

THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION'S BATTLE FOR CONTRA AID

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Despite continued opposition within Congress and the American public at large, the Reagan administration has striven since it entered office to secure aid for the contra forces of Nicaragua. Perhaps more interesting than the sheer doggedness of the administration has been its willingness to modify its purported objectives in order to secure support for the aid requests. D. Brent Hardt, in a revealing anatomy of the battle for contra aid, details how the administration's position evolved from competing views within the White House to focus on the interdiction of supplies to El Salvadoran rebels, then on internal Nicaraguan reforms, and finally on the all but stated desire to overthrow the Sandinista government. The changes in the administration's stance, according to Mr. Hardt, were largely induced by Congressional pressures. With survival of the contras as a political force at stake, the Reagan administration will pull out all the stops in an ongoing effort to secure financial assistance for the rebels. The author concludes that the contras will remain the cornerstone of an inconclusive and ambiguous U.S. policy toward Nicaragua.

In a November 1981 National Security Council meeting, President Reagan approved a \$19 million CIA plan for "covert" paramilitary operations against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. The decision to arm and train the Nicaraguan rebels, now known as the "contras," has become one of the most divisive American foreign policy issues since the Vietnam War. Less than three months after the President's secret decision, the CIA plan became public knowledge in the *New York Times*, and Congress immediately began debate on the propriety of clandestine operations against Nicaragua.¹ From this point onward, the press and Congress have been inextricably involved in shaping U.S. policy toward Nicaragua. This involvement made the notion of a covert war incongruous from the start.

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1. *New York Times*, 10 March 1982, p. A17. Rep. Michael Barnes (D. Md.) introduced a resolution to prevent the Administration from giving clandestine aid. *New York Times*, 16 March 1982, p. A6.

Central America has been the most active region of American foreign policy during the Reagan administration, and the contra aid struggle brings into sharp focus many of the characteristic features of Reagan's foreign policy: his desire to project American power, his willingness to employ covert actions, his preference for military pressure over diplomatic compromise, his use of ideologically-rooted rhetoric, and his resiliency in face of adversity.

The administration's four-year battle for contra aid has followed a circuitous course in the face of determined opposition. While support for the policy may be galvanized by a Nicaraguan miscalculation such as an ill-timed visit to Moscow, it may evaporate just as quickly by virtue of an administration error such as the mining of Nicaraguan harbors. The contra aid dispute has also been subject to an array of outside influences. Foreign governments, guerrilla groups, and domestic special interest groups have succeeded in interjecting their viewpoints into the policy process and influencing its outcome. The contra aid battle has been further complicated by a battle for control of U.S. foreign policy between the President and Congress that has become enmeshed in it.

Because of the openness and complexity of the contra aid process, the public has been bombarded by conflicting claims. The confusing debate has reinforced the public's traditional ambivalence about foreign affairs. The public demands American strength and assertiveness in confronting Soviet advances, but insists that the United States refrain from direct military involvement abroad, as in Central America. It supports the symbols of toughness such as increased defense spending, but not the substance of actual military efforts. And instead of seeking to educate the public on the complexities of foreign affairs and the contradictions inherent in their demands, presidents have played on these simplistic urges, promising the world at little or no cost.

Ronald Reagan's Central American policy has exemplified this tendency. Having promised new strength and assertiveness in foreign affairs, Reagan needed to demonstrate his resolve, and where better to stand up to the Soviets than in what has been the U.S. "backyard," where the United States maintains a clear strategic advantage? The administration would score political points in Central America by "rolling back" the leftists and demonstrating American mettle. But in its eagerness to notch a political triumph, the administration caricatured Central American reality. When press reports of a more complex reality began to appear in the United States — most notably a series of articles by Raymond Bonner of the *New York Times* portraying guerrillas in El Salvador as a popular force with indigenous roots² — images of Vietnam, with the U.S.

2. "With the Salvadoran Rebels in the Combat Zone," *New York Times*, 26 January 1982, p. A1; "Massacre of Hundreds Reported in El Salvador," *New York Times*, 28 January 1982, p. A12.

supporting a corrupt and unpopular regime against determined revolutionaries, returned to haunt the American subconscious. Almost instinctively, the public began backing away from the administration's policy as the potential costs became apparent. Reagan had promised to rid Central America of the Soviet menace, but he had not mentioned the risks involved. He was left, therefore, with half a policy: guarded support for eliminating Soviet influence in the region, but sharply circumscribed means to achieve that goal.

From the beginning of his administration's involvement in Central America, President Reagan has faced the difficult task of selling his policy to a skeptical press, an unreceptive Congress, and a vacillating public. To build support for its policy, the Reagan administration has resorted to rhetorical diplomacy — a form of public diplomacy featuring a relentless barrage of high-level speeches, State and Defense Department briefings, and official reports calculated to win public acceptance of the administration's version of Central America. The administration has hoped that by repeating its story often enough, it will become accepted as fact. This tactic seems to have worked: even though the administration never produced convincing evidence to substantiate its charges about arms flows from Nicaragua to El Salvador, for example, the result of its insistence has been an acceptance of the arms traffic as a fact. President Reagan has largely succeeded over the course of five years in bringing the debate over Central America to his terms, and he has succeeded partly through his use of rhetorical diplomacy.

Focusing on the issue of contra aid, this article examines the origins of the contras and the origins of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua. It then follows the tortuous course of the four-year effort to aid the contras, exploring how the openness of the foreign policy process, congressional partisanship, and executive rhetoric have affected the course and conduct of U.S. policy in Central America.

I. ORIGINS OF THE CONTRAS

The United States did not invent the opposition to the Sandinistas that has become known as the contras. Dissension surfaced almost immediately within the ranks of the broad coalition that had swept Anastasio Somoza from power in July 1979. Political motives mixed with personal conflicts in giving life to this internal dissension, but certain concerns united many who had helped topple Somoza: the decision of the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) to postpone elections, its decrees limiting political pluralism, its policy of aligning Nicaragua with Cuba and the Soviet Union, and its partisan control of the army. The Junta of National Reconstruction, a mixed-membership, five-person governing body set up to assume power and garner international support in the

wake of Somoza's departure, had its powers quickly usurped by the FSLN, the Marxist-oriented guerrilla group that had spearheaded the fight against Somoza. The FSLN's creation of a network of mass organizations such as the Sandinista Defense Committees (CDS), its takeover of the military, and its restrictions on press freedoms left little doubt that the party, not the junta, would run Nicaragua.

As the FSLN restricted the pluralism that had been promised in the original Plan of Government drawn up in San José, Costa Rica prior to the final takeover, the coalition began to crumble. In April 1982, less than nine months after Somoza's fall, Violeta Chamorro, the wife of the newspaper editor whose murder had sparked popular opposition to Somoza, and Alfonso Robelo, a business leader who had opposed Somoza since 1974, resigned from the Junta. Robelo would later become a political leader of the Costa Rican-based contra group ARDE, the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance, led by revolutionary hero Edén Pastora.

Groups which would come to form the contras had diverse origins ranging from reactionary *Somocistas* to leftist-oriented revolutionaries like Pastora. Enrique Bermúdez, a former colonel in Somoza's detested *Guardia Nacional*, organized a group of Guardsmen into the Fifteenth of September Legion as early as 1979. José Francisco Cardenal, a leader of the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP) — an umbrella business organization whose opposition to Somoza had been instrumental in his downfall — resigned from the newly-formed Council of State and left Nicaragua in May 1980 because of FSLN restrictions on democratic pluralism and its hedging on elections. He flew to the United States, where he immediately began searching for ways to overthrow the Sandinistas.

Initially, he joined forces with Bermúdez in a short-lived organization called the Nicaraguan Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ADRIN). Recognizing the important role the U.S. would play in its efforts, ADRIN established political organizations in many U.S. cities. The only significant action of the group at this time, however, was its effort to obtain arms for a revolt being planned by the charismatic agricultural leader Jorge Salazar in conjunction with an army group opposed to the FSLN. Because of his widespread popularity among coffee workers, Salazar posed a considerable threat to the Sandinistas. But hopes for a revolt were dashed in November 1980 when Salazar was gunned down by Sandinista military police.³ ADRIN collapsed shortly thereafter, largely because Cardenal and his collaborators had qualms about associating with former

3. The events surrounding Salazar's death are described in Shirley Christian, *Nicaragua: Revolution in the Family* (New York: Random House, 1985), pp. 170-85.

National Guardsmen and worried about the image such ties might project in Nicaragua and abroad. Even at this early stage of the contra struggle, contra leaders recognized the importance of political image in determining Nicaragua's fate.

To sharpen his image, Cardenal formed a new organization called the Nicaraguan Democratic Union (UDN) with a motto calculated to have a broad appeal — "*sin comunismo, sin Somocismo*." The UDN began meeting in Miami in November 1980 to plan its strategy and raise money from Nicaraguan exiles. Meanwhile, Raúl Arana, a military leader of the UDN, cultivated contacts in the Honduran military in order to gain a base of operations in Honduras. At this stage, however, the UDN was still a poor and feeble force: merely to buy two hundred weapons, Arana had to round up dozens of people in Miami willing to sign for the weapons at numerous local gun shops.⁴ Obviously, if the UDN was to succeed in toppling the Sandinistas, more sustained political, economic, and military assistance would be needed. Cardenal and his military leaders set out to find such assistance in the spring of 1981.

Their efforts bore some fruit in June 1981 when Argentina began providing aid, first in the form of \$50,000 in cash to purchase weapons and food, but with the prospect of more aid if the rebel groups could unite.⁵ Enticed by this offer, the UDN mended its fences with Bermúdez and signed a unity pact creating the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) in August 1981. An Argentine colonel met with Cardenal in Miami a few days later and explained that an agreement had been made by the governments of Argentina, Honduras, and the United States to supply equipment, money, and military advice to the FDN. Cardenal understood this to mean that the money was coming from the United States.⁶ With the United States partially committed, Cardenal turned to the task of ensuring continued American support: always sensitive to political images, he insisted over Argentine opposition that the FDN create a strong political arm. Such an arm, he reasoned, would be necessary to present the exiles' case to the world, give the movement political respectability, and develop a political framework for a new regime that would assuage international fears that the contras simply wanted to restore *Somocismo*.

II. ORIGINS OF THE U.S. POLICY OF AIDING THE CONTRAS

The United States entered the covert war in Nicaragua through the "back door" of El Salvador. Ronald Reagan was inaugurated just as the

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 197-98. Inside Nicaragua the UDN's impact was miniscule; its main activity was cattle rustling — necessary for the group's survival.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

Salvadoran guerrillas launched a "final offensive," and although the offensive did not succeed, it aroused great concern in the new administration. Reagan officials chose to view the situation in Central America as a test of U.S. resolve: Secretary of State Alexander Haig described the situation in El Salvador as "a well-orchestrated international communist campaign" and a "challenge at the heart of our sphere of interest." A loss in El Salvador, he believed, would result in "a loss of credibility," whereas a victory would signal a "revival of American will" to Third World countries with "deep doubts . . . about the U.S. and its capacity to project its power in defense of its own interests."⁷

While the new administration was willing to stake its credibility on the defeat of the guerrillas in El Salvador, it regarded Nicaragua as lost to communism: Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Inter-American Affairs Nestor Sanchez described Nicaragua as "a militarized sanctuary for subversion against its neighbors [that] appears *irrevocably* set on the path to totalitarianism."⁸ The new administration apparently would not stake U.S. prestige on defeating the firmly entrenched Sandinistas. As part of its effort to defeat the Salvadorans, however, it insisted that Nicaragua cease all aid to the guerrillas. This insistence would become the back door to the contra war, for it allowed the administration to justify aid to the contra rebels as an effort to prevent the spread of communist subversion to El Salvador and not as an effort to topple a recognized foreign government.

The United States not only entered the contra war through the back door; it entered it backwards. Whereas the United States became involved in El Salvador with a fairly clear set of goals — the defeat of the guerrillas and the construction of a stable democratic government — it entered the conflict in Nicaragua with little or no conception of what it hoped to accomplish. The two opinions prevalent within the administration were not easily reconcilable: containment and coexistence with Nicaragua through negotiations, on one hand, and the defeat and removal of the Sandinistas through war, on the other.

The only area of agreement between these positions was on the need to pressure the Sandinistas: the "containment" advocates, led by Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Thomas Enders, viewed the pressure as a negotiating tool, while the "overthrow" advocates, Fred Iklé, Nestor Sanchez, and Constantine Menges, viewed it as the first step toward the destruction of the FSLN regime. Acting on the basis of this

7. "Excerpts from Haig's Briefing about El Salvador," *New York Times*, 21 February 1981; Alexander M. Haig, Jr., *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1984), pp. 129, 98, 96.

8. Nestor D. Sanchez, "The Communist Threat," *Foreign Policy* 52 (Fall 1983):45 (emphasis added).

limited agreement, the administration moved to put the squeeze on Nicaragua in early 1981 by freezing economic aid, suspending wheat sales, and opposing Nicaragua's loan requests to the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank (IADB). The policy of pressuring the Sandinistas thus began as a policy of economic pressure; providing military aid to the contras was a logical extension of this policy of pressure.

In the wake of Secretary of State Haig's rhetorical bluster in early 1981, the pragmatic "containment" approach temporarily won over, largely because the high-profile policy was exceedingly unpopular and was reawakening perceptions of Reagan as a warmonger at a time when the administration needed to conserve its political strength for its top-priority economic programs. Enders therefore pursued a low-profile approach, initiating negotiations with Nicaragua in August 1981. The emphasis on negotiation was designed to limit political controversy over Central America domestically, ensure congressional approval of the administration's policy, and, potentially, put an end to Nicaraguan support for the Salvadoran guerrillas.

The negotiations which occurred between August and October of 1981 have been regarded by many as the only serious Reagan administration effort to negotiate with the Sandinistas.⁹ Enders made clear in his opening gambit that Nicaraguan support for Salvadoran guerrillas was the crucial issue for the United States. In a letter to Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto Brockman, he described such aid as an "insuperable barrier to the development of normal relations" and insisted that termination of Nicaraguan support was "a *sine qua non* for any dialogue."¹⁰ The Nicaraguan leaders reacted defensively, saying they would negotiate, but without preconditions. The United States responded by proposing a bilateral nonaggression declaration which would have committed the U.S. not to use, threaten to use, or acquiesce in — a reference to the anti-Sandinista training camps in Florida — the use of force against Nicaragua if Nicaragua agreed to end the arms shipments to El Salvador and stop its military build-up. The last demand would have required Nicaragua to return its heavy arms to Cuba, the Soviet Union, and other countries of origin — a condition which even a Nicaraguan moderate like former Ambassador to the U.S. Arturo José Cruz regarded as a "condition of a victorious power."¹¹ The Sandinistas overreacted to the hard-line U.S. opening. Instead of regarding the positions as negotiable instruments, they were insulted by them and lashed out at the United States: Daniel

9. See Roy Gutman, "Nicaragua: America's Diplomatic Charade," *Foreign Policy* 56 (Fall 1984):3-23.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Ortega broke a tacit understanding to lower the intensity of his rhetoric and attacked U.S. policies toward Nicaragua and Central America in an October 7 speech before the United Nations. The U.S. further antagonized Nicaragua by conducting a joint naval exercise with Honduras, beginning that same day. These antagonisms signalled the end of any real prospects for achieving a negotiated settlement of differences; the window of opportunity had closed. Negotiations would continue on and off during the following years; demands would be repackaged, expanded, and reformulated, but the talks were no longer conducted in earnest pursuit of a diplomatic solution. Instead, they became mere posturing for maximum public effect — an adjunct of the rhetorical diplomacy that has dominated U.S.-Nicaraguan relations.

The failure of Enders' negotiations reinforced the position of the hardliners, who had always been skeptical about diplomatic initiatives, and their views again began to shape administration thinking on Central America. This shift represented a watershed in U.S. policy because the hardline approach refused to accept the existence of a communist country on the Central American isthmus. And once coexistence with the Sandinista regime was ruled out, the whole calculus of policy changed, leaving prolonged conflict as the only possible course for U.S.-Nicaraguan relations. A brief review of the beliefs of Reagan administration hardliners and the Sandinista leadership reveals the impossibility of compromise and the inevitability of the conflict that has arisen.

In many respects, the Sandinistas and the Reagan hardliners share a similar *Weltanschauung* of a bipolar world of continuous struggle between two competing, irreconcilable world systems. According to former Sandinista official Arturo Cruz Sequeira, the Sandinistas view the struggle between capital and labor as the central contradiction of all capitalist societies. They then project this contradiction outwards and reduce the world to a struggle between imperialism and socialism.¹² From the Reagan side, the USSR is seen as "an expansionist power, imbued with a mission to spread its system throughout the world."¹³ The United States represents the monolith of imperialism to the Sandinistas while the Sandinistas represent the monolith of communism to the U.S. hardliners. The Sandinistas believe, according to Cruz, that an independent path is impossible for Nicaragua given the openness of its economy, and therefore, "if Nicaragua was to become socialist, there was no alternative to full integration with the Soviet bloc."¹⁴ From the start, the National

12. Arturo Cruz Sequeira, "The Origins of Sandinista Foreign Policy," in *Central America: Anatomy of Conflict*, ed. Robert S. Leiken (New York: Pergamon Press, 1984), p. 102.

13. Sanchez, "The Communist Threat," p. 44.

14. Cruz Sequeira, "The Origins of Sandinista Foreign Policy," p. 103.

Directorate of the FSLN insisted on a pro-Soviet foreign policy despite geopolitical imperatives, economic incentives, and regional conditions. The example of Grenada, where the U.S. has obtained documents detailing the logic and actions of another small Caribbean state's immersion into the Soviet bloc, is instructive here.¹⁵ Like Grenada, Nicaragua identified with the Soviet agenda on every issue from Kampuchea to Afghanistan in an effort to prove its worth to Moscow. The Reagan hardliners believed, evidently with good reason, that Nicaragua was completely integrated with the Soviet bloc, though they erred in seeing the relationship as Soviet-initiated and part of a master plan when in fact the impetus for the relationship arose more from the Nicaraguan side. They also believed with good reason that leftist revolutionaries would try to deceive the U.S. until revolutionary gains could be made "irreversible," a belief supported by the Sandinista position that "tactically, everything was negotiable except the final objectives of the revolution and the Soviet-backed military buildup."¹⁶

The U.S. hardliners and the Sandinistas also shared similar views on the balance of power, the domino theory, and the primary importance of security issues. The Sandinistas — again like Grenada's leaders — believed that the balance of power in the world between socialism and imperialism had shifted in favor of socialism.¹⁷ They reasoned that the U.S. had not intervened in Nicaragua in 1979 (as imperialist logic would dictate) only because it was constrained by its fear of Cuba, which had demonstrated its superiority in Angola.¹⁸ Jeane Kirkpatrick, the hardliners' theoretician, similarly saw a "deterioration of the U.S. position in the hemisphere" which had created "serious vulnerabilities where none previously existed."¹⁹

The hardliners subscribed to a variant of the domino theory for Central America, outlined by Constantine Menges: "In a particular geographic region, and to some degree in the world, each successive victory of the revolutionary left adds to its power, appeal, and momentum in the next target countries."²⁰ This formulation corresponded neatly with the per-

15. See U.S., Department of State and Department of Defense, *Grenada Documents: An Overview and Selection* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1984).

16. Cruz Sequeira, "The Origins of Sandinista Foreign Policy," p. 104. Constantine C. Menges, "The United States and Latin America in the 1980s," in *The National Interests of the United States in Foreign Policy: Seven Discussions at the Wilson Center*, ed. Prosser Gifford (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America and the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, 1981), p. 64.

17. "U.S. imperialism," according to a Grenadian Foreign Relations Report, "is on the decline" and "no longer holds sway over mankind." The socialist community, on the other hand, was seen as "strong and growing still." *Grenada Documents*, Doc. 106, pp. 17-18.

18. Cruz Sequeira, "The Origins of Sandinista Foreign Policy," p. 102.

19. Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, "U.S. Security and Latin America," *Commentary*, January 1981, p. 29.

20. Menges, "The United States and Latin America in the 1980s," p. 61.

ception of the FSLN Directorate that in a region as small as Central America, there are only two options: "a revolutionary solution for the entire region, given the 'ripple effect' of the Sandinista Revolution, or the eventual defeat of Nicaragua."²¹ To the FSLN, the old Central American truism that "five are one" is still valid; Nicaragua cannot remain a socialist island in a capitalist sea.

Finally, both the Sandinistas and the Reaganites shared a security-oriented perception of events in Central America. The Sandinistas believed that the security of their revolution lay almost exclusively in the acquisition of military hardware. According to Cruz, "internal working papers of the Sandinista Front on possible negotiations with the U.S. stressed that anything that might affect the vital decision to go ahead with this military build-up should be rejected . . . [N]egotiation was not a foreign policy objective; it was a means for buying time and gaining strategic advantage."²² For Kirkpatrick, security concerns also took precedence. She urged the United States to return to "the strategic perspective which had shaped U.S. policy from the Monroe Doctrine down to the eve of the Carter administration and at the center of which was a conception of the national interest and a belief in the moral legitimacy of its defense."²³ For both sides, negotiations were merely a means of gaining time to build strategic advantage.

Given these deeply held views, conflict was inescapable: the Reaganites and the Sandinistas shared a vision of the world in which U.S. and Nicaraguan interests were diametrically opposed. But while conflict was inevitable, the form that the conflict would take was by no means clear. The question before both the Sandinistas and the Reagan Administration was not whether to end the conflict, but how best to conduct and manage it.

III. THE RHETORICAL DIPLOMACY OF CONTRA AID

During the week in November 1981 when President Reagan first approved the covert CIA plan to help build and train a rebel force, the United States and Nicaragua provided a preview of the rhetorical nature of conflict in which they would be engaged in the coming years. In rapid-fire sequence, the Sandinistas accused thirteen people attached to the U.S. embassy in Managua of being CIA operatives; they charged the Reagan administration with inventing evidence of renewed Sandinista support for Salvadoran guerrillas in order to justify increasing U.S.

21. Cruz Sequeira, "The Origins of Sandinista Foreign Policy," p. 104.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 104-105.

23. Kirkpatrick, "U.S. Security and Latin America," p. 31.

military involvement in El Salvador; and Fidel Castro asserted that reports of Cuban troops in Nicaragua were part of a "campaign of lies" by the U.S. government. The Reagan administration returned the fire on November 12 in a foreign policy statement by the Secretary of State citing "mounting evidence in Nicaragua of the totalitarian character of the Sandinista regime." A week later, the United States announced that time was growing short to prevent Nicaragua from becoming a totalitarian state, and refused to rule out military action in the region. Nicaragua managed a final salvo in this opening exchange by having Defense Minister Humberto Ortega meet with Konstantin Chernenko in Moscow in a symbolic effort to assert Nicaragua's independence and imperviousness to U.S. threats.²⁴ The Nicaraguan-U.S. conflict that ensued followed a similar pattern of accusations, threats, countercharges, defenses and symbolic actions.

A number of questions have permeated this public diplomacy struggle, questions which have then found an echo in congressional and public opinion. What are the goals of the parties to the struggle — do the contras really care about halting the arms flow to El Salvador or do they simply seek the overthrow of the Sandinistas? What is the reason for Nicaragua's military buildup — is it purely defensive, as the Sandinistas claim, or part of an aggressive Soviet-backed expansionist effort, as the administration claims? What is the U.S. goal in aiding the contras — to stop Nicaraguan meddling in neighboring countries, to create pressure on negotiations, or to strangle the Nicaraguan government and purge the isthmus of Soviet and Cuban influence?

Another question has involved the composition of the contra forces — a major public relations point. Are the contras disgruntled revolutionaries or vengeful *Somocistas*? Should they succeed in overthrowing the Sandinistas, what kind of regime would they establish? The U.S. role in contra operations forms another issue area. Does the United States train and advise or does it plan and help carry out contra attacks? How much material support does the U.S. provide? And, given the extent of U.S. involvement, does the United States exercise any control over the contras? A major question raised by U.S. conduct in aiding the contras is whether or not the program of covert aid is really supposed to be covert at all. The openness of the administration regarding its role in aiding the contras suggests that it believes the success of the contra operations depends on Nicaragua's recognition that U.S. power is behind the rebels. The contra

24. *New York Times*, 7 November 1981, p. A4; 10 November 1981, p. A6; 12 November 1981, p. A4; 13 November 1981, p. A1; 20 November 1981; 23 November 1981, p. A15; 27 November 1981, p. A3.

operations thus became a signal to Nicaragua of U.S. concern, or even a bluff of imminent intervention.

A final question, and one that infuses the entire debate, is whether or not the U.S. should be involved in aiding the contras at all. Moral, legal, and pragmatic political concerns all enter the calculus here. The major question is whether the pursuit of such a policy can advance U.S. interests without corrupting U.S. institutions, eroding respect for international law, and antagonizing U.S. friends and domestic opinion.

These questions were at the core of a series of events which, linked together, have formed the foreign policy process between the United States and Nicaragua. The struggle has been highly episodic, with a flurry of activity surrounding a particular issue, usually followed by a short calm as the groups involved prepared for another round over a separate issue.

The battle over contra aid began in earnest in March 1982 through the coincidence of three events: first, the contra forces, which up to this time had had little impact in Nicaragua, succeeded in blowing up two bridges in Nicaragua over the Negro and Coco Rivers. These dramatic actions served as an unofficial declaration of war by the contras, and made clear to the Sandinistas that they were no longer dealing with mere cattle rustlers. Second, Congress began its first debates on the U.S. role in the contra operations. The debate was occasioned by reports in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* of the President's November approval of clandestine CIA operations. Reflecting the intimate relationship between what is written in the press and discussed in Congress, Representative Michael Barnes, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, introduced a bill only two days after the press reports appeared designed to prevent the Reagan Administration from conducting any clandestine operations against the Sandinista government.²⁵ Finally, events in El Salvador led to changes within the Reagan administration which moved Nicaragua to center-stage and guaranteed confrontation between the United States and Nicaragua. The surprising success of the March elections in El Salvador on which the United States had staked much of its hopes for its Central American policy, strengthened the hand of the hardliners and convinced them that a domestic climate existed both for increasing U.S. support for El Salvador and forcing a change in the Nicaraguan government.

The decision to elevate democratic pluralism in Nicaragua to "the *sine qua non* of restoring relations" — ²⁶in the words of Craig Johnstone, then

25. *New York Times*, 16 March 1982, p. A6.

26. Gutman, "Nicaragua: America's Diplomatic Charade," p. 11.

director of the State Department's Office of Central American Affairs — definitively ended any lingering hopes for a negotiated settlement: the FSLN leadership had told Enders in August that they would not discuss internal politics. "A state that agrees to negotiate on internal matters," a senior Sandinista official explained, "wounds the substantive reason for being a state."²⁷ According to Johnstone, the shift in the U.S. position reflected a perception within the administration that "we could not reach a deal because there was no flexibility on the Nicaraguan side."²⁸

There was, however, another critical reason for the new emphasis on democracy which grew out of domestic political pressures. In February, the Nicaraguan Government had accused the United States of issuing "lies and half truths" against the revolution, and challenged the United States to prove its charges of Sandinista support for Salvadoran guerrillas. The press report in which this challenge appeared increased the pressure on the administration by quoting Western diplomats who expressed "open skepticism" about the U.S. charges.²⁹ Placed on the defensive, the administration responded with a major political information campaign: A Navy surveillance ship was put in position off the coast of Nicaragua and aerial reconnaissance flights were stepped up to gather proof of the arms flow. Secretary Haig then testified before Congress that he had "overwhelming and irrefutable" evidence that the insurgents in El Salvador were controlled from abroad by non-Salvadorans.³⁰ A few days later, he announced that a Nicaraguan military man had been captured in El Salvador. On March 10, the administration made public aerial reconnaissance photos which it claimed proved that the Sandinistas, with Cuban and Soviet assistance, were assembling the largest military force in Central America, a force which upset the military balance in the region and threatened Nicaragua's neighbors.³¹ The administration's credibility on Central America was so low, however, that this major briefing was largely disregarded. Further damage to U.S. credibility occurred when Mexico claimed that the captured Nicaraguan military man was actually only a student from a Mexican university. By allowing itself to be placed on the public defensive by Nicaragua, the administration found itself losing the battle for Central America.

To counter this image of defensiveness, U.N. Ambassador Kirkpatrick and National Security Adviser William Clark pressed the administration to go on the offensive in the battle for public opinion and to increase

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*

29. *New York Times*, 15 February 1982.

30. *New York Times*, 3 March 1982, p. A1.

31. *New York Times*, 10 March 1982, p. A1.

U.S. pressure on Nicaragua. As the public diplomacy fiasco of March made clear, the United States needed a broader, more appealing rationale for its Central American policy to counter public and congressional skepticism. The promotion of democracy and human rights in Nicaragua provided such a rationale, even though it foreclosed chances for a negotiated settlement.

Beginning in mid-1982, Kirkpatrick and her allies applied pressure on Congress by asserting that a U.S. defeat in El Salvador would be Congress' responsibility for failing to support the administration's policy. This hard-line tactic reflected her belief that appeasing Congress only increased its obstructionism.³² A confidential State Department paper drafted by Johnstone and cleared by Enders reveals the administration's concern with the domestic aspects of its foreign policy: it emphasized the need for "a stronger constituency on Capitol Hill for the Administration's policy in key votes on economic and military aid."³³ And even while the administration optimistically asserted that "the trend of events in Central America is now running in our favor" (by virtue of the El Salvador elections and the deteriorating situation in Nicaragua), it still feared that failure in Congress would lead to "increased chances of a political/military debacle in Central America with grave national security consequences." If Congress held the key to the success of the administration's policy, the administration would have to offer Congress more than veiled threats to obtain funding; it would also have to offer inducements.

An October 1982 episode revealed the administration's dexterity in playing to Congress. Throughout the summer, border tensions between Nicaragua and Honduras threatened to flare up into open war. This increase in tension reflected the burgeoning strength of the anti-Sandinista forces in Honduras. The depth, number, and effectiveness of contra incursions had begun to worry the Sandinistas, and in response, they crossed into Honduran territory to attack rebel bases and stepped up their public diplomacy efforts to tie the CIA to the "rightest" rebel attacks. The threat of a conflagration on the isthmus worried Mexico, and in mid-September, Mexican President José López Portillo and Venezuelan President Luis Herrera Campins appealed to the United States, Nicaragua, and Honduras to begin an "exploration of ways that remain open to halt the current worrying escalation."³⁴

32. Barry Rubin, "Reagan Administration Policymaking and Central America," in *Central America: Anatomy of Conflict*, ed. Robert S. Leiken, p. 309.

33. *New York Times*, 16 August 1982, p. A8.

34. *New York Times*, 16 September 1982, p. A7.

The administration had been under pressure from Congress to show greater flexibility toward Central America and to be more open to negotiations. The Mexican-Venezuelan letter gave Reagan an opportunity to appear to be flexible without budging an inch on substance. He responded to the Latin leaders by expressing "great interest" in their "very constructive proposal" for a negotiated settlement of the border dispute. But he went on to say that "any meaningful attempt to address the problems of Central America must be within a regional context" and must seek "democratic pluralism" and "an end to support for terrorist and other groups in other countries of the region."³⁵ In other words, there would be no special bilateral negotiations with Nicaragua, only multilateral negotiations in which Nicaragua's internal politics and support for Salvadoran guerrillas headed the agenda.

To further cloak this substantive rigidity in an image of flexibility, the administration concurrently pursued its own peace initiative in San José, Costa Rica, where Caribbean allies of the U.S., including Jamaica, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Colombia, and Costa Rica, gathered to demonstrate regional support for the administration's policy. This San José meeting made it possible for a State Department official to tell the *New York Times* that although he found the Mexican proposal "useful and interesting," he felt it addressed "only one aspect of the problem," and therefore the U.S. preferred the approach endorsed in San José that regional cooperation depended on each government's encouraging "national reconciliation" — Reagan code words for granting political legitimacy to the contras.³⁶ So even as Reagan upped the ante by calling on the Sandinistas to accord the contras legitimacy, he managed to appear in the guise of the great conciliator. A number of congressmen were gulled. Representative David Bonior of Michigan who had sent Reagan a letter with 107 congressional signatures urging him to respond positively to the Mexican-Venezuelan initiative, concluded, "the Administration appears to be signalling a real willingness to talk."³⁷

Public perceptions of this willingness to negotiate did not last long, however, for a month later *Newsweek* magazine shattered the image of the administration as a good-faith negotiator with a cover story on U.S. involvement with the contras titled "A Secret War for Nicaragua."³⁸ The article charged that U.S. Ambassador to Honduras John D. Negroponte, was "overseeing an ambitious covert campaign to arm, train, and direct Nicaraguan exiles" in order to "harass and undermine the Nicaraguan

35. *New York Times*, 7 October 1982, p. A1.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. "A Secret War for Nicaragua," *Newsweek*, November 8, 1982.

government." Evoking images of Vietnam, *Newsweek* claimed to have uncovered "extensive details" of a campaign that had "escalated far beyond Washington's original intentions" and had grown "just about out of control." Noting increasing U.S. involvement with *Somocistas*, the article stated that the U.S. had "alienated the only group likely to attract widespread support inside Nicaragua" (Edén Pastora) and was supporting "the only wrong, the only truly evil alternative." The U.S. appeared to be falling into a Vietnam pattern of involvement, according to *Newsweek*, moving from training, to plotting missions, to going out on actual operations. Scheduled joint military maneuvers with Honduras along the Nicaraguan border, *Newsweek* said, "might preview a real war." Observing that the operations potentially violated congressional restrictions on 'dirty tricks', *Newsweek* also pointed the way to congressional action: "virtually every knowledgeable official says that the operation needs firmer restraints."

Congress swung into action quickly to get itself on record as having placed some restraints on the administration. Within the month, the House voted 411 to 0 to prohibit the Defense Department and the CIA from providing military equipment or training to the *contras* "for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua." This restriction, officially known as the Boland amendment, was actually not a new restriction, but a *public* declaration of a previously classified condition that had been attached to the fiscal 1983 intelligence authorization bill four months earlier. So although Congress did not take any new substantive position in response to the *Newsweek* article, it succeeded in appearing to be taking bold action. In reality, little had changed. To comply with the Boland Amendment, the administration merely had to do what it had been doing — denying that U.S. support was intended to topple the Sandinista regime.³⁹

As 1982 drew to a close, events were moving in directions certain to increase tensions in Central America and political risks in the United States. Hardliners within the administration pressed for a more assertive stance at the same time as Congress demanded a more conciliatory stance. White House activism coincided with congressional activism to make Central America a major domestic political issue. Press reports of U.S. involvement added to the pressure on all sides. In Central America, Nicaraguan-Honduran border tensions threatened to boil over as the *contras* began to make their presence felt in Nicaragua. President Rea-

39. For example, the day after the *Newsweek* story appeared, the Administration stated, "We are not waging a secret war or anything approaching that. What we are doing is trying to keep Managua off-balance and apply military pressure to stop them from providing military aid to the insurgents in El Salvador." *New York Times*, 2 November 1982, p. 6.

gan's visits to Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Honduras in December only served to heighten tensions; the Sandinistas were convinced that the President was discussing plans to invade Nicaragua and termed the trip a "provocation."⁴⁰ The planned U.S.-Honduran war games on the Nicaraguan border confirmed Nicaragua's fears. Most significant from the U.S. perspective, however, was the deteriorating state of affairs in El Salvador. The optimism generated by the March elections had been eroded by the inability of the Salvadoran Army to defeat the guerrillas. In October 1982 and January 1983, the rebels had launched major offensives, capturing, in the latter case, the major coffee town of Berlin in central El Salvador and holding it for three days. These rebel successes seemed to confirm the failure of the Reagan policies, and further eroded the tenuous base of support for them that then existed. In addition, the administration was running out of money for its policies, and the prospects for increasing aid levels were growing dim.

The combined impact of these trends forced a high-level review of U.S. policy under NSC chief Clark. The review had two immediate results: Ambassador Kirkpatrick was dispatched to Central America in February to get a first-hand look at the situation; and a new "two-track" policy of negotiation with the Salvadoran Left, combined with continued support for the Salvadoran military and the contra rebels was articulated. The goal of this new policy, as Christopher Dickey explained, "was less to move toward the bargaining table at that moment than to get the money from Congress needed to move at all."⁴¹ The offer of negotiations was used as a carrot to get Congress to pay for the bigger stick the administration felt was necessary. (The two-track proposal was leaked by Enders' bureaucratic enemies in February in a way that made him appear to be capitulating to leftists, thereby discrediting him and leading to his ouster in May. Nevertheless, the premises of the two-track approach remained the basis of U.S. policy in 1983.) Meanwhile, Kirkpatrick returned from Central America warning that the Salvadoran Army and government were demoralized by the uncertainty over the future of U.S. support — an uncertainty caused, according to Kirkpatrick, by congressional criticism and State Department talk about negotiations. Citing a "very widespread concern about the level of Soviet long-range investment in the region and the low level of apparent U.S. interest and involvement," she proposed emergency increases in U.S. assistance and a major presidential effort to buoy the Salvadoran regime by discouraging congres-

40. *New York Times*, 29 November 1982, p. A1.

41. Christopher Dickey, "Central America: From Quagmire to Cauldron?" 3 *Foreign Affairs* 62 (America and the World 1983):662-63.

sional criticism. CIA Director William Casey concurrently advocated an expansion of covert U.S. operations against Nicaragua.

By March, Central America had again become the administration's top foreign policy priority. In a March 10 speech, Reagan described the defense of the Caribbean against Marxism and communism as "vital" to U.S. interests and requested \$110 million in additional military aid for El Salvador. To head off charges that he was overemphasizing military solutions at the expense of diplomatic ones, Reagan appointed Richard Stone as a special negotiator for Central America — a deft political maneuver because such a position had originally been proposed by the influential former chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Operations, Clarence Long.

At this juncture, U.S. policy toward the contras was to portray the fighting in Nicaragua as an internal affair, as Reagan demonstrated in a news conference: "What we are seeing now are the other revolutionary factions totally ousted from any participation in the government now fighting back."⁴² Furthermore, the administration would neither acknowledge nor disclaim support for the contras, hoping thereby to evoke fear in Nicaragua about the extent of U.S. involvement.⁴³

International opinion had also begun to swing sharply against the U.S. in early 1983. Concern about the direction of events prompted Panama, Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela to join together in January to search for an alternative to the military solution apparently being pushed by the United States. The Contadora Group, as it was called, attracted widespread international support; and the less than wholehearted U.S. support for the effort added to an impression of U.S. intransigence. The non-aligned nations held a ministerial meeting in Managua in January as a sign of their support for Nicaragua, during which they denounced the "systematic attacks" designed to destabilize Nicaragua "as *admitted publicly* by a foreign power."⁴⁴ Nicaragua skillfully used United Nations fora to denounce U.S. aid to the contras, evoking harsh words of response, but no direct denials of U.S. complicity, from Jeane Kirkpatrick.⁴⁵ Even the Sandinistas' arrogance in mistreating the Pope during a March 4 visit could not avert U.S. isolation in the U.N. Security Council over charges of U.S. wrongdoing.

When President Reagan delivered a major address on Central America to a joint session of Congress in April 1983, he launched a risky public campaign in the face of considerable domestic and foreign opposition to

42. *New York Times*, 29 March 1983, p. A1.

43. *Ibid.*

44. *New York Times*, 15 January 1983, p. A8.

45. See, for example, *New York Times*, 24 March 1983, p. A12.

his policies. Declaring that the security of all the Americans was at stake in Central America, Reagan urged Congress to support and fully fund his military and economic assistance programs. If it refused and El Salvador was "lost" to communism, Reagan made clear where the blame would be pinned: "Who among us would wish to bear the responsibility for failing to meet our shared obligation? I doubt that a majority in Congress . . . would stand by passively while the people of Central America are delivered to totalitarianism and we ourselves are left vulnerable to new dangers."⁴⁶

Initially, the speech and the massive public diplomacy effort that accompanied it had little positive impact. The week following the speech, the Democratic-controlled House Select Committee on Intelligence handed Reagan a major, if temporary, setback by voting along party lines to cut off all funds for covert, CIA-backed military operations in Nicaragua. Instead, it offered overt aid to "any friendly country" in Central America — pointedly omitting the contras — to help stem the flow of weapons to El Salvador.⁴⁷ But Reagan was now on the offensive, and in a speech the following day, he called the contras "freedom fighters" who oppose a government that has betrayed its revolutionary principles.⁴⁸ The major significance of this speech, however, was not the new appellation given to the contras but the acknowledgement by the President that the United States was aiding a group whose goal it was to challenge and perhaps overthrow the Sandinista regime. Two days later, the Republican-controlled Senate Select Committee on Intelligence adopted a bill to allow the CIA to continue covert activities until the end of fiscal year 1984. Partisan divisions continued to widen as the House bill moved through the Foreign Affairs Committee, and in July, the administration began searching for a bipartisan compromise that would avoid a full House vote on ending aid to the contras.

This search led to the formation of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America under Henry Kissinger which was charged with finding "means of building a national consensus on a comprehensive United States policy for the region."⁴⁹ But the political benefits of this conciliatory gesture were negated when it was revealed concurrently that the Administration planned to conduct an unprecedented six-month U.S. military exercise with four thousand troops and nineteen ships in Honduras and along its Caribbean coast. The story appeared just as the House

46. *New York Times*, 28 April 1983, pp. A1, A12.

47. *New York Times*, 4 May 1983, p. A1.

48. *New York Times*, 5 May 1983, p. A1.

49. Henry A. Kissinger, Foreword to *Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1984).

was preparing to enter debate on the Boland-Zablocki bill to cancel all covert aid to the contras, and it helped turn the tide against the rebels 228 to 195. The bill died because the Senate refused to take action on it, but the vote signalled a growing discontent with the U.S.-backed militarization of the region, with covert operations of dubious legality, and with the administration's lack of clarity regarding its objectives in Nicaragua.

The Nicaraguan government had also done its part to defeat aid to the contras. In the midst of the House debate, Daniel Ortega unveiled the Sandinistas' own version of rhetorical diplomacy, offering to address a number of issues raised by the United States and the Contadora countries including a freeze on arms shipments to El Salvador and a non-aggression pact with Honduras. Further, it agreed to examine them in a multilateral framework whereas it had previously insisted on a bilateral framework.⁵⁰ To advance this image of flexibility and moderation, Ortega emphasized the continued role of the private sector and the existence of pluralistic institutions, and he repeated promises to hold elections in 1985.

Though this conciliatory stance may have helped influence the congressional vote on contra aid, it seemed only to stiffen the resolve of the Reagan administration to press its fight against Nicaragua. On September 12, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Fred Iklé delivered a speech cleared by the White House in which he declared, "We must prevent consolidation of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua that would become an arsenal for insurgency, a safe haven for the export of violence." He made it clear that the United States sought to prevent this consolidation by military means: "We do not seek military defeat for our friends. We do not seek a military stalemate. We seek victory for the forces of democracy."⁵¹ As Tom Wicker of the *New York Times* observed in response to Iklé's speech, preventing consolidation of the Sandinista regime "obviously requires that it be overthrown."⁵² This public declaration of the administration's new, more assertive goals was coupled with a frontal assault on Congress: "As long as a group in Congress keeps crippling the President's military assistance program, we will have a policy always shy of success. We will remain locked into a protracted failure." In a direct reference to the July House vote against contra aid, he accused Congress of establishing a "sanctuary" for Sandinista aggression and he warned that the "psychological impact" of a cutoff of U.S. aid on the Nicaraguan

50. Dickey, "Central America: From Quagmire to Cauldron?" p. 674.

51. Iklé's speech before the Baltimore Council on Foreign Affairs appears in *The Nicaragua Reader: Documents of a Revolution Under Fire*, eds. Peter Rosset and John Vandermeer (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1983), pp. 21-26.

52. *New York Times*, 19 September 1983.

resistance forces would be "severe", signalling throughout the region that "the totalitarian forces represent the winning side."⁵³

What was surprising about the administration's renewed military emphasis was that it seemed to ignore the poor results of past and current military efforts. In El Salvador, the government forces fought poorly despite massive U.S. efforts to create a more efficient force that respected human rights. And in Nicaragua, the contras showed signs of weakening. Administration claims in May that the contras stood a good chance of overthrowing the Sandinistas by the end of the year were whittled down in June to a prediction that they would control one-third of the rural areas, and by late summer, it was apparent that the contras had failed to achieve significant military gains or create a major political threat to the Sandinistas, though they had caused about \$70 million in damage.⁵⁴ This dichotomy between the actual impact of the Central American forces and the growing importance attributed to them by the administration exemplifies the nature of rhetorical diplomacy: rhetoric is a policy tool used often without regard for actual conditions, and in the battle for Central America, the success or failure of the fight on the ground seemed not to matter as much as the impression of significant U.S. involvement created by U.S. aid to the contras. In fact, as the prospects for military success grew dimmer, polemical attacks on Nicaragua increased in intensity.

Iklé's attack on Nicaragua and his threat to pin the blame on Congress for the failure of administration policies apparently had little effect on congressional attitudes. On October 20 in a nearly identical 227-194 vote, the House again voted to cut off U.S. support for the contras despite last-minute appeals from the Secretary of State. This second vote, though non-binding, emphasized congressional resolve to put an end to U.S. support for the contras, and had it not been for the positive political impact of the Grenada intervention, U.S. aid to the contras might have been terminated for good in 1983.

Grenada was a temporary turning point in the struggle between the U.S. and Nicaragua because it gave the contras new financial life in the U.S. and also frightened the Sandinistas into their most conciliatory actions since the beginning of the contra war. Only one month after the full House had voted against continuing covert aid, House and Senate conferees agreed to provide \$24 million in covert aid. Within Nicaragua, the Sandinistas relaxed their censorship of *La Prensa*, opened a dialogue with the Roman Catholic hierarchy, promised to announce election pro-

53. Iklé, speech before the Baltimore Council on Foreign Affairs, pp. 23-24, 25.

54. *New York Times*, 23 May 1983, p. A1; 24 June 1983, p. A1; 24 July 1983, p. A1.

cedures for the 1985 elections, offered amnesty to exiled nationals and partial amnesty to anti-Sandinista guerrillas, and asked the Salvadoran rebel leaders to leave the country. They also announced that one-thousand Cubans had left the country, and offered to send all foreign military advisors home and stop buying arms if other Central American countries followed suit.⁵⁵ The Reagan administration reacted cautiously and with mixed signals to Nicaragua's concessions. Secretary of State George P. Shultz who had replaced Haig in 1982 at one point welcomed the proposals, describing them as "vastly different" from previous offers. But he added, "what we want is reality to be put behind the rhetoric." Elsewhere in the administration, Constantine Menges, who had moved up to the position of Senior Director for Latin American Affairs in the NSC, attacked the proposals on November 28 as "wholly inadequate" because they proposed verification monitoring by the same countries that were supposed to have guaranteed the July 1979 agreement that brought the Sandinistas to power with pledges of democratic government.⁵⁶

The hardline position represented by Menges won out within the administration. Throughout the fall, even before the Grenada intervention, organized military pressures on the Sandinistas had been intensified: under CIA direction, the contras had conducted a series of commando sabotage operations against airfields, factories, and most dramatically against oil storage facilities in Corinto harbor. The hardliners believed, apparently with reason,⁵⁷ that Nicaraguan conciliation had come in response to U.S. pressures. But instead of choosing to explore these signals through diplomatic channels, as would have been consistent with the official logic that contra aid was the only way to get the Sandinistas to the negotiating table, the administration decided in November to step up military pressure. According to one official, "people figured that if a little pressure had some effect, then more pressure would have more effect."⁵⁸ By not negotiating at this time when all the trends were moving in the U.S. favor,⁵⁹ the administration missed its best chance to achieve a highly favorable political settlement. Also, it effectively removed the diplomatic façade from a U.S. policy whose only aim could now be the overthrow of a government with whom the United States maintained

55. Dickey, "Central America: From Quagmire to Cauldron?" p. 675; *New York Times*, 25 November 1983, p. A1.

56. Gutman, "Nicaragua: America's Diplomatic Charade," pp. 18-19.

57. See *Ibid.*, p. 18: "Even Nicaraguan officials concede these signals came in response to American pressures."

58. *New York Times*, 11 April 1984, p. A1.

59. The Sandinista government was losing political support in Europe because of its ties to Cuba and its attitude toward domestic critics. Spain, France, and West Germany had been growing cool to Nicaragua. *New York Times*, 16 November 1983, p. A1.

diplomatic relations. Furthermore, the decision to step up military pressure led to the Administration's most egregious tactical blunder in its long campaign against the Sandinistas — the mining of Nicaraguan harbors.

As 1984 began, Nicaragua was still in a conciliatory mood and was scoring well on the public diplomacy front with well-publicized announcements of plans and arrangements for elections. In late February, the Sandinistas decided to hold elections in November 1984 — a year ahead of schedule. Then, in early March, while the U.S. administration and Nicaraguan opposition leaders were seeking to downplay the importance of the election proposal,⁶⁰ the Sandinistas began reporting that some ships entering Nicaraguan harbors had hit mines and sunk. They noted wryly that the contras appeared to have developed new skills which they said reflected a CIA decision to provide more direct support for them. These announcements attracted little attention in the United States, where Congress was busy considering President Reagan's request nearly to double U.S. assistance to the contras with an additional \$21 million. Reagan initially tried to tie the contra aid to a \$150 million emergency aid bill for famine relief in Africa, provoking House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill to comment that Reagan was "unfit to be President of the U.S."⁶¹ Nevertheless, the Senate approved the \$21 million on April 5 by a wide margin in what was regarded as an "important" victory for the President. But within three days that victory would be overshadowed by a disclosure which troubled many supporters of the administration: the *New York Times* reported on April 8 that Americans working for the CIA on a ship off Nicaragua's coast had been supervising the mining of Nicaragua's harbors.

The report, observing that the direct involvement of Americans in military operations "constituted a significant change in CIA operations against Nicaragua," touched off a major political controversy in Congress, rekindling doubts about the use of covert activities in Central America to advance U.S. interests. Congressional reaction was swift. Speaker O'Neill made clear that the \$21 million request for *contra* aid was dead in the House, and the Senate voted 84 to 12 for a resolution sponsored by Edward Kennedy opposing the use of U.S. funds to mine Nicaraguan harbors. Senator Barry Goldwater sent a scathing letter to CIA Director Casey complaining that the CIA had failed to keep the intelligence

60. See Arturo Jose Cruz's op-ed article in the *New York Times*, 27 January 1984, p. A27. Secretary of State Shultz told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he doubted there would be what the U.S. considered fair elections. "An election, just as an election is one thing," he said, "they have elections in the Soviet Union." *New York Times*, 23 February 1984, p. A4.

61. *New York Times*, 16 March 1984, p. A4.

committee fully informed of its activities. "The President has asked us to back his foreign policy," Goldwater wrote. "Bill, how can we back his foreign policy when we don't know what the hell he is doing? . . . We were not given the information we were entitled to receive. I don't like this one bit from the President or from you."⁶² As a *New York Times* analysis observed, the vituperative congressional reaction to the harbor mining incident "dealt President Reagan his most severe political jolt on foreign policy and may have caused lasting damage to his ability to muster bipartisan support for his foreign policy in Central America."⁶³

The administration was caught off guard by this congressional condemnation, and with good reason, for the incident had much more to do with domestic politics than foreign policy. The initial congressional reaction made it appear that the administration had withheld information about CIA dirty tricks, but as was later revealed by Representative Edward P. Boland, then Chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and usually a leading opponent of the administration's covert activities, Congress had been informed about U.S. involvement in the mining of Nicaraguan ports in late January and had been monitoring the operation closely.⁶⁴

The incident was also not the first instance of direct U.S. involvement in operations against Nicaragua. A front page story in the *New York Times* in October 1983 reported that the CIA had recommended and helped plan the rebel attacks at Corinto harbor and elsewhere.⁶⁵ The reason for the congressional criticism was not so much that Congress disproved of the foreign policy action — it had been briefed about the mining and the Senate had just voted \$21 million more for covert activities even after Panamanian and Soviet ships had been hit — but because the action had entered domestic politics through the press in such a way that there appeared to be only one correct side to be on. Up until this time, Congress had not only tolerated considerable ambiguity in the administration's Central American policy, but as the *New York Times* observed in an editorial, it "seemed to prefer it to any disturbing clarity."⁶⁶ The mining incident stripped away much of the ambiguity behind which Congress had been hiding, and so, with a certain amount of hypocrisy, Congress loudly voted to condemn what it had quietly voted to fund.

62. *New York Times*, 14 April 1948, p. A6.

63. *New York Times*, 12 April 1984, p. A12.

64. *New York Times*, 14 April 1984, p. A1.

65. *New York Times*, 17 October 1983, p. A1.

66. *New York Times*, 18 April 1984, p. A30.

The Sandinistas compounded the administration's political problems by bringing the mining incident before the International Court of Justice in the Hague, where they scored repeated legal, and therefore rhetorical, victories over the United States. On May 10, the Court ruled unanimously that the United States should immediately desist from mining Nicaraguan harbors, and for the first time in its history, the Court ordered the United States to respect the sovereignty and political independence of another nation. American claims that the Court lacked jurisdiction to hear the case were also overruled as the Court decided in December to hear the case on its merits. The U.S. reaction was to turn its back on the World Court altogether, seemingly confirming the illegality of U.S. actions and certainly damaging long-term U.S. interests in promoting a world order respectful of international law.

By the end of April, the President's program of contra aid, which had been on track at the beginning of the month, had been suddenly derailed. To overcome stiff congressional resistance, Reagan decided to go over the heads of Congress and make a direct televised appeal to the American people.⁶⁷ In a May 9 speech, Reagan described Sandinista rule as "a communist reign of terror" and challenged his audience with four "simple questions": "Will we support freedom in this hemisphere or not? Will we defend our vital interests in this hemisphere or not? Will we stop the spread of Communism in this hemisphere or not? Will we act while there is still time?"⁶⁸ Two weeks later, the House responded with a resounding "no" when it voted 241 to 177 to deny further aid to the rebels. Obviously, the mining incident had damaged the President's credibility and heightened congressional skepticism of official explanations.

Despite the failure of the direct appeal, the administration still had one last hand to play for fiscal 1984 — the negotiation ploy. On June 1, Secretary of State Shultz made an unexpected stop in Managua on his way back from Costa Rica, and held talks with the Sandinistas in which he opened a bilateral negotiating channel between Ambassador Harry Shlaudeman and Deputy Foreign Minister Victor Hugo Tinoco. Demonstrating that he, too, could conduct rhetorical diplomacy, Shultz declared upon arrival in Managua, "President Reagan sent me here on a mission of peace."⁶⁹ But his more immediate mission was to exert pressure on congressional Democrats. Having opened direct negotiations with the

67. A New York Times/CBS poll the week before the President's speech revealed that only 1 in 3 supported his policy in Central America and 1 in 2 were afraid the policy would lead the U.S. into war. *New York Times*, 29 April 1984, p. A3.

68. *New York Times*, 10 May 1984, A16.

69. *New York Times*, 2 June 1984, p. A1.

Sandinistas, the administration could now claim that the Democrats were intent on denying Reagan the means to continue the pressures that had successfully brought the Sandinistas to the bargaining table. This tactic, however, even combined with a new State and Defense Department report on Nicaraguan subversion and another round of presidential polemics accusing Nicaragua of being a "totalitarian dungeon," failed to overcome congressional opposition. On July 24, the White House gave up its effort to gain approval for the \$21 million in additional contra aid for fiscal 1984 and decided to concentrate on obtaining money in the 1985 budget.

The defeat left the contras temporarily short of funds, but they had also been busy with their own public diplomacy effort to build an international following. As far back as December 1982, leaders of the rebel groups had held news conferences in Miami in an attempt to dispel the image of the contras as right-wing Somoza followers. While acknowledging that some members of the National Guard were among their ranks, they insisted that these were "younger, professional officers not associated with the excesses of the National Guard." Should they gain power, the contra leaders professed a desire to "give democracy a chance."⁷⁰ In early 1984, the contras arranged a major rally in New Orleans to gain support and funding. Now, in mid-1984, they had to rely on their own connections to keep fighting until the administration could raise new funds. To increase their prospects of attracting aid, the Costa Rican-based ARDE united with the Honduran-based FDN, creating a larger, more unified rebel force. Edén Pastora still refused to associate with the *Guardia*-tainted FDN and thus struck off on his own in the U.S. and Latin America to seek funding.

Prospects for a renewal of U.S. aid in 1985 were made extremely remote by the revelation in October 1984 that the CIA had produced a manual for the contras, titled "Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare," which gave advice on political assassinations and which presupposed that the insurgent effort was aimed at overthrowing the Sandinistas.⁷¹ The furor which soon developed over the manual seemed to confirm the impression that the "CIA's war" was "out of control," and that once again the agency was violating congressional and executive restraints on "dirty tricks." To add to the administration's woes, the Sandinistas scored another public diplomacy coup in the fall by accepting the Contadora Group's draft treaty — something the United States had been calling on them to do. When the United States refused to give a

70. *New York Times*, 7 December 1982, p. B3.

71. *New York Times*, 15 October 1984, p. A7; 16 October 1984, p. A1.

similar commitment, Ortega's claim that the administration was "trying to destroy the Sandinista regime" gained credence.⁷²

As 1984 drew to a close, the Reagan administration had run out of options. The policy of pressuring Nicaragua by aiding the contras had apparently reached a dead end. In October, as part of a broad budget compromise, Congress had tentatively approved \$14 million in covert aid, but the money could be released only through a special vote after March 1, 1985 and as the *Times* reported, renewal was "considered unlikely, especially in the House."⁷³ In the absence of renewed aid, the administration feared that the contras could not counter such new Soviet weapons as the MI-24 attack helicopter, and doubted that the rebels would survive the year without U.S. support. The two main alternatives to contra aid, outright military intervention or a political solution, were both regarded as unacceptable within the administration, but there was "no agreement on what else to do," according to one State Department official.⁷⁴ Lacking a new consensus or a clear set of policy objectives, the administration simply decided to continue muddling along with its program of contra aid and rhetorical diplomacy — seemingly assuring foreign policy paralysis.

The irony of the administration's Nicaragua policy was that as resistance to its covert war had grown, so had opposition to the Sandinistas, both in Congress and abroad. The perception began to take hold that the Sandinistas had reduced civil liberties since the November 1984 elections. Britain, Germany, Mexico, and Spain distanced themselves from Nicaragua because of their belief that the Sandinistas had, in the words of a Spanish Foreign Ministry official, "given up the principles of their revolution"⁷⁵ — a line which the Reagan administration had been pushing since 1981. In Congress, opponents of contra aid expressed disillusionment with the domestic policies of the Nicaraguan government, and as this disillusionment grew, it provided a window of opportunity for the President to overcome the paralysis over contra aid.⁷⁶

He was quick to exploit it. To gain renewed congressional support, Reagan had to devise a new logic for the aid to correspond with the shifting political mood in Congress. Congress was no longer willing to fund the contras for the hypocritical purpose of stopping the arms flow

72. *New York Times*, 28 September 1984, p. A3.

73. *New York Times*, 9 December 1984, p. A18.

74. *Ibid.*

75. *Boston Globe*, 3 March 1985, p. 21.

76. The press had shifted its attitude as well: a *New York Times* editorial commended the President for opposing the Sandinistas, although it still maintained that a secret war was not the proper way to conduct such a policy.

to El Salvador; it was well known that few contras expressed any concern for such a goal. But as congressional interest in Nicaragua's internal affairs increased, a new strategy presented itself: the administration could seek to convince Congress that maintaining contra military pressure was the best way to encourage Nicaragua to modify its domestic policies. This strategy became the central focus of the second Reagan administration's foreign policy.

Reagan lost no time in going on the rhetorical offensive. In January, he linked Nicaragua to such American *bêtes noires* as Iran, Libya, and the Palestine Liberation Organization, saying that these ties posed a "new danger" to Central America.⁷⁷ In a February 16 radio address, he likened U.S. support for the contras to the support given the colonies by foreign powers during the American revolution. Calling the contras "our brothers," he stated that rejecting contra aid "would be to betray our centuries-old dedication to supporting those who struggle for freedom."⁷⁸ Secretary Shultz joined the verbal assault two days later, testifying before Congress that the people of Nicaragua had fallen "behind the Iron Curtain" and that the United States had a "moral duty" to prevent this situation from becoming permanent.⁷⁹ The President left little doubt about U.S. goals the following day when he declared that his objective was to "remove" the "present structure" of the Nicaraguan government — a structure he defined as "a Communist, totalitarian state." The United States would ease up on the Sandinistas, he said, only if they would "say 'uncle'" and allow the contras to participate in the government.⁸⁰

What was most apparent in this polemical assault on Nicaragua was the ideological and moralistic tone of the administration's rhetoric. Having failed to make a convincing strategic or *Realpolitik* case for contra aid, Reagan sought to tap the moralistic and idealistic veins in the American body politic. This repackaging was reflected most clearly in a San Francisco speech by Secretary Shultz in which he linked the contras with the Afghan and Cambodian resistance forces. All three were part of "a new and different kind of struggle" in which "people around the world [were] risking their lives against Communist despotism." The contra struggle was no longer of purely regional significance, but had been globalized as part of a democratic revolution that was "sweeping the world."⁸¹

77. *New York Times*, 25 January 1985, p. A1.

78. *New York Times*, 17 February 1985, p. A1.

79. *New York Times*, 20 February 1985, p. A8.

80. *New York Times*, 22 February 1985, p. A1.

81. *New York Times*, 23 February 1985, p. A4.

This intense round of verbal attacks provoked an immediate series of responses from the Sandinistas. On February 25, they deftly tried to pin the blame for the breakdown of the Contadora process — a breakdown caused by a dispute between Nicaragua and Costa Rica over a man who had taken asylum in the Costa Rican embassy in Managua — on the administration. "If Mr. Reagan is saying his goal is to overthrow our Government," the Deputy Foreign Minister declared, "how can we continue in Contadora to solve the problems in the region?"⁸² President Ortega took to the offensive two days later by announcing an indefinite moratorium on the acquisition of new arms and the return of one-hundred Cuban military advisors — unilateral measures taken to "encourage the reduction of tensions."⁸³ To drum up support for these "peace" proposals and to stem an erosion of international support, Ortega set out on a series of visits to West European and Latin American countries. Finally, recognizing the importance of opinionsetters in the U.S., he wrote an Op-Ed article for the *New York Times* outlining four reasons why the American people and Congress should refuse to support the President's efforts to renew aid to the contras.

These Nicaraguan overtures helped stiffen the already strong congressional resistance to covert operations and presented the administration with bleak prospects for renewing aid. House Speaker O'Neill broke with Reagan for the first time since the President's landslide re-election, accusing him of going back on his word that the United States would not seek to impose its will on other countries by force. Throughout Congress, the administration's heated rhetoric seemed to have done more harm than good. In an angry exchange with Secretary Shultz, for example, Representative Ted Weiss of New York described the President's policy toward Nicaragua as "an exercise in twisting facts, in distorting facts, in misstating facts." Representative Peter Kostmayer of Pennsylvania likewise accused the administration of "red-baiting" on the Nicaragua issue.⁸⁴ By March 1985, congressional opposition to contra aid was so intense that the Republican chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, David Durenberger, urged Reagan not to submit a request to Congress for renewed aid which he termed an "illogical and illegal absurdity."⁸⁵ In spite of this warning, the President formally presented a \$14 million request for contra aid a week later, arguing with charac-

82. *New York Times*, 26 February 1985, p. A6.

83. *New York Times*, 28 February 1985, p. A1.

84. *New York Times*, 28 February 1985, p. A13.

85. *New York Times*, 27 March 1985, p. A4.

teristic doggedness, "We're not going to quit and walk from them no matter what happens."⁸⁶

Having failed to win support with geopolitical arguments about arms flows, and now with moralistic and ideological arguments about a democratic revolution, the administration at last adopted a pragmatic approach to sway congressional votes, coupling its request for contra aid with a proposal for peace talks between the Sandinistas and the contras. Specifically, the President called for an immediate cease-fire until June 1 and promised Congress that if it agreed to the aid request, the money would not be used to purchase armaments and would instead buy food, clothes, medicine and other basic necessities that would allow the "democratic opposition" to remain a "partner" in the negotiations.⁸⁷ This shrewd tactical manoeuvre put both the Sandinistas and Congress in a quandry: if the Sandinistas refused to negotiate, the White House could depict them as intransigent and argue that there was no alternative to a resumption of military aid. If the Sandinistas hedged but did not immediately refuse, the administration could then claim that a denial of further aid would remove the pressure on the Sandinistas that might bring them to the negotiating table. And finally, in the unlikely event that the Sandinistas did agree to talks, the administration could argue that a vote against the contras would harm negotiations in progress. Although the proposal was politically effective, it was substantively useless because the Sandinistas had consistently stated they would never negotiate with the contras or hold new elections — another requirement of the President's proposal. Reagan administration pragmatism thus extended only to domestic politics; in concrete foreign policy terms, the administration simply sought to continue its seemingly aimless policy of pressuring the Sandinistas.

Congressional reaction to Reagan's plan was mixed. Speaker O'Neill, recognizing that the Sandinistas would never agree to it, called it a "dirty trick" that would be rejected by Congress. But Republican leaders expressed hope that it would sway enough representatives to win passage. Reagan campaigned hard for aid throughout April, continuing his invective against the Sandinistas and his hard-sell to Congress. "We cannot have the United States walk away from one of the greatest moral challenges in postwar history," he said. After describing what he termed the "institutionalized cruelty of the Sandinista government," he declared with Orwellian logic that a vote against the proposal was "literally a vote against peace."⁸⁸ But faced with almost certain defeat of his proposal,

86. *New York Times*, 5 April 1985, p. A8.

87. *ibid.*, p. A1.

88. *New York Times*, 16 April 1985, pp. A1, A8.

the President was forced to explore possible compromises such as dropping his insistence that after a certain date the aid would automatically shift from "humanitarian" to military. During the lengthy debate on the aid, some members of Congress interjected themselves into the diplomatic process: Senators John Kerry of Massachusetts and Tom Harkin of Iowa traveled to Managua and obtained a "peace proposal" from Ortega: the Sandinistas would call a cease-fire if the United States stopped aiding the contras. This proposal, which basically called on the contras to end their struggle in exchange for nothing, was a restatement of an old Sandinista position.⁸⁹ The senators had simply acted as a conduit for Nicaraguan rhetoric in their eagerness to demonstrate congressional activism.

As the vote on contra aid approached, the White House and Congress struggled to find a compromise formula. The administration and its Republican allies sought to avoid a politically damaging defeat, while the Democrats wanted some sort of program to avoid being accused of ignoring communist subversion in the Western Hemisphere come election time. Among the alternatives considered were a Democratic plan to send \$10 million through the Red Cross to refugees of the fighting, and a Republican plan for "humanitarian" aid for the contras dispersed through the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) instead of the CIA. Just as the debate was ending, the *New York Times* reported that the rebels had achieved a substantial base of popular support and would continue to fight regardless of the U.S. decision — a promising development for the administration.⁹⁰ The Sandinistas also managed to score last minute public diplomacy points by announcing an accord with the Miskito Indians, thereby deflecting an important human rights criticism of the regime.

But all this twelfth-hour manoeuvring merely served to mask the real issue for Congress: if it endorsed almost any kind of contra aid request, it would be endorsing the President's view of Nicaragua as a threat to U.S. national security as well as his explicit goal of overthrowing the Sandinistas. Moreover, it would be forfeiting the control of U.S. Central American policy that it had struggled so hard to maintain. Under these circumstances, although the Republican-controlled Senate went along with their President, the Democratic-controlled House succeeded in killing all attempts to aid the contras. Partisanship triumphed, the United States was left without a policy, and the contras appeared headed for defeat.

89. *New York Times*, 22 April 1985, p. A3.

90. *New York Times*, 23 April 1985, p. A8.

But on the same day on which the House voted to end contra aid, President Ortega made an announcement which breathed new life into the embattled program: he had decided to visit the Soviet Union within the week. Congress regarded the proposed trip as a rebuff. Senator James Sasser of Tennessee, who had voted against contra aid, called it "an ill-timed, ill-advised trip," and added that by going just as the administration was beginning to show some flexibility as a result of congressional pressures, Ortega had demonstrated that he was "either naive, incompetent, or not as committed to negotiations as recent statements would indicate."⁹¹ On April 29, when Ortega met with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and received a promise of continued economic aid, the Senate approved a resolution condemning Sandinista efforts to strengthen ties with the Soviet Union. As legislators began to run for cover in the wake of the embarrassing visit, the congressional mood shifted sharply against the Sandinistas and the Reagan administration quickly returned to the offensive, imposing an economic embargo, accusing Nicaragua of aggressive actions against its neighbors, and warning that if Congress failed to aid the contras, the U.S. would eventually face an "agonizing" decision about involving American troops in combat in Central America.⁹²

In mid-June, the Administration achieved a major victory when Congress approved \$27 million for nine months of non-military aid. Ortega's symbolic action had achieved what months of administration rhetoric alone had failed to do: it generated a consensus between Congress and the Reagan administration on the necessity for changing the structure of the Nicaraguan government and on the means to achieve that change.

The contras were initially buoyed by the \$27 million in "humanitarian" aid, but its actual impact was scant. It served to keep the contras in the field, but may actually have eroded their military effectiveness. Deprived of weapons, ammunition, and training by congressional restrictions, the contras were forced to curtail their activities and content themselves with half-hearted training exercises in Honduras. The contras' ability to pressure the Sandinistas dwindled rapidly. While the Sandinistas continued to reinforce their military capabilities with sophisticated Soviet weapons and training, the contras received only food and medical supplies from the United States. By the end of 1985, it was clear that the contras would be effectively eliminated as a factor in the Central American struggle if they were not allowed to receive U.S. military support.

In 1984, the Kissinger Commission had reported in regard to El Salvador that there was "no logical argument for giving some aid but

91. *New York Times*, 25 April 1985, p. A8.

92. *New York Times*, 5 June 1985, p. A1; 24 May 1985, p. A1.

not enough. The worst possible policy is to provide just enough aid to keep the war going, but too little to wage it successfully."⁹³ In 1986, the situation in Nicaragua had reached a similar juncture. Failure to provide significant military aid would ensure the demise of the contras and signal the end of the U.S. policy of pressure on the Sandinistas. Congress could no longer hide behind its antiseptic cloak of humanitarian aid. The administration would either have to parlay its limited 1985 success into momentum for an expanded contra aid program in 1986 and beyond or be prepared to abandon the contra policy. The stage was thus set for another major confrontation on Capital Hill.

In late February 1986, the President asked Congress to authorize the use of \$100 million of Defense Department funds for the contras — \$70 million in military aid and \$30 million in "non-lethal" aid.⁹⁴ Despite mounting opposition in Congress to the Sandinista government, the administration faced an uphill battle to win approval. In early March, contra leaders Alfonso Robelo, Adolfo Calero, and Arturo José Cruz travelled to Washington to meet with President Reagan and lobby Congress. Their arrival coincided with a series of high level speeches in which the administration sought to draw parallels between the overthrow of dictatorships in Haiti and the Philippines and the situation in Nicaragua. In congressional testimony, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliot Abrams, observing that the United States had played a constructive role in both cases, concluded, "We have just now all agreed that permanent dictatorship is not inevitable in Haiti and the Philippines. The question now facing Congress is whether we are to accept that communist dictatorship will be permanent in Nicaragua."⁹⁵ President Reagan echoed these remarks saying "the world is watching to see if Congress is as committed to democracy in Nicaragua in our own hemisphere, as it was in the Philippines."⁹⁶ A few days before the House vote, the President took his case directly to the people in a televised address. But his impassioned plea had little impact on public opinion or congressional attitudes. On March 21, the House dealt the President a major, if temporary, defeat, voting 222-210 against contra aid.

Attention then shifted to the Republican-controlled Senate, where the aid package was expected to pass by a narrow margin. Just as the Senate

93. *Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission*, p. 121.

94. To avoid the implications of seeking new funds at a time of Graham-Rudman-Hollings restrictions on government expenditures, the administration for the first time requested that the aid come out of already approved Defense Department funds so as not to incur any new expenses.

95. Elliott Abrams, "Permanent Dictatorship in Nicaragua?" *Current Policy No. 802* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, 1986), p. 2.

96. "Contra Aid Vital, Reagan Declares," *New York Times*, 4 March 1986, p. A15.

was beginning its debate, reports began to circulate that 1500 Nicaraguan troops had crossed into Honduran territory. The administration seized on this action to portray Nicaragua as a threat to regional peace. To focus attention on the incursion, the President ordered \$20 million in emergency military aid for Honduras and used U.S. Army helicopters to transport Honduran troops to the border area. Some lawmakers initially expressed skepticism over the reports, noting that Honduran officials had originally denied there had been an attack and later downplayed its significance. The Sandinistas indirectly confirmed the attack, however, when they announced that they had inflicted heavy losses on rebel forces and destroyed several rebel base camps.⁹⁷ Since they had previously maintained that there were no rebel camps in Nicaragua, this statement amounted to an admission of the incursion. Local Honduran peasants also confirmed that heavy fighting had occurred.⁹⁸ The attack appeared to strengthen the President's case against Nicaragua on Capitol Hill, but it did not have the same impact as Ortega's Moscow visit the previous year. The Senate passed the aid request as expected in a narrow 53-47 vote on March 27, but only after the President had agreed to a plan that would delay \$75 million for ninety days while the United States pursued negotiations with the Sandinistas.

In the immediate aftermath of the Senate vote, opposition lawmakers conceded that the President would win approval of some form of contra aid from the House. The issues to be resolved were how much aid and with what strings attached. The administration hoped for approval of its Senate compromise, but momentum in the House gathered behind a proposal of Representative David McCurdy of Oklahoma which would have permitted \$25 million to be released immediately, but only for non-military purposes. The remaining \$75 million would have been subject to yet another House and Senate vote in July 1986 in which House opponents believed they could defeat military aid. Indeed, some of the most determined aid opponents favored the McCurdy amendment as a means of limiting aid. Rather than accept continued limitations against military aid, the Republicans defeated a contra aid proposal which had been attached to a catch-all spending bill, further postponing the decision on aid. At a time when clarity was required either to support the policy of pressure against the Sandinistas or to end U.S. involvement with the contras, Congress still sought refuge in ambiguous formulas. As a result, the contras will continue to play a role in U.S. policy toward Central

97. "Honduran Peasants Confirm Report of Battle," *New York Times*, 28 March 1986, p. A1.

98. *Ibid.*

America, but just what that role is remains, as it has been from the beginning, shrouded in deliberate ambiguity.

IV. CONCLUSION

On the surface, the Reagan administration has been neither consistent nor coherent in its policy toward Nicaragua and the contras over the past five years. Assertions that the U.S. sought to interdict arms traffic to El Salvador gave way to a policy of demanding internal reforms in Nicaragua, and finally, to an implied, though as yet unacknowledged, desire to overthrow the Sandinista government. But beneath the surface, the policy has been consistent in seeking to apply pressure on the Sandinistas. This goal, pursued along many fronts, has become the hallmark of the Reagan administration's Central American policy.

But if the Reagan policy is to pressure the Sandinistas, the question remains to what end the pressure is being applied. Jorge Dominguez has argued that the countries of Central America are important to the United States only when U.S. policymakers decide to make them so.⁹⁹ From the first days of the Reagan presidency, it was clear that the administration sought to attribute considerable importance to the region, treating it as a test case of American power and will. The administration emphasized Central America because it provided symbols of U.S. toughness on the cheap: by aiding the contras in a highly visible manner — leaving no doubt as to who was behind the effort — the administration could appear to be combatting communism as its election rhetoric had promised, even while it maintained a strict pragmatism in its direct dealings with the Soviet Union. The logic behind the contra aid effort was expressed by an official who works closely with the rebels: "The way to go after the Soviet Union is through the colonies. We have to find ways to help democratic resistance movements *without sending troops*. . . . If these people can stand up and throw off Communism, it goes beyond Managua, it goes to the gut of our national interest."¹⁰⁰ The policy of contra aid was thus a reflection of the administration's approach to East-West relations which has been characterized by circumspection in direct dealings, and ideological and rhetorical assertiveness in peripheral areas.

Another question posed by the contra controversy is whether or not rhetorical assertiveness can be the basis of a successful foreign policy

99. Jorge I. Dominguez, *U.S. Interests and Policies in the Caribbean and Central America*, (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1982), p. 19. Dominguez divides U.S. interests into subjective and objective. "A major power can impute importance to any interests it wishes to in any part of the world. If people come to believe something matters, then it does."

100. *New York Times*, 18 August 1985, p. A1 (emphasis added).

toward any region. The Nicaraguan case provides clues as to both the potential and limits of such a policy. In the course of the contra aid struggle, President Reagan did succeed in bringing the debate over Nicaragua to his terms, but he succeeded in spite of, not because of, his rhetoric: even as public sentiment turned against the Sandinistas, opposition to the administration's policy in Nicaragua expanded. Reagan's policy thus failed to translate public opposition to the Sandinistas into public support for its policy of pressure. It failed mainly because of its rhetorical excesses; the stridency tended to invite mockery and weakened credibility. What accounted for the administration's eventual success in winning funding from Congress was not rhetoric, but an unflagging concern for the issue. Over the long run, Presidential priority can bring even a reluctant Congress to support a crucial issue. Had Reagan demonstrated his consistent concern about Nicaragua in a more moderate rhetorical voice, he might have been able to translate the growing opposition to the Sandinistas into support for his policies at a much earlier stage.

Although the administration succeeded in gaining approval for contra aid from Congress in 1986, it has yet to prove that its rhetorical diplomacy in combination with contra pressure can succeed in Central America. U.S. funds do have an impact, as evidenced by the sharp increase in contra activity in early 1984 after Congress approved \$24 million in funding. But even with substantial increases in funding, the prospects for a contra overthrow of the Sandinistas remain remote.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, as an instrument of pressure to bring the Sandinistas to the negotiating table, the contra effort has proven to be largely irrelevant. No amount of contra pressure will force the Sandinistas to place internal issues on the negotiating table or to negotiate with the contras as the United States insists. Despite the posturing within the administration and Congress about a negotiated solution, there is no real diplomatic option open between the United States and Nicaragua. The problem with the contra aid policy therefore, is that its effectiveness in Central America is limited; it is viable only as a signal of U.S. concern and a means of keeping Nicaragua preoccupied, but not as a means of resolving the region's dilemmas.

From the start of the administration's involvement with the contras, it has lacked a clear and consistent conception of its objectives. The policy initially emerged as a compromise between bureaucratic factions

101. The retiring commander of U.S. military forces in Central America told a Senate committee in February 1985 that he believed the contras were incapable of overthrowing the Sandinista government "in the foreseeable future" regardless of whether they received American funding. *New York Times*, 28 February 1985, p. A1.

with two differing agendas — a negotiated settlement, on one hand, and the overthrow of the Sandinistas, on the other. This ambiguity in approach remains: U.S. policy aims both “to support the freedom fighters and in parallel to work for a diplomatic solution.”¹⁰² Ambiguity will continue to characterize U.S. policy because it reflects the public ambivalence about the region. The public wants no more Cubas, but no more Vietnams either; it wants to combat communism, but not with U.S. troops. As long as the Reagan administration and the Sandinistas remain in power, their implacably opposed world views and their mutual mistrust effectively rule out a negotiated settlement of differences. Nicaragua will therefore remain a country of conflict and turmoil, and the contras will remain the expression of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua until the Reagan administration leaves office, the Sandinistas collapse from within, or the contras themselves tire of their futile struggle and repair to a new life in Miami.

102. *New York Times*, 18 August 1985, p. A16, quoting Robert McFarlane.

