

Nicaragua and the United States under Ronald Reagan

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The Reagan administration came to office in 1981 with an instinctive animosity toward the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and a determination, among some senior officials, to roll-back the Sandinista revolution. But initially, the administration's policy towards Nicaragua was a function of its effort to win the war in El Salvador. Nicaraguan assistance to the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR-FMLN) had expanded during the months prior to the Salvadoran 'final offensive', and was seen within the administration as an essential element in the war. Thus US policy was framed as how to halt Nicaragua's support to the Salvadoreans.

At first, the US Ambassador to Nicaragua, Lawrence Pezzullo, was able to convince the new administration that it could restore the understanding Washington had had with the Sandinistas before Reagan's election — that US economic aid was contingent upon Nicaraguan restraint in El Salvador. Though the Sandinistas responded positively to Pezzullo's efforts, hardliners within the Reagan administration were determined to win Nicaragua's acquiescence not with the carrot of economic aid but with the stick of threatened military action. On 1 April, 1981, US economic aid was cut off.

The hardliners were mostly Reagan political appointees from the right-wing of the Republican Party: National Security Adviser Richard Allen, CIA Director William Casey, Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger being most prominent among them. At the State Department, professional foreign service officers tended to adopt a more pragmatic — though no less anti-communist — approach to dealing with the Sandinistas.

Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Thomas O. Enders led a second effort to restore the understanding with Nicaragua in the late summer of 1981, but this too failed, in part because hardliners in the administration insisted that Washington's proposals be framed in a way certain to offend the nationalism of the Nicaraguan leaders. After a few months of fruitless exchanges, the talks broke down.

This failure produced a full-fledged policy of hostility towards Nicaragua — exactly what the hardliners had sought all along — the centrepiece of which was the covert war organised by the Central Intelligence

Agency. At first the war was nominally intended merely to interdict the flow of arms from Nicaragua to the FDR-FMLN. But with the operation being run from Washington by those who sought the Sandinistas' ouster, and being conducted on the ground by counter-revolutionary forces who had the same objective, the aim of arms interdiction soon gave way to the goal of eliminating the Sandinista regime. An operation originally slated to include about 500 commandos ended up by fielding an army of some 15,000.

The creation of the contra army was supplemented by a massive military build-up of the Honduran Armed Forces financed by the United States, and a series of regional military exercises unprecedented in size and duration. In conjunction with these manoeuvres, the United States built in Honduras the basic infrastructure necessary to support direct intervention in Nicaragua by US troops.

The covert war and the military build-up on Nicaragua's borders constituted only one facet of the administration's comprehensive assault on the Sandinista regime. Economic pressures were applied first by halting bilateral aid, then by pressuring multilateral institutions like the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank to curtail lending to Nicaragua, and finally by imposing a full trade embargo.

The political rhetoric unleashed against the Sandinistas reached such heights that the Mexicans characterised it as 'verbal terrorism'.¹ The Sandinistas were alleged to be worse human rights violators than Somoza, 'genocidal' in their treatment of the Miskito Indians, anti-semitic, puppets of Cuba and the Soviet Union, guilty of subversion against all their neighbours, and incompetent to boot.

The War at Home

By 1983 the administration's credibility and support for its Nicaragua policy in Congress had begun to erode. The visible failure of Reagan's policy to achieve its stated objectives, its growing price tag, and the President's apparent determination to escalate US involvement began to frighten moderate Democrats

¹ *Washington Post*, 25 November, 1981.

and Republicans who had supported Reagan. The Republicans' poor showing in the 1982 mid-term elections reinforced these doubts and shattered the mantle of invincibility Reagan had acquired in the 1981 battles over the budget. Politicians who had been afraid to criticise the President before the 1982 election felt safer in 1983.

The defection of these moderates, including most of the leadership of the Democratic Party, raised the possibility that Congress might repudiate Reagan's Nicaragua policy by cutting off funds for the covert war. The administration reacted by abandoning efforts to convince Congress of the wisdom of its policy, and sought instead to intimidate it with dire predictions of communist victory and an explicit warning that Congress would be blamed for 'losing' Central America.

President Reagan's extraordinary speech to a Joint Session of Congress on 27 April, 1983, exemplified the new approach. He cast the issue of Central America starkly in Cold War terms, railing against the Cuban-Soviet threat. The threat to blame Congress for losing Central America if it failed to acquiesce to his demands was thinly veiled: 'Who among us', he concluded his speech, 'would wish to bear the responsibility for failing to meet our shared obligation?'² In case there was any doubt as to the import of this, US Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick was more blunt a few days later when she complained that the problems being encountered by the administration's policy were due to the fact that, 'There are some members of Congress who want to see Marxist victories in Central America.'³

The threat of a McCarthy-style recrimination temporarily silenced Reagan's congressional critics. Since the 1950s furor over 'Who lost China', the political charge of being soft on communism has been a potent one in the United States. Nevertheless, Reagan's political attack failed to win back the support of the moderates, whose votes were essential to the administration. The House of Representatives, with the Democratic Party leadership carrying the battle, voted twice to stop funding the covert war entirely; it continued only by virtue of the Republican majority in the Senate.

In June 1984, the House again refused to appropriate any additional funds for the war, thereby ending legal US aid to the contras. But the cut-off was shortlived. In 1985, Congressional resistance to Reagan's policy began to recede. Democrats were noticeably more reticent to confront Reagan after the electoral debacle

of November 1984. When Reagan sought a renewal of military aid for the contras in April, the Democrats held firm against it. But after several weeks of rancorous debate punctuated by an ill-timed trip to Moscow by Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, enough conservative Democrats broke ranks to approve Reagan's proposal to provide so-called 'humanitarian' aid to the contras. The United States thereby resumed its direct involvement in the covert war.

A year later, the administration returned to Congress with the largest contra aid request ever: \$100 mn in unrestricted aid, to be administered once again by the CIA. After several bruising rounds of debate, the administration once again eked out a narrow victory. With a majority coalition of Republicans and conservative Democrats firmly in place, liberal Democrats appeared powerless to halt the administration's rush to war.

The legislative battle over aid to the contras in 1985 and 1986 was marked by some of the most inflammatory rhetoric employed in the domestic debate over Central America. Although much of it was directed against Nicaragua, its real target was the Democratic opposition to Reagan's policy. The Secretary of State accused members of Congress of being 'self-appointed emissaries' engaged in illegal negotiations with enemy governments.⁴ In the Congress, Republicans openly called Democrats 'soft on communism' for opposing the restoration of aid to the contras.⁵ These attacks had their greatest effect on moderate Democrats from conservative districts in the Southern border states — areas that voted overwhelmingly for Ronald Reagan in both 1980 and 1984.

The Congressional opposition to Reagan's policy had multiple sources. In part it was based upon a sincere belief that his policy was endangering the national interest rather than safeguarding it. By escalating the level of military conflict in the region, the administration risked engulfing the entire region in war and drawing the United States into direct combat involvement. That, in turn, would severely damage US relations with Latin American nations like Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina — nations vastly more important to the United States than the mini-states of Central America.

But perhaps the most important reason that Congress was willing to confront the President at all on the issue of Central America was the existence of widespread public opposition to Reagan's policy, opposition based largely in the religious communities of the United States. The Catholic Church, virtually every major Protestant denomination, and many American Jewish organisations were outspoken in their

² For the text of this speech, see President Ronald Reagan, 'Central America: Defending Our Vital Interests', *Current Policy* No. 48, US Department of State, Washington DC, 1983.

³ *New York Times*, 5 May, 1983.

⁴ *New York Times*, 26 May, 1985.

⁵ 'House, in Dramatic Shift, Backs "Contra" Aid', *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, 15 June, 1985.

opposition. Across the nation, hundreds of congregations defied the law by offering sanctuary to Central American refugees entering the United States illegally.

Public opinion polls confirmed the reluctance of the general populace to see the United States become more deeply involved in the Central American crisis [LeoGrande 1984]. Despite its best efforts, the administration was unable to rally public support behind its policy. Within the administration, the consistent opposition of such a large segment of the public was considered a major obstacle to the pursuit of a more aggressive policy in the area [LeoGrande 1984:2].

Iran-Contra

The first blow to the prospects for continued contra aid came with the 1986 election returns and the Democrats' stunning victory in recapturing a Senate majority. When the Republicans controlled the Senate, Reagan could depend on it to water down any limit on contra aid imposed by Democrats in the House of Representatives. With the Democrats in control, the Senate was not likely to be such a congenial place for Reagan's Nicaragua policy.

Moreover, the Republicans lost the Senate by an overwhelming margin, despite Reagan's intense campaigning. The election demonstrated dramatically how little Reagan's popularity was transferable to other Republicans (he had, said one wag, 'teflon coat tails') and how little Democrats had to fear from him. This lack of political clout made Republicans less willing to risk unpopular stands at the urging of the White House, and Democrats less afraid to oppose the president.

When the administration's arms-for-hostages deal with Iran was first revealed, it appeared that the debacle's effect on policy toward Nicaragua would be indirect. As Reagan's public approval ratings plummeted and the White House staff was consumed with damage control efforts, the administration seemed too weakened and preoccupied to plot a major escalation in Central America.

When the House Intelligence Committee began to follow the money trail from the Iranian arms deal, the administration had to reveal that the profits had been illegally diverted into a slush fund to finance the contra war. Overnight, the war against Nicaragua became a front-page issue and a major part of the growing crisis of government.

Before the contra slush fund was uncovered, the administration's arms deal was criticised largely for its lack of wisdom. The diversion of money to aid the contras, however, was clearly illegal. Once it was revealed, the issue was no longer whether the administration had followed a sensible policy in the

Middle East, but rather, who was responsible for violating the law in Central America. What had been a matter of poor judgment became one of criminality. It was then that comparisons of the scandal to Watergate began to be taken seriously. On the day National Security Advisor John Poindexter and his 'can-do' deputy Oliver North, were fired for setting up the contra slush fund, White House correspondent Sam Donaldson echoed the famous Watergate question by opening the ABC evening news with, 'The question tonight is what did high officials know and when did they know it?'

The scandal re-invigorated Congressional efforts to stop US support for the contra war. Congressional Democrats, most of whom have opposed the contra war from the beginning, had despaired of being able to halt it after Reagan won approval of \$100 mn in 1986. But the scandal confirmed that much of their criticism about the lawlessness of the administration's Nicaragua policy was truer than they ever imagined. The administration's total disregard for both the spirit and the letter of the law gave contra aid opponents a powerful new argument: the administration could not be trusted to abide by any limits Congress might impose on the contra aid programme. The only way to reign in an Executive branch that was intent upon a wider war that neither Congress nor the American people approved of, was to halt the contra aid programme entirely.

The scandal has put the contra aid programme in jeopardy for several reasons. It further weakened President Reagan's political influence with the Congress and his standing in the opinion polls. It solidified public opinion against the contra aid programme by margins that consistently run 3 and 4 to 1. And it made it politically difficult for members of Congress to support the contras without appearing to condone the wrong-doing associated with the aid programme. Conversely, the Democrats feel secure enough to take up the issue of contra aid again. House Speaker Jim Wright made ending aid to the contras a high priority.

President Reagan and his allies on Capitol Hill insisted that the National Security Council's dubious financial dealings did not diminish the merits of the contras' cause. They argued that the misdeeds of Oliver North, John Poindexter and Company were irrelevant to the basic issues that led Congress to approve military aid for the contras in 1986, and that the contras should not be made to suffer for the wrong-doing of others. But inevitably, the stench of the scandal tainted the entire policy.

From the beginning, Congressional opposition to contra aid was based in large part on improprieties in the administration's management of the programme. The CIA's mining of Nicaragua's harbours and its authorship of the 'terrorism manual' advocating

assassination, convinced many in Congress that the policy was out of control. By failing fully to inform the Intelligence Committees of the dimensions of the contra war, the administration lost the confidence of Congress. The issue then became one of institutional prerogatives in the conduct of foreign policy.

The Guatemala Accord

Although the Iran-contra scandal undermined the foundations of the administration's majority coalition in Congress, it did not spell automatic victory for opponents of contra aid. One of the perennial weaknesses of the Democratic opposition was their inability to devise an alternative to Reagan's policy of covert war that they could feel politically comfortable with — that is, one that allayed their fears about being blamed for losing Central America to communism.

For several years, their principal alternative was to call for negotiated solutions to the Central American crisis, and, in particular, to support the Contadora process. But as Contadora faltered, it gradually lost its political value for the Democrats. The Arias plan, which became the Guatemala Accord when the Central Americans signed it in August 1987, came as a godsend to the Democrats. The main difference between the Guatemala Accord and Contadora was that the Accord played greater attention to the internal political situation in each of the Central American countries, calling for guarantees of democratic political development, dialogue among adversaries, and ceasefires in countries where there was fighting.

It was something of a miracle that the Guatemala Accord was signed at all. For four years, the Reagan administration had successfully blocked the signing of a Contadora agreement. But a variety of factors converged to break Washington's control over the negotiating process in Central America. The Iran-contra scandal weakened the administration's ability to keep its allies in line. As Honduras and Costa Rica watched the scandal unfold in the United States, they began to doubt that Congress would renew aid to the contras — a conclusion which invigorated their own search for a solution to the Nicaraguan conflict.

The Central Americans feared that the United States had created, in the contras, a Frankenstein monster that would be a source of permanent instability and violence in the region. Honduras was especially worried. The Reagan administration had cajoled Honduras into cooperating in the war against Nicaragua, and if Washington were to tire of the war and abandon it, Honduras would be left to contend with both the contras and poor relations with Nicaragua.

For the same reason that the Accord bolstered the

Democrats, it threw the Reagan administration onto the defensive. At first, the president pronounced it 'fatally flawed', but then softened his criticism in the light of the Accord's broad support in Congress. But the administration went to work immediately, pressuring the Central Americans to toughen their attitude toward Nicaragua and demand that the Sandinistas make concessions not called for in the Accord itself, primarily, to open direct talks with the contras.

Unable to muster the votes to extend military aid for the contras, the Reagan administration was forced to postpone its request for additional aid until early 1988, after the January summit of Central American presidents convened to evaluate progress under the Guatemala Accord. The administration succeeded in convincing El Salvador and Honduras — both of whose economies were dependent upon massive US economic aid — to refuse at the summit to accept an extension of the deadline for compliance with the Accord. But, to the surprise of most observers, the Nicaraguans prevented the summit from collapsing in failure by making major unilateral concessions, including direct talks with the contras.

This set the stage for a showdown between Congress and the Reagan administration. Would the United States abide by the Guatemala Accord's call for an end to all outside aid to insurgent forces? The administration tried to argue that aid for the contras was essential pressure to keep the Sandinistas honest, but it was hard to disguise the fact that additional aid was directly contrary to the letter and spirit of the regional agreement.

In late January, the administration finally submitted its long-awaited aid request, but it was an unusually small one — only \$36 mn for six months — and only 10 per cent was for lethal military aid. At the last minute, Reagan even agreed to let Congress vote on whether to release the military portion of the aid package, in the hope that this would swing a handful of undecided members. But it was not enough; the administration request was defeated 219-211 in the House of Representatives.

While it was a major defeat for the administration's policy, the narrowness of the vote gave the administration hope that it could try again. In order to muster a majority against the Reagan proposal, House Speaker Jim Wright was forced to promise wavering moderate Democrats that he would allow a subsequent vote on humanitarian aid for the contras. In March, to everyone's surprise, Wright's proposal was also rejected by an odd coalition of Republicans who felt it was inadequate, and liberal Democrats who opposed any contra aid whatsoever.

The one certainty was that the war between the Reagan administration and its Democratic opponents

over contra aid was not yet over. Even the ceasefire agreement between the Sandinistas and the contras signed in late March did not fully diffuse the struggle in Washington, as the administration and Congress proceeded to argue about what sort of aid package was consistent with the accord.

Order or Progress? The Maintenance of Control

Ronald Reagan came to office proclaiming that the global rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union would be the keynote of his foreign policy. The administration's early rhetoric and actions in Central America faithfully reflected the East-West optic through which the administration viewed virtually every Third World conflict. Where Carter saw poverty and dictatorship as the root causes of revolution, the Reagan administration saw mainly the spectre of Cuban subversion. Intervention to stem the perceived spread of communism was restored to its traditional place in the armoury of US policy responses — covertly against Nicaragua, overtly against Grenada.

In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas proved to be more tenacious and resistant to US destabilisation efforts than the administration expected. The policy of pressures allegedly designed to make the Sandinistas behave as desired by Washington had a wide range of counterproductive effects. Instead of strengthening internal democracy and pluralism, it polarised Nicaraguan politics, thereby endangering the political survival of the internal opposition. Instead of forcing the Sandinistas to reduce their ties to Cuba and the Soviet Union, Washington's hostility led to the rapid expansion of those ties, as the Nicaraguans were forced to find alternative sources for military hardware to fight the war, and economic aid to make up for the economic sanctions levied by the United States.

Underlying Washington's policy in Nicaragua was the familiar imperative of US policy toward Latin America: 'No more Cubas'. In practical terms, this

meant preventing the radical left from attaining power. This imperative, of course, predates the Cuba revolution. It has a mixed parentage — partly a product of the cold war, and the perception that Third World conflicts often or inevitably are an arena in that war, and partly an impetus to protect US economic interests from the depredations of nationalistic regimes.

In Latin America, and especially the Caribbean Basin, the motives behind containment have another source, best exemplified in the phrase which characterises the region as 'our own backyard'. That motive is control; the imperative that the United States be in a position to control events in the region — the sovereignty of other states notwithstanding. It is a notion that predates the cold war — indeed, predates the existence of the Soviet Union — and a notion that has long outlasted the days when the United States had a major economic stake in the area. This motive of control can be traced back at least to the turn of the century, if not earlier, and it forms the basis of what can only be called a uniquely American version of colonialism.

In the wake of Vietnam, the liberal wing of the Democratic Party took on something of an anti-interventionist outlook. The battle in Washington over US policy toward Nicaragua was very much a testing ground between this new outlook and the more traditional attitude of global intervention. The outcome of the conflict between Reagan and the Democrats was, therefore, of enormous potential importance. At stake was whether the United States would begin to adopt a new attitude toward Latin America, or whether the old presumptions of hegemony and control would be re-established as the basic doctrine underlying US relations with the Hemisphere.

Reference

LeoGrande, William M., 1984, *Public Opinion and Central America*, Washington Office on Latin America, Washington DC