are against it.

If the Administration has given no consideration to scenarios such as this, it is essential that it should do so, and that it should discuss them frankly with the Congress and with the American people. If it does, it is likely to conclude that the United States could well face far more difficult problems in Nicaragua than coexisting with the Sandinist regime.

It may be asking too much to expect such dispassionate reflection from Mr. Reagan and his colleagues, however. They are too committed. They are unlikely, unassisted, to find their way out of the web their paranoia has spun. If the United States is to be diverted from its present collision course with Nicaragua, the impetus for a change in direction must come from other sources—from the Congress, from the National Bipartisan Commission on Central

America recently convened under the leadership of Henry Kissinger, and perhaps also from friendly governments, especially from U.S. allies in Europe and elsewhere in Latin America.

Potentially the most important, of course, is the Congress, for only it has the power to do more than warn and cajole. It can if it wishes deny the Administration the resources it needs for the covert operations that constitute the core of its war against Nicaragua. There are many members of both Houses of Congress—a majority among Democrats and a considerable minority among Republicans—who are known to feel that the Administration's policies are profoundly misguided. The courage of their convictions will be tested at just the time this journal reaches its readers' hands, in late September 1983, when both Houses will consider bills cutting off funds for the covert war. Considerable courage will be required. In an atmosphere poisoned by allegations that those who oppose the President's policies are witting or unwitting appeasers, legislators fear being tarred with the brush of having "lost" Central America to communism by tying the Administration's hands. Their inclination, therefore, is to have it both ways by going on record with an expression of doubt but leaving the ultimate responsibility to the President. Nevertheless, at this writing there seems to be a substantial chance that congressional action to deny the President funds will be successful.

VI

Yet legislated prohibitions are no substitute for constructive policy alternatives. It is in the seach for alternatives that the Kissinger Commission can play a role. Although it is not scheduled to present its recommendations until February, the Commission (or, if it is deadlocked, some of its members) might earlier reach some preliminary conclusions. Initially, its most important task will be to form its own perspective on the nature of American interests—and threats to those interests—in the region. To do so it should seek the facts for itself, not receive them solely through the filters of the Administration: there is every reason to believe that reporting from Central America by both the Department of State and the Central Intelligence Agency has been biased by the all-too-familiar predilection of junior officers to send up the line what they know their seniors want to hear.

One thing their seniors have evidently not wanted to hear about is the existence of possibilities for diplomatic solutions. Indeed, one of the most striking characteristics of the Administration's policies toward Central America—and the Nicaraguan policy that has now

become its core—is how small a role diplomacy seems to have played. The likelihood is that the White House does not want a diplomatic settlement with Managua. How could it justify concluding an agreement with a government that it has said cannot be trusted to keep one?

Mr. Kissinger has said that his Commission will not get involved in negotiations; presumably it sees its task as primarily directed to the long-term political relationship between the United States and Central America and above all to what the United States might do with others to improve social and economic conditions there. Such a view may well be appropriate. But as a gifted negotiator Mr. Kissinger should not hesitate to point where negotiations might lead. Since 1981 the United States has approached the Sandinistas entirely with sticks, not with carrots. On several occasions the Nicaraguans have reportedly offered assurances that they would send no arms to El Salvador. But each time the Administration evidently decided not to take the steps—never very large ones—that the Nicaraguans had asked in return. On one such occasion, in March 1981, Managua requested a resumption of U.S. economic assistance and as a token of its good faith unilaterally suspended shipments to the Salvadoran insurgents. Inexplicably, the State Department acknowledged that the arms transfers had indeed stopped—and then went on to announce that the Administration had nevertheless decided to maintain, pending a later review if the "favorable trends" continued, its ban on economic aid. The ban remained and the shipments resumed.

This is not the place for reviewing the subsequent negotiating record with Nicaragua or for discussing the possibilities of a negotiated resolution of the essentially civil conflict in El Salvador.[11] Yet it may well be that progress can only be made if the two sets of negotiations are linked. It is obviously the case that a settlement in El Salvador would simplify the task of reaching a U.S.-Nicaraguan understanding, for Nicaragua's role in the Salvadoran conflict is the ostensible cause of the Reagan Administration's hostility. But a negotiation between Washington and Managua could conceivably produce a reciprocal agreement, an explicit Nicaraguan undertaking to end all material support for the guerrillas in El Salvador in return for an explicit U.S. commitment not to assist armed groups opposing the Sandinist regime. Surely such an agreement could be

[11] For a review of the U.S.-Nicaraguan negotiating record since 1981, see Jay Peterzell, *Reagan's Secret Wars*, Washington: Center for National Security Studies, 1983, pp. 28–30. For a suggestive discussion of the possibilities for a negotiated solution to the Salvadoran conflict, see Piero Gleijeses, "The Case for Power Sharing in El Salvador," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1983, pp. 1048–1063.

adequately verified by a regional peacekeeping mechanism. It might in turn lead to a situation where neither side in El Salvador sought a military solution, and thus to an eventual compromise political settlement.

Really to heal the rifts of the region, however, there must ultimately be a multilateral negotiation, involving all the states of Central America. Such a negotiation is in fact already under way under the auspices of the so-called Contadora powers—Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Panama. Their task is to work out ground rules for coexistence. Those rules must be based upon two premises. One is that the export of armed revolution—or counterrevolution—is impermissible.

The second is that it is realistically impossible to erect a barrier to the transmission of revolutionary ideas. With all its flaws, Sandinist Nicaragua is likely to remain a magnet and a model for men and women elsewhere in Central America who would transform repressive oligarchical societies. Those who fear the force of that model should be constrained to look to the inequities in their own societies, rather than—as would Honduras' General Alvarez—seek temporary safety in a holy war.