

OBSTRUCTING INJUSTICE

THE WHITE HOUSE and its quasi-official press have succeeded in demonizing the Sandinistas, but that has not translated into a corollary enthusiasm for Ronald Reagan's favorite terrorists. With a few transitory exceptions, public opinion polls over the past five years have disclosed widespread opposition to U.S. support of the CIA-*contras*. The proportions have consistently been in the vicinity of 60% opposed, 30% in favor and 10% undecided. This, despite the fact that a majority of respondents have succumbed to the drumbeat of accusations that Nicaragua represents a communist threat to its Central American neighbors, and will probably allow the Soviet Union to establish military bases on its territory.

However, a great deal of the opposition to the CIA-*contras* is based on the hard rock of perceived self-interest, not on any qualms about the devastation of Nicaragua. For many, the prospect of becoming involved in another deadly fiasco like Vietnam arouses an inhibiting anxiety. This can be inferred from responses to the question, "Would you favor intervention in Central America if it did not result in another Vietnam?" That formulation draws a favorable response of 67%.³⁴⁴

Something quite similar actually occurred in reaction to the 1983 invasion of Grenada. Surveyed beforehand, a large majority of the U.S. populace opposed armed intervention. But after the deed was done, with comparatively few U.S. casualties to cast a pall over the proceedings, a grateful nation conferred its overwhelming approval.

The interests and wishes of the people of Grenada — whoever *they* might be — had little or nothing to do with it. Nor did it seem to matter in the least that the administration's rationale for its unprovoked aggression was soon demonstrated to be a tissue of lies.

As with most international issues, voting behavior and opinion poll data clearly indicate that a majority of U.S. citizens know little and care less about what kind of bloody mess their government makes in Nicaragua — as long as it doesn't splatter on them. But significant elements of the populace are intensely involved.

On the one hand are the ardent anti-communists whose fear and hate form the political base of the Reaganites' Central America policy. They include fundamentalist churches, right-wing organizations and many individuals of great wealth. Their violent passions find an outlet in the network set up by the White House to co-ordinate illegal private funding of the CIA-*contras* (cf. pages 108-114).

Opposing that unholy alliance is a broad spectrum of groups and individuals. Although not nearly as large or as loud as the anti-Vietnam War movement — after all, there are as yet no rafts of middle-class white kids drifting home from Central America in bodybags — the loose coalition supporting Nicaragua in its struggle against the Reaganites has nevertheless achieved some notable results.

First and foremost, it has impeded the long-planned U.S. invasion of Nicaragua, which almost certainly would have been ordered by now were it not for an articulate and energetic opposition.

Among the most effective opponents are the mainline churches, including the Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, United Church of Christ, American Baptists and others. Even the U.S. Catholic Conference, while siding with its reactionary colleagues of the Nicaraguan hierarchy, has joined in the general chorus of disapproval. All have issued strongly worded denunciations of the CIA-*contras* and most other aspects of U.S. policy in Central America. Hundreds of individual congregations have established sister-church relationships with counterparts in Nicaragua.

The Leader of the Free World has even been rebuked by the church he attended as a youth, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). A petition circulated by the Disciples Peace Fellowship at the 1987 General Assembly asked Ronald

Reagan “how our Christian faith can justify your actions as President.... You have claimed national security reasons for withholding the rights of other countries to self-determination. You have continued to urge Congress to vote aid to the Contras, even when such aid threatens the Central American Peace Plan.... You have often favored violent solutions to world problems instead of leading our nation toward trust in diplomacy and negotiations: i.e. Grenada, Libya, the Persian Gulf, Nicaragua.

“It is incumbent upon you as a fellow Christian to listen to the message of the Church, instead of depending upon advice from the Pentagon and the merchants of war material.”

Confronting the lies

In 1986 over 200 national religious leaders initiated a major educational and lobbying campaign that attracted considerable attention with a dramatic demonstration on the steps of Congress, and an angry proclamation:

“A scaffold of deception is being constructed around Nicaragua. Exaggeration, misinformation, and outright falsehood form the heart of the Reagan administration’s case against Nicaragua.... The administration has been deceiving the public in its quest for military and so-called humanitarian aid to the contras. Most notably, it has been covering up credible reports that the contras are systematically committing human rights atrocities against innocent civilians...

“We call upon the U.S. government to cease its promotion of fear and hatred and to cease its funding of the contra war against Nicaragua. We call upon the media to critically examine the unsubstantiated assertions made by the U.S. government regarding Nicaragua....

“We call upon all persons of faith and conscience in the U.S. to look at the effects of current U.S. policy in Nicaragua and all of Central America, and to join with us in saying to the government of the United States, IN THE NAME OF GOD, STOP THE LIES, STOP THE KILLING!”

Pretty strong stuff for the normally prudent souls of the mainline denominations, which have aimed the same kind of criticism at the arms race and other pet projects of the Reaganites. So worrisome is this trend toward rampant pacifism that one high-ranking general warned an audience of his peers at the National War College that, "The greatest challenge to all that we do now comes from within the churches. A whole new way of thinking is developing in the churches, and we have to know how to deal with it."³⁴⁵

The general might have mentioned a sizable contingent of the nation's war veterans in the same breath. Most of those active in the Nicaragua solidarity movement first learned to distrust their government in Vietnam, but veterans of World War II, the Korean War, Grenada — even the recent war games in Honduras — are also represented.

The resurgence of veterans' anti-war sentiment is all the more remarkable for having survived the Reagan administration's sadly effective campaign to repackage the Vietnam disaster as a "noble, selfless enterprise" (*pace* Richard Nixon). Many of those who did the fighting have a far different recollection, and are determined to apply their experience to current events.

That determination was most dramatically brought to national attention in 1986, when four Vietnam vets publicly renounced their decorations, including a Medal of Honor, and commenced a "Fast for Life" on the Capitol steps in protest against the CIA-*contras*. The fast continued for 47 days, and stimulated a series of parallel activities all over the world — peace vigils, civil disobedience actions, sympathy fasts, etc.

The four leaders received 10,000 letters of encouragement, many from fellow Vietnam vets who contributed an additional 88 defiled decorations; other notes of encouragement came from as far away as Ireland, France and Britain's House of Commons.

Veterans have established a permanent presence in Nicaragua. Two members of Vietnam Vets against the War based in Managua broadcast a weekly radio program about life in Nicaragua to GIs stationed in Honduras. The Veterans Peace Action Team has made plans to interpose a corps of unarmed

vets between the CIA-*contras* and Nicaraguan civilians. There are also plans to send a truck convoy with 4000 tons of grain and other supplies via the Pan American Highway in mid-1988, after a public information tour through the U.S.

Veteran casualty

Speeches of friendship and solidarity by U.S. veterans have become a staple of such national celebrations as the revolution's anniversary on the 19th of July. They include Brian Willson, who spoke on the occasion of the FSLN's 25th anniversary in November of 1986. One of the four vets who led the above-mentioned "Fast for Life", Willson told his audience of 250,000 celebrants: "Our fast was inspired by the Nicaraguan people... who present the dramatic case of a Third World nation rising up against the most powerful superpower on the face of the earth. Your revolutionary process belongs to all peoples of faith and conscience throughout the world. Therefore, it is extremely important that you survive, not only for your own good but also for the good of the people of the United States."³⁴⁶

Less than a year later, Willson lost both of his legs to a U.S. supply train in California when it ran over him during a demonstration against military shipments to the CIA-*contras*. After recuperating, Willson visited Congress on his new artificial legs in hopes of explaining to a House Armed Services subcommittee why he risked life and limb on behalf of Nicaragua.

The sub-committee voted 10-4 to disallow his testimony, moving Rep. Barbara Boxer of California to protest, "I was totally shocked. This was undemocratic. I had never heard of not letting a witness put his statement on the record. I found it absolutely shameful. During the Iran-*contra* hearings, Oliver North had the option of going on *ad nauseum* about why he did what he did [cf. "The Builder & The Destroyer", page 345]. No one stopped him. He had his full say. Laws were broken. But here was Brian Willson, and Congress muzzled him. It was horrible and crazy. We'll lose democracy that way."³⁴⁷

Willson was subsequently sued for damages by the train crew, for the “humiliation, embarrassment and emotional distress” he inflicted on them by choosing their train to cut off his legs. Despite all this, he has continued his struggle against the Reaganites, along with numerous veteran associates.

Local disagreements

Widespread opposition to the CIA-*contra* program has been expressed at all levels of government, provoking Reaganites to bitter cracks about such-and-such being “the only town in the U.S. with a foreign policy”.

But there is more than one. The mayor and council of Seattle have persisted in their support of a sister city relationship with Managua, despite many loud complaints. Near the opposite coast, the Board of Aldermen in Burlington, Vermont, sent a letter to Congress in July of 1986 objecting to funding of the CIA-*contras*: “In essence, the U.S. Congress has declared war



In one of numerous protests mounted in major U. S. cities, signers of the Pledge of Resistance block midday traffic in front of Seattle's Federal Building. Thousands have endured arrest and other discomforts to register their disapproval of the Reagan administration's assault on Nicaragua.

against the people of Nicaragua — a war which will result in the continued killing of and injury to thousands of innocent children, women and men. On the very date of the Board's action, the International Court of Justice (World Court) declared the United States government's actions to be illegal under international law. In view of these facts, and in view of the opposition to present U.S. policy by many of the residents of Burlington, [we] wish to protest this vote of Congress in the strongest terms possible."

In Wisconsin, the White House confronted an entire state agitating against it. "Some 70 organizations in the Badger State are devoted to seeing to it that the people of Nicaragua get cows, computers, diapers, blackboards, fire-fighting equipment, medicine, schoolbooks, wheelchairs and sewing machines.... In 1986, Wisconsin raised \$1 million in goods and another million in cash for the country that has been its sister

"When I went to Nicaragua in 1986, I expected to find a situation like East Germany, which I had visited years before. After all, we had heard so much about the 'Marxist-Leninist dictatorship' in Nicaragua.

"What I found was something very different. There were soldiers in evidence, as in East Germany. But, there, the similarity ended. These soldiers mixed freely with the people. Their manner was relaxed and friendly, and civilians displayed not the slightest fear of them.

"I was free to go wherever I chose, without supervision. Everywhere, I found people speaking openly and freely — often quite critically of the government. But whenever I asked critics if they would prefer the contras to take over the country, they looked at me as though I were crazy. That was clearly unthinkable.

"The contrast with East Germany could not have been greater. It is obvious, to me at least, that Nicaragua is a free country, and that the people mean to keep it that way."

— Kim Esterberg, real estate appraiser, Bainbridge Island, WA

state since 1963. Next year it is going for \$2 million.... Several prominent lawyers are helping the Nicaraguans draft a new constitution.... A steady stream of utterly respectable Wisconsinites — bishops, union leaders, state legislators — go down to see for themselves what the president calls a ‘terrorist base’... [Former governor] Anthony Earl is a member of the Wisconsin Coordinating Committee on Nicaragua, which was founded in 1984 to create a united front against the president’s belligerence.”³⁴⁸

By 1986, a handful of state governors had refused to permit their National Guard units to be used for the imperial war games in Central America, and several others were facing strong citizen pressure to follow suit. The administration was not amused; an Assistant Secretary of Defense complained: “The governors’ authority has become a vehicle to debate or influence foreign policy. This is no longer a case of a few isolated instances. It is a demonstrated way for dissent groups, state legislators, and state governments to seize a forum to debate foreign policy.”³⁴⁹

Ever antagonistic toward any debate on foreign policy which it does not control, the White House responded by submitting legislation that eliminates governors’ authority to veto the deployment of National Guard units. It was passed in 1987, by the same Congress that approved \$127 million in direct aid to the CIA-*contras*.

But that maneuver has not entirely settled the question. The law is being appealed in federal courts, and citizen groups in several states have organized petitions and referenda in opposition to CIA-*contra* aid.

The mayor, unglued

A vital ingredient in the ongoing debate is the testimony of the approximately 70,000 U.S. citizens who have visited Nicaragua since the revolution’s victory in 1979. Some were Reaganites on superficial “fact-finding” missions to Managua to get their anti-Sandinista tickets punched by the pro-*contra*

opposition. But most were more or less pre-sold on the Sandinista revolution and/or repelled by the CIA-*contras*. Their purpose was to demonstrate support, often concretely by participating in engineering projects, health care programs, coffee-picking and construction brigades, etc.

Scattered among the pilgrims were quite a few sceptics, stimulated or prodded into seeing for themselves what a totalitarian dungeon looks like. Many were leading citizens of their communities — town councilmen, doctors, judges, etc. Almost universally, they were staggered by the enormous discrepancy between the rabid rhetoric of the White House and the evidence of their own eyes and ears.

One of these was Mayor Brent Shirley of Port Townsend, a coastal town in the state of Washington. He was challenged to visit Jalapa after a citizen's group had engineered its designation as Port Townsend's sister city: "I went down there as a staunch supporter of Reagan, and really as a conservative," he later recalled. "I went down there with open eyes, and I came back completely surprised at what I saw.... My associates kid me about my 'conversion'.... I saw President Reagan on TV addressing the Nicaragua question. I became unglued. What he was saying didn't match anything I saw. Not anything!"³⁵⁰

Labor unrest

The largest single expression of public displeasure with Reagan foreign policy to date was the April 1987 "March for Peace and Justice in Central America and South Africa", enacted concurrently in San Francisco and Washington, D.C. Reminiscent of the giant civil rights and Vietnam rallies of the 1970s, the march attracted several hundred thousand demonstrators. It was especially noteworthy for the extensive involvement of labor and religious leaders.

The event widened a rift in the AFL-CIO over its reflexive support for Cold War theory and practice. The federation's president, Lane Kirkland, who had served compliantly on the

Kissinger Commission (cf. pages 206 ff.), formally directed all state and local councils of his domain to shun the march, painting his errant colleagues with the subtle brush of “Marxist-Leninism”.

Kirkland’s directive was ignored, as prefigured by the federation’s most recent national convention, at which a foreign policy question ignited an open debate for the first time ever. The controversy was over a proposal by a broad range of unions to condemn U.S. support of the CIA-*contras*. It was narrowly defeated, but the convention did call for negotiations in Central America instead of military intervention — a significant departure from past practice.

By 1987, over half of the federation’s membership belonged to unions formally opposed to the CIA-*contras*. “Even more remarkable, lobbyists for a dozen major unions, including five of the six largest in the AFL-CIO, are making their opposition known to Congressional figures who are considered swing votes on contra aid.”³⁵¹

The general attitude of anti-*contra* labor is conveyed in a 1986 letter from the Puget Sound District Council of the International Longshoremen’s & Warehousemen’s Union to its representatives in Congress:

“The *contras*, led by former Somocistas, represent no democratic principle, and can contribute nothing in the way of reform to Nicaragua. Their ongoing record of murder, torture and pillage — confirmed by an increasing number of reliable sources — has from the beginning only strengthened the resolve of the Nicaraguan people and their government to defeat them at all costs.... It is also clear that, whatever its deficiencies, the Nicaraguan government has the support of the country and is committed to improving the lives of its working people.... We do not want our tax dollars to be diverted into bloody foreign adventures that only victimize our fellow workers, and increase the likelihood of U.S. forces becoming involved.”

Material assistance

In addition to lobbying against the CIA-*contras* and testifying on behalf of Nicaragua, the U.S. solidarity movement has provided a substantial quantity of material assistance. Thousands of volunteer organizations, ranging in scope from local church congregations to national relief agencies, have contributed hundreds of millions of dollars in goods and services.

One of the first to organize was the Nicaragua Network. Founded in 1979, it has functioned as a national clearing house of information, and has sponsored numerous tours between the two countries. The latter include a steady stream of work brigades to help with reforestation, coffee and cotton harvests, construction projects, etc.

The *brigadistas* represent a wide range of ages and backgrounds — lawyers and truck drivers, students and stockbrokers, carpenters and doctors, etc. Their presence has been credited with inhibiting terrorist attacks in many cases; CIA public relations would suffer if too many U.S. civilians were to be wounded or killed. Their personal testimony to the folks back home, often through the media of community newspapers and local broadcast channels, has been a critical factor in building opposition to the CIA-*contras*.

Other vital sources of information and assistance are the 80-plus sister city organizations that have thus far been established. Hardly a major Nicaraguan town remains that does not have an ongoing relationship with a U.S. counterpart, and the benefits can be substantial: school buildings, childcare centers, sanitation systems, agricultural plants, medical clinics, ambulances, electrical systems, recreational complexes, mountains of clothing and school supplies, and more.

As with the work brigades, the first-hand knowledge that emerges from such a relationship acts as an antidote to White House propaganda. Comparatively apolitical in their approach, sister cities provide a vehicle for enlisting the energies of U.S. citizens who may not be ready to directly challenge their government, but are willing to assist a struggling people. The associated learning process often has a radicalizing effect.

Among the more active of the established national relief agencies are Church World Service, Catholic Relief Services, the Mennonite Central Committee and the American Friends Service Committee. In addition to these, there are several agencies that focus entirely on assistance to Nicaragua. They include: Bikes not Bombs, which seeks to alleviate transportation problems by producing and repairing bicycles; Architects and Planners in Support of Nicaragua, which organizes construction brigades and trains Nicaraguans in building techniques; and TecNica, which co-ordinates contributions of technical assistance from U.S. computer experts, engineers, etc. Ben Linder, the first U.S. civilian murdered by the CIA-*contras*, was an electrical engineer.

Since 1985 The Quixote Center, a Catholic-based organization, has tried to keep track of the total value of material assistance sent by U.S. citizens to Nicaragua. Headed by a Jesuit priest, its sponsors include Catholic Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit and Rev. Joseph Lowery of the Southern Baptist Leadership Conference. Over 2500 organizations and many thousands of individuals have participated in The Quixote Center's national campaign entitled Quest for Peace, conceived as a challenge to congressional funding of the CIA-*contras*.

In fiscal year 1986, the Quest accumulated more than enough in donated goods and services to offset the \$27 million voted by Congress to fund the CIA-*contras* for the same period. The following year's \$100 million in guns and bullets was likewise matched by peaceful contributions. For 1988, it has set goals of another \$100 million in goods and services, and \$2 million in cash to initiate a long-term reconstruction effort.

Notes Bishop Gumbleton: "The Quest for Peace is a good example of the kind of non-military solutions our country should be seeking in Central America. It is a concrete way to offer our hand in peace to people who are being battered and killed by the violent policies of our government."

(Continued on page 327)

Ben Linder's Murdered Dream

"My son was brutally murdered for bringing electricity to a few poor people in northern Nicaragua. He was murdered because he had a dream, and because he had the courage to make that dream come true. Not many of us can say that.

"What was that dream? To make it possible for the peasants to have a light bulb in their homes so their day doesn't have to end at six o'clock, when it gets dark... to get clean drinking water to them so that their children don't have to die of diarrhea in the first years of their lives... to raise them out of poverty so they can raise their children with hope for their future.

"The plant in El Cua is the only one of its kind in Nicaragua. It is a tiny little plant, in a tiny village, in a tiny little country. But it is such a threat to the security of the United States that our government orders it destroyed



Ben Linder, at left, lays out small hydroelectric dam at the site where he was butchered by CIA-contras shortly after this photo was taken.

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Not included in the Quest for Peace tally are the various expenses associated with educational and lobbying activities within the U.S. — printing and telephone bills, transportation, salaries of paid lobbyists, office rent, legal and accounting fees, etc. It is impossible to calculate the total cost, but the printing bill, alone, probably runs into the millions of dollars. (See Appendix for a selection of information and solidarity resources concerning Nicaragua.)

They are not amused

The Reaganites, needless to say, are not amused by all this talk and action. Solidarity groups have been accused of providing secret military aid to Nicaragua: “We think they are raising money under false pretenses,” complained an officer of the right-wing Council for Inter-American Security. “They are actively working with foreign communist governments

Ben Linder’s Murdered Dream (cont.)

and orders its builders murdered along with thousands of Nicaraguans who also want to convert their dreams into reality.

“We have been overwhelmed by the love and respect of the people of Nicaragua for Ben, for us, for the people of the United States. We understand why he came here, and we now understand even better why he stayed. The freedom in this country has no equal that I know of. Ben told me the first year that he was here, and this is a quote: ‘It’s a wonderful feeling to work in a country where the government’s first concern is for its people, for all its people.’ I am grateful that he had his three-and-a-half years in Nicaragua.”

— *Elisabeth Linder, speaking at son’s funeral in Nicaragua*

or insurgencies, and coordinating political activities with them in the United States.”³⁵²

Similar noises have been made by administration officials. More pointed disapproval has taken the form of extensive surveillance and numerous burglaries of churches and other suspect organizations (cf. “Mysterious burglaries”, page 297).

Nor has the administration ignored any opportunity to impede relief efforts. Quest for Peace has been continuously harassed by the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (which oversees the Reaganite trade embargo), the Customs Service and the Internal Revenue Service.

After five months’ deliberation in 1986, the State Department refused Oxfam America an export license for \$41,000



Jaime Perozo

Since the invasion of Grenada in 1983, partly justified as an effort to “safeguard American lives”, citizens of the United States living and working in Nicaragua have gathered in front of their country’s embassy every Thursday morning. Usually joined by visitors from all over the world, they demonstrate their opposition to the U. S. assault on Nicaragua, and attempt to give formal notice that their “safety” may not be used as the pretext for another invasion. The ambassador invariably refuses to meet with them.

worth of farm supplies for Nicaraguan peasants, asserting that "such transactions are inconsistent with current U.S. foreign policy". But that same foreign policy empowered the State Department to grant the U.S. Council for World Freedom (affiliate of the World Anti-Communist League) a license to send the CIA-*contras* a helicopter after a review period of only four days.³⁵³

The solidarity movement has nevertheless persisted in its efforts, so much so that the administration has toyed with the idea of barring all travel and aid to Nicaragua. But the movement has grown so wide and deep, and has enlisted so many respectable citizens, that such a step is unlikely. The fallout from the Iran/Contragate scandal has also had a restraining effect (cf. pages 106 ff). Clamping down on genuine humanitarian aid might even prod a tremulous Congress to protest.

THE IMBALANCE OF POWER

According to the theory of "checks and balances" embedded in the U.S. Constitution, it is not possible for the administration to attack another country without the express consent of Congress. Appropriately enough, for a land where malevolent fundamentalists pose successfully as Christians and a trained symbolton like Ronald Reagan is permitted to play president, no one has violated the Constitution more systematically than the New Right zealots who pretend to be its most loyal defenders.

The clandestine apparatus of the "national security state" that has mushroomed since the onset of the Cold War provides the perfect vehicle for conducting presidential wars with little or no interference from Congress. As long as a presidential war remains comparatively small and/or secret, and does not endanger too many respectable U.S. lives, it has little to fear from Congress or the general public. But if it becomes embarrassingly obvious or threatens to involve the nation in a Vietnam-style disaster, complications may arise.

That's what has happened in the case of Nicaragua, which has confounded the Reaganites with its maddening resistance. All that swaggering nonsense about a resurgent *Guardia Nacional* gobbling its 1983 Christmas dinner in the homely comfort of Managua has dissolved into a long season of military defeat and domestic discord.

The role of Congress in all this has been to conduct the official public debate on the wisdom of allocating funds to the *contra* component of the CIA's multi-faceted destabilization campaign. Before the Iran/Contragate scandal inflicted its political damage on the White House in 1987, the money was not terribly significant. As noted previously, the few hundred million dollars voted by Congress amounted to little more than small change in comparison with the much tidier sums carved out of the federal budget and solicited from kindred spirits (cf. pages 104-123).

Congressional consent was desired by the administration primarily for the shroud of legitimacy it could drape over a pre-ordained policy. With a few exceptions and displays of just enough resistance to keep things interesting, Congress played its part. In doing so, it once again highlighted several basic features of the Cold War, as practiced within the confines of the United States:

- the persistence of mindless anti-communism as a force for evil, both at home and abroad
- the power granted presidents to wedge all foreign policy debates into the paranoid framework of mindless anti-communism
- the power granted presidents to entangle the entire nation in their military adventures, and keep it there with warnings about the dire consequences of "lost prestige" should those adventures be abandoned.

Equipped with these levers of political influence, the Reaganites have applied "the art of compromise" to shift the ponderous weight of Congress toward the destruction of Nicaragua. A political scientist has summarized the process:

“Back in 1981, few members [of Congress] would have seriously considered a request for millions to aid an exile army whose aim was the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government. That’s exactly why the administration used covert channels to first establish the *contra* force.

“In each of the succeeding compromises, Congress sought to restrain or control administration intentions. But, slowly, Congress itself became ensnared in the administration’s *contra* web. Now many in Congress are reluctant to cut aid and take administration blame for ‘losing’ Nicaragua....

“The president has skillfully tailored and packaged compromises to incrementally nickel-and-dime hundreds of millions of dollars out of Congress, and was willing to lie, break the law and circumvent Congress to get more.

“He has used compromises to woo swing voters to sustain a force over which Congress has had no control, and then broken his compromise commitments, pursuing instead his central goal of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government.

“He has used compromise to sink the hook of commitment deeper into the jaws of undecided members of Congress, to make it even more difficult to oppose him on the next vote.”³⁵⁴

Public ritual

The resulting shift in perspective was so complete and so bizarre that congressional “moderates” came to be numbered among the staunchest defenders of the CIA-*contras*. In early 1988, Republican Senator Daniel Evans of Washington reversed his long-standing opposition to terrorist funding, after deciding that the Nicaraguan government was not sufficiently “sincere” in its dealings with the CIA-*contras*.

Democratic Senator David Boren of Oklahoma, another “moderate”, expressed grave concern at the ease with which the Nicaraguan Army chased the CIA-*contras* back into Honduras for the umpteenth time, destroying or capturing large quantities of U.S. weaponry in the process. “We think it only right to make up for this draw down in military supplies

caused by the Sandinistas," declared Boren. "With the Sandinista attack on the contra forces, we are in a much more critical situation." [Emphasis added]

It seems that nothing short of Nicaragua's passive absorption of CIA-*contra* brutality will satisfy the forces of moderation in Congress.

It is futile to seek explanations for such behavior among the spare bones of the Constitution, or by recourse to mere logic. The only way to make any sense out of the peculiar posturings of Congress is to place them within the context of what has become a ritualized public drama on the grand theme of anti-communism.

In these proceedings, the impresario function is performed by the mainstream news media, which provide the arena and select the *dramatis personae*. The basic script and the starring roles are, of course, assigned to the White House. Although there is some slight allowance for improvisation, very little of the dialogue is permitted to stray from the main theme: Forces of Freedom Battle the Evil Empire.

The composition of the supporting cast depends on which nation is currently under attack by the anti-communist crusade. In the Nicaraguan episode, the Bad Guys are the Soviet Union, Cuba and the Sandinistas. They don't get to say much, but there's no need — "everyone" knows what *they* want.

Possibly offering comfort to the Bad Guys are foreign policy Liberals, sometimes known as Communist Dupes. Their intentions may be harmless, but other players regard them as weak, which is worse than evil. Anxious to cast off that stigma, their basic speech is, "We hate communism just as much as (or more than) you do. But there's got to be a better way!" That way is never found by a working majority.

The Good Guys are the President and his followers, who are legion: conservatives in Congress, *contras* and *pro-contras*, Central American client-states, etc. Their basic speech is, "If we don't get the communists out of Managua now, the next thing you know they'll be in Harlingen, Texas." (Twenty years ago it was, "If we don't fight the communists in Vietnam, one day soon we'll be fighting them in San Francisco.")

A vital role is played by the Moderates, confused souls who sometimes talk like Liberals but can usually be relied upon to act like Good Guys. Much of the ritual's dramatic tension is based on their apparent indecision.

The intended audience is the U.S. electorate, most of which is paying little or no attention. Public opinion polls indicate that, "One in three U.S. citizens cannot identify Nicaragua as being in Central America, a majority sees no distinction between the Marxist [sic] Sandinistas and the rebel Contras."³⁵⁵ Their inattention notwithstanding, the voters are important because every so often they get to choose the principal actors. The process by which they do that remains a mystery. But, to paraphrase H.L. Mencken: No one has yet lost an election by over-estimating the willingness of U.S. voters to be scared witless by evocations of The Red Menace.

Most of that small segment of the audience which does pay attention is split between supporters of the Good Guys and allies of the Liberals. They encourage their respective champions and, every so often, a contingent will leap into the arena with a rousing demonstration of opposition to or support for the CIA-*contras*.

The script does provide for ongoing revisions. Every so often, an especially articulate and/or telegenic personality manages to interject a novel idea. But these tend to have a short performance life, and are eventually ignored or discarded, leaving the basic text intact.

It should also be noted that the players occasionally step out of character in other settings. This is especially true of Liberals and Moderates, whose addresses to select audiences tend to be much more critical of the Good Guys than anything they dare to utter for general consumption. But these are mere sideshows, with little or no effect on the main event....

This is, of course, a simplified description of the drama. Its accuracy can be assessed by reviewing the public debate on Nicaragua as recorded in the Congressional Record and the mainstream press.

Congressional overlook

The assault on Nicaragua was set in motion with \$19 million in direct funding to the CIA destabilization project. In accordance with the gentlemanly procedures that had been devised to neutralize outrage at previous CIA abuses, only a few congressmen were notified of the operation. Those discreet members of the Senate and House “oversight” committees — often referred to by critics as “overlook” committees — were assured that the money was to be used only for blocking shipments of Nicaraguan arms to El Salvadoran guerillas, and were sworn to secrecy.

Only the most willfully ignorant took the El Salvador cover story at face value, and even they were soon forced to concede the obvious. Reports on the destabilization program began filtering into Congress almost as soon as it began — from disillusioned CIA operatives, foreign embassy officials, Latin American governments concerned about the consequences of U.S. military intervention, and others. By 1982, anyone could read detailed accounts of the “secret war” in *Newsweek* and other mainstream publications.

Still the funding of the terrorists continued, under cover of the administration’s lies about Sandinista gun-running to El Salvador. It wasn’t until 1984, when the CIA got caught with its fingerprints all over an “assassination manual” and the mining of Corinto’s harbor, that Congress was provoked to reaction. With many an indignant speech, it cut off direct funding for the CIA-*contras*, and passed the first in a series of legislative amendments specifically proscribing any attempt to overthrow the government of Nicaragua.

No problem. Nothing so trivial as an act of Congress could dissuade the Reaganites from their self-appointed task. They proceeded to rummage through departmental budgets — especially those of State, Defense and the CIA — for the necessary funds. These were supplemented with money and supplies laundered through co-operative governments such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, and by sharpening the bite on the private network of anti-communist donors at home.

By such devices, all perfectly illegal, the Reaganites managed to sustain the president's terrorists for three years, while constructing a gigantic invasion platform in Honduras and El Salvador (cf. pages 104 ff.).

The people's representatives in Congress were fully aware of this. But Ronald Reagan's popularity was thought to have rendered him unchallengeable on foreign policy issues, and there weren't many brave enough to say out loud that the emperor's new suit of clothes had a decidedly martial cut.

Big joke

The president's sense of power in his deceptions was grotesquely apparent at one of his rare press conferences during this period of official non-intervention. In response to a question about the legality of the blatant assault on Nicaragua, Reagan smirked presidentially and assured his national audience that, of course, "We want to keep obeying the laws of our country", while he and the respectful gathering chortled knowingly at this artful sophistry. It was a big joke which everyone in Congress and the press room could heartily enjoy.³⁵⁶

As the administration cranked up the volume of its propaganda campaign, congressional "moderates" began feeling the pressure to restore direct funding to the CIA-*contras*. As is so often the case with foreign policy issues, the key swing votes were wielded primarily by conservative Democrats from southern states. Whatever their solicitude for Nicaragua or loyalty to the party leadership, it was tempered by an apprehension that the good ol' boys and gals back home tend to be right ornery about communism — and that it don't take all that much for a skillful demagogue like Ronald Reagan to get 'em all het up.

The critical moment came in early 1985, just after the House of Representatives voted down yet another *contra* aid bill. Injudiciously failing to clear his travel arrangements through Congress, Daniel Ortega embarked on his seventh excursion to Europe and the Soviet Union shortly after the

House vote. His journey included stops at Italy, France and Spain, all for the purpose of enlisting support against the anticipated trade embargo which the Reaganites did, in fact, impose a few months later.

But his first destination was the Soviet Union, from which he requested fresh oil supplies for his beleaguered nation. It was the cue for which the Reagan dramatists had been waiting. Howling in alarm at this manifest evidence of The Communist Menace at Our Doorstep, the cry was taken up by the mainstream press, which dutifully transformed Ortega's mendicant journey into the modern equivalent of Mussolini's pilgrimage to Nazi Germany. It was a Big Story, given prominent display on TV newscasts and front pages of the daily papers. How did they know it was a Big Story? Why, because the White House told them it was.

The political reaction was instantaneous. Those who had dared to vote against the CIA-*contra* aid bill were caught with their pants down and scurried to denounce the Nicaraguan president's "betrayal" of their "misplaced trust" — after all they had done for him. Thus was born the myth, repeated on every similar occasion since, of Ortega's foolishness and lack of political sophistication (he should have known how cretinous U.S. politics can be).

Within weeks, Congress had reversed itself and added \$27 million of visible tax dollars to the cache already accumulated by other means. In order to put a pretty face on the proceedings, a fresh Orwellian refinement was introduced to the liturgy — the terrorist funds were styled "humanitarian aid", to be used solely for such "non-lethal" supplies as food and clothing.

Humanitarian torture

Napoleon might never have uttered his famous dictum that, "An army marches on its stomach", for all that Congress cared. But the people of Nicaragua soon came to understand its meaning all too well. "With that 'humanitarian aid'," observed a young soldier months later, "they murdered some of

my closest friends, tortured and killed three peasants from a village where we were, and threw them in the river.”³⁵⁷

Not all of the boodle reached its intended destination, of course; the General Accounting Office subsequently found that at least \$11 million disappeared — presumably into the pockets of CIA-*contra* and Honduran military leaders. Of the balance, some of it was used — surprise, surprise — to deliver weapons, after all. The duplicitous Elliott Abrams ordered that weapons be concealed among the terrorists’ new shoes and shirts. “I did not want mixed loads,” insisted the official nominally in charge of the shipments, “but Abrams wanted mixed loads.”³⁵⁸ Mixed loads it was.

A year later, the “humanitarian” pretense was temporarily dropped when Congress approved \$100 million in unequivocally lethal aid to the terrorists. The vote came in the summer of 1986, on the same day that the World Court declared the U.S. assault on Nicaragua to be illegal.

Support for the president’s terrorists was strongest in the Senate, where Republicans enjoyed a slight numerical advantage for most of the Reagan administration’s two terms. Through the complicity of conservative and “moderate” Democratic senators, that support continued even after the Democrats won a majority in 1986.

Exceptional Speaker

It is in the House of Representatives where the main battles over funding for the CIA-*contras* have been acted out. A solid core of opponents to *contra* funding was led by the Speaker of the House, Tip O’Neill, until his retirement in 1987. O’Neill received much of his information about Nicaragua from relatives working there as Catholic missionaries, and used his considerable influence to mobilize the Democratic majority against military intervention in Central America, generally. In engineering the defeat of several *contra* funding measures, O’Neill achieved an unusual degree of success in opposing a presidential military adventure

Congress is constrained by a powerful tradition of deference to the presidency in matters of "national defense", and it is traditional wisdom that any congressman who takes the lead on a controversial foreign policy issue is flirting with involuntary retirement at the next election. Among others, the experience of Congressman Michael Barnes would seem to bear that out (cf. page 297). Some of the most distinguished careers in recent history have come to abrupt ends in the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Opponents of any president's foreign policy must confront two fundamental forces of U.S. political life: the enormous power of the presidency to define the terms of public debate, and the public's deeply indoctrinated dread of communism.

The almost unlimited access to national news media by the White House has been outlined in the preceding chapter, "Packaging the Activity". Suffice it here to note that the average voter hears and "learns" far more about foreign policy from the president than from his or her senators and congressman. As of January 1988, for instance, the television networks "CBS and NBC had routinely honored 37 White House requests for Reagan speeches in prime time, and all but one of these were also televised by ABC."³⁵⁹ For the most part, congressmen can only watch with the rest of the country, and hope that the president doesn't make too much trouble for them.

The president's dominance of the airwaves augments his power to set the foreign policy agenda. On those occasions when the House has rejected presidential requests for CIA-*contra* funding, the Reaganites have threatened to come back again and again and again until they get their way. They have made good those threats, always accompanying them with a "major presidential address" or a contrived media event to demonstrate the threat to national security presented by the Sandinistas. Thus, the screws are tightened on congressional swing votes, deals are cut, promises are made and, eventually, the president gets his way.

Nicaragua is not the first victim of this inexorable process. Even the extraordinarily intense opposition to the Vietnam

“Congress has never caused troops to be withdrawn and probably never will, for several strong reasons:

“• To do so would be a direct challenge to the president’s powers as commander-in-chief. Congress often chafes at the exercise of those powers, but is reluctant to interfere lest it limit or inhibit some later president’s ability to act quickly and strongly in a real emergency.

“• Such congressional interference also would be a direct challenge to a president’s policy. Congress fears, probably correctly, that it could not carry public opinion against the ‘bully pulpit’ of a president, the official primarily empowered to conduct foreign policy.”

— Tom Wicker, *New York Times*, 7 January 1988

War could not stop it: “During the seven years from July, 1966, through July, 1973, Congress recorded one hundred and thirteen votes on proposals related to the war. But its first limitation on U.S. military activities in Southeast Asia was not imposed until 1969... and it directed its full opposition to a continued commitment in the region only in August, 1973, when it voted to stop all bombing throughout Indochina.”³⁶⁰

The question remains as to why Congress persists in supporting unpopular wars in defiance of widespread public opposition. Part of the answer may lie in simple arrogance. Many congressmen feel that, as they are the ones who have been chosen for adult responsibilities and access to Classified Information, their martial wisdom must prevail over the peaceful inclinations of those who chose them.

Nagging anxiety

But the most likely explanation is the weird embrace of anti-communism. Although they seldom put it so bluntly, many congressmen simply don’t trust their constituents’ protestations of indifference to “communist threats” that are targeted by the president for extinction. The suspicion remains very powerful that the voters’ tolerance for congressional opposition to presidential wars — no matter how vicious and ill-

conceived — is quite fickle. A popular vote against war today might, under the knife of an accomplished demagogue, be mutilated into proof of softness on communism during the next election campaign. As Republican Senator Nancy Kassenbaum of Kansas put it, “A lot of people are looking for some political cover, quite frankly. They don’t want to face that nagging question, ‘Did you lose Nicaragua?’”³⁶¹

It is not a groundless anxiety. An opinion poll conducted for the *New York Times* and CBS TV in March 1988 found that military aid to the CIA-*contras* was still unpopular with the U.S. public. But 66 percent of those surveyed agreed that Nicaragua threatened the security of other Central American nations, and only 17 percent felt it did not. It was hardly a result to embolden congressional moderates. What if another Central American country were to “go communist” before the next election? How many of the folks back home would acknowledge their anti-war counsel then?

Not many, perhaps. A century of ferocious red-baiting has left ugly scars: “The American people are very worried about Marxism.... It’s extremely difficult for a congressman who is well-informed... to take on the administration over the question of current U.S. actions in Central America.”³⁶²

In that fond hope the Reaganites have placed their faith. Not since the glory days of Joe McCarthy has so much rhetorical thunder crashed down on suspected commie dupes from on high. In order to preserve President Reagan’s image as a nice guy among the folks at home, most of the dirty work has been delegated to the likes of Jeanne Kirkpatrick, an academic who first ingratiated herself with a scholarly rationalization for U.S. support of such bestial regimes as those of Chile and Guatemala. As Ambassador to the United Nations, Kirkpatrick once complained that certain members of Congress “want to see Marxist victories in Central America”.

The Reaganites’ favorite hatchet man has been White House advisor Patrick J. Buchanan, who has gleefully reprised the role he performed during the Nixon years. A typical Buchanan outburst came after Congress began to investigate a

few of the crimes disclosed by the Iran/Contragate scandal: "History is going to indict, and history will convict, this Congress of a far greater crime against America: complicity in permitting the enemies of the United States to consolidate a military beachhead on the mainland of North America.... The dirty little secret slipping out of the show trial is that the Democratic majority is opposed to victory.... The Liberal wing of the Democratic Party has made itself the silent partner — the indispensable ally — of revolutionary communism in the Third World.... Along with its auxiliaries in the mainline churches and the liberal press, it is conducting this feverish campaign to discredit, defund and defeat the *contras*, because it wants the other side to win...."

That sort of malicious nonsense, from a guest article in *Newsweek*, is the staff of political life in the Reagan White House and among its allies within and without the capitol beltway. There is little doubt that it has worked, even on administration officials: Asked by the Iran/Contragate committee why he didn't bother to check on the legality of the illicit *contra* funding operation, National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane replied, "To tell you the truth, probably the reason I didn't is because if I'd done that, [CIA Director] Bill Casey, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, and [Secretary of Defense] Cap Weinberger would have said I was some kind of a commie, you know."³⁶³

The net result is that it has become politically impossible to say a kind or temperate word about the Sandinista revolution; even those bold enough to reject funding of the *contras* are careful to accompany rejection with an obligatory condemnation of the wickedness in Managua.

Indiana Congressman Lee Hamilton, a leading opponent of *contra* funding, was an early supporter of economic sanctions, arguing that the U.S. should "increase economic pressure on Nicaragua [by] working with our allies to deny it World Bank loans and assistance from the International Monetary Fund. A policy of increased economic pressure could also include a trade cutoff." He got his wish in 1985.

“All of us here are political animals, and we cast our votes with an eye on what the repercussions will be in the next election. If we think that the president’s position is strong, and the American people give some credence to him, we want to hedge our bets a good deal. It’s a little harsh to say that’s a gutless way to do things; it’s the politically expedient way.”

— Rep. George Brown, Jr.³⁶⁴

Colorado’s Senator Gary Hart, briefly a presidential candidate, allowed as how, “It is dangerous to imagine the Sandinistas have good intentions; but it is naive to think they will be swept away by the *contras*, and it is ultimately foolish to claim that military force is our best means for controlling Sandinista misbehavior.”

As for so many of his anti-*contra* colleagues, Hart’s stated objection to the Reaganites’ assault on Nicaragua was based on feasibility; its desirability was taken for granted.

Senator Daniel Evans of Washington concurred in the administration’s diagnosis, but delicately recommended an alternative cure: “The President has likened Nicaragua and the Nicaraguan government to a cancer, a cancer which must be excised. But there are other ways to treat cancers. One is to develop anti-bodies to counter and stop the growth of the Nicaraguan-Marxist cancer which does exist.”³⁶⁵

This homely treatise on preventive medicine notwithstanding, Dr. Dan opted for radical surgery in early 1988, when he voted for military assistance to the CIA-*contras*.

And so it went, every one agreeing that the Sandinistas were an evil bunch. The only thing left to debate was how best to neutralize or get rid of them. After listening to a Reagan speech and the Democratic Party’s response in March of 1986, a Nicaraguan university student observed that, “All this is so infantile. Americans are nice people, but their leaders are like spoiled children who can’t get their way. The Democrats’ response was as bad as what Reagan was saying. All they are debating is how they are going to kill us.”³⁶⁶

“We are not surprised about the diversion of funds from arms sales to Iran to the *contras*,” remarked a Nicaraguan Protestant leader. “What surprises us is how it can be discussed legally, in front of the cameras and the eyes of the world, the way to give funds to a mercenary army, to an aggressor army, so that it can continue to destroy schools, to destroy hospitals, and to leave more children orphaned. That is what is worrying us. How is it possible that in broad daylight the assassination of another people is being discussed in Congress?”³⁶⁷

Bicentennial desecration

In the summer of 1987, Ronald Reagan was lending his presidential image to a national celebration of the U.S. Constitution’s 200th anniversary. At the same time, Congress was nervously sorting through mountains of evidence that the president and his handlers had been systematically violating that sacred document.

The assault on Nicaragua had been cloaked in lies from the beginning and, after Congress explicitly proscribed it in 1984 (see page 334), duplicity was compounded by arrogant defiance. The Reaganites circumvented congressional restraints by establishing their own fundraising network and misappropriating government funds on behalf of the CIA-*contras*.

But Congress as a whole wasn’t noticeably disturbed by that. After all, President Reagan was still thought to be extraordinarily popular, and most voters still didn’t seem to know or care very much about Nicaragua.

That changed in late 1986, when a Lebanese journal revealed that the Reaganites had been selling arms to Iran and using the profits to secretly fund the CIA-*contras* (see page 106). The public was outraged — not so much at this new evidence of the deadly obsession with Nicaragua, but at the unforgivable sin of dealing with the Iranian infidels.

In his successful 1980 election campaign against Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan had been marketed as someone who would “stand tall” against the enemies of the U.S. — most particularly the fundamentalist Moslems of Iran who had

held the Carter administration hostage to public opinion for over a year — and thereby given the Reagan campaign its main chance.

Now, here was the All-American President caught doing what he had solemnly promised his fans that he would never do — making deals with the wicked Iranians. Not even Jimmy Carter, the wimp, had resorted to that. Nor did it help the presidential image that the medium of exchange was some of the most sophisticated weaponry in the U.S. arsenal. Quite abruptly, the Reagan image wasn't standing so tall anymore. He might arrange the starvation, torture, murder and rape of all the Nicaraguans his tender heart desired; but doing deals with the Ayatollah and his gang was clearly more than a decent U.S. citizen could tolerate.

As the story unfolded in the following months, poor old Reagan was outfitted with so many different lies to tell that he couldn't keep them straight. It became almost routine for White House staffers to urgently follow up their leader's contradictory statements with the official White House version of "what he really meant". Eventually they adopted the strategy of keeping him out of hearing as much as possible.

Meanwhile, a steady stream of embarrassing disclosures ate away at the famous Reagan popularity. His handlers agonized over whether to have him acknowledge responsibility for the mess — a responsibility which only the most blindly loyal could possibly fail to perceive — or blame it all on "out of control" subordinates. In the end, they settled on the latter course as the lesser of two evils. Better that he be accused of ignorance and ineptitude than conscious collaboration with the Iranian Satan.

And that's how it played out, with the compliance of some good sports on the National Security Council who agreed to take the rap, and with a big assist from a deferential Congress.

The Senate-House congressional committee that had investigated the Iran/Contragate mess in the summer of 1987 was the

(Continued on page 348)

The Builder and the Destroyer

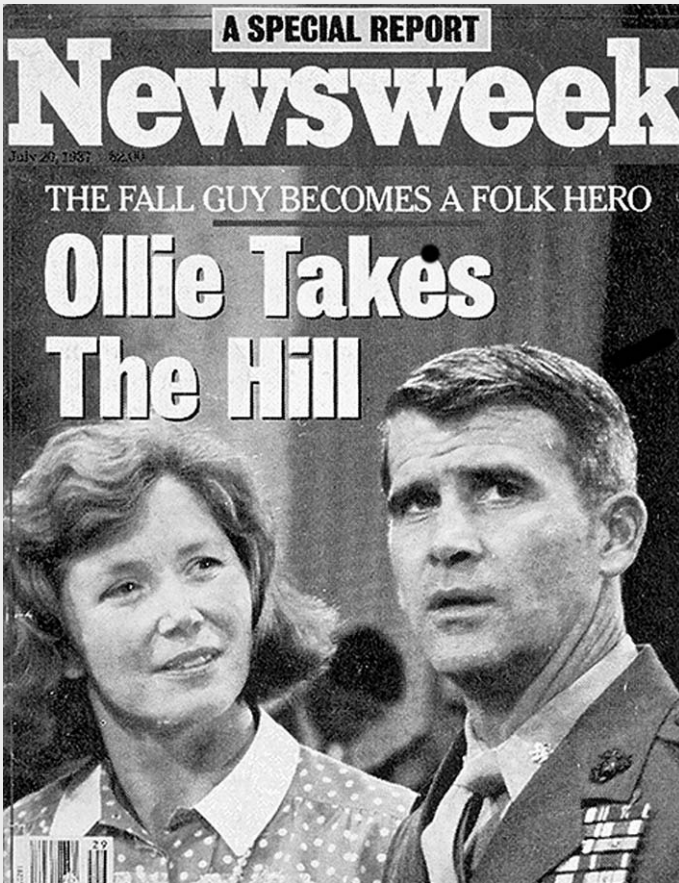
THE DRAMATIC HIGHLIGHT of the congressional hearing on the Iran/Contragate scandal during the summer of 1987 was the stirring testimony of Marine Colonel Oliver North. While seconded to the National Security Council, North had co-ordinated much of the administration's unauthorized war against Nicaragua, including the private fund-raising network for the CIA-*contras*.

As the administration's designated "fall guy", North was sacked from the National Security Council as soon as the scandal broke. Ever the good soldier, he was prepared to accept a portion of public disgrace and a return to active duty as the political price of his covert strife against the Evil Empire. But when his old pals in the White House appointed a special prosecutor to investigate, and he began to hear talk of his "crimes" and "prison", North took the piles of money his right-wing admirers collected for his defense and hired himself a fancy lawyer.

He chose well. With the help of his combative attorney and the Reaganites on the congressional committee, North essentially dictated the form and substance of his testimony before the nationally televised hearing. As the committee members listened mutely, "like warts on a pickle", the earnest Marine lectured the vast national audience for several days running on the imminent peril of communism in Central America, and the fecklessness of Congress in denying the president the means to resist the forces of darkness.

It was standard White House propaganda, recited so many times before by the likes of Ronald Reagan and Elliott Abrams. But this time, attracted by the odor of a major scandal and a televised hearing, a great many citizens were paying attention to the "debate" for the first time. And all they got to hear was Colonel North's

paranoid view of the world; his anti-Sandinista tirade went completely unchallenged by the “gaggle of gingerly congressmen”. Within a matter of hours, the fall guy had been transformed into a national hero, by his own iconic zeal, the dramatic impact of television and the bumbling ineptitude of the committee. *Newsweek* headlined its cover story on the propaganda coup, “Ollie Takes the Hill”. But a more accurate headline would have been: “The Hill Surrenders without Firing a Shot”.



North's moment of glory was brief, however. Opinion polls indicated that, while his fervent patriotism and loyalty to superiors were admired, his illegal activities were not. The public's final report on the monomaniacal Marine was decidedly mixed. But his jingoistic television performance did have a lasting impact: It deflected the committee, at just the right moment, from any slight inclination it may have entertained to peek into the darker corners of the president's war on Nicaragua.

Three months before Congress meekly surrendered to Colonel North, the terrorists he had outfitted assassinated a cheerful young man from Oregon. Ben Linder had gone to Nicaragua for a brief visit and, deeply moved by its struggle against the empire of his birth, decided to stay on and put his recently acquired engineering skills to the work of bringing electricity to remote villages. For this affront, he was targeted by the local terrorist band for extermination.

The grisly death of Ben Linder was not a major media event in his own land. The journalistic significance of Linder's brief life can be measured by the comparative treatment its extinction received from a mainstream publication like *Newsweek*. Whereas the murderous and mendacious North was anointed with two consecutive cover stories of heroic length and detail, the murdered engineer merited only a terse sidebar so trifling that it was not even listed on the magazine's contents page. In the national warfare state, heroes don't build things; they blow them up.

The response to Linder's death from Congress was likewise a study in contrasts. Testifying about CIA-*contra* terror and the murder of their son before a subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Linder's parents were greeted with something less than the fawning reception to which North was treated. They had to listen to Elliott Abrams explain how their misguided son's

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very model of decorum. To the inevitable howls of “witch hunt!” from the perennial witch hunters of the right wing, the committee politely probed the edges of a murderous conspiracy against the U.S. Constitution and world order.

That reticence was entirely consistent, given that Congress had been dragged to its task only after the White House — prodded by the Lebanese press — had itself set the investigation in motion with public disclosures of the Iranian arms deal. Having successfully avoided its responsibility for years, during which most of the relevant information had been openly discussed in the mainstream press and other forums, Congress somewhat haltingly and with much angry debate proceeded unerringly to the surface of the matter.

The ferocity of the congressional debate, along with residual anxieties about Reagan’s popularity with the voters, resulted in a committee composed preponderantly of “moderates” and supporters of the CIA-*contras*. The committee was expected to protect the republic from the distress of excessive brooding over presidential misconduct.

The Builder and the Destroyer (cont.)

death was the Sandinistas’ fault, for allowing him to venture into territory patrolled by “freedom fighters”.

Rep. Robert Dornan of California performed his now familiar impression of an anti-communist fighting cock with a terrible case of constipation. And Rep. Connie Mack of Florida favored Linder’s grieving parents with this tough wisdom: “I guess that what really has me upset is that I can’t understand how you can use the grief that I know you feel — either use it to politicize this situation, or to allow yourself to be used to politicize this situation.... I do not want to be tough on you, but I really feel that you have asked for it.”³⁶⁸

That expectation was fulfilled, and then some. The greatest opportunity Congress would ever have to counteract the White House propaganda campaign against Nicaragua was quickly perverted into the most effective single exercise of that campaign.

Playing to a huge national broadcast audience, the Democratic committee chairmen permitted their Reaganite colleagues and a jingoistic parade of administration witnesses to transform the hearing into a protracted advertisement for the CIA-*contras*. As tens of millions of voters paid attention to their president's war for the first time, one White House witness after another paid glowing tribute to the noble cause of the "freedom fighters", and bombarded the national audience with dire warnings about the communist beachhead in Sandinistaland.

"Warts on a pickle"

No one on the committee was moved to question or contradict the orchestrated cacophony of lies, half-truths and distortions about Nicaragua, and the CIA-*contras* were spared the indignity of public scrutiny. "At a post-hearing dinner for reporters who covered the proceedings, a group of about a dozen journalists was asked if any could recall a negative comment made about the *contras* during the entire hearings. Heads were scratched; no one could recollect a discouraging word."³⁶⁹

Complained one Democratic congresswoman of her dumb colleagues on the committee, "They sat there like warts on a pickle". Even *Newsweek* noticed something tentative about the performance, later referring to the demure investigators as "a gaggle of gingerly congressmen".³⁷⁰

The Reaganites could hardly credit their good fortune. You couldn't buy advertising like that for any amount of money, and its effect on the political fortunes of the CIA-*contras* was nothing short of miraculous. At a stroke, they were rescued from ignominy, and even enjoyed a brief surge of popularity.

For that they could thank the investigating committee, which ornamented the Reaganite litany with respectful silence and conveniently ignored abundant evidence of *contra* brutality and corruption. Thus, the nation learned next to nothing from the committee about: the systematic terrorization of Nicaraguan civilians, so thoroughly documented by human rights organizations; the CIA-*contra* drug traffic to the United States and Attorney General Edwin Meese's obstruction of an FBI investigation into it; the embezzlement of tens of millions of dollars which never reached the terrorists in the field; the misuse of "humanitarian" funds to purchase weapons; etc., etc.

There were other yawning gaps in the investigative record, as well — most notably the vast netherworld of covert operations. In order to appease moderate Republicans, the investigation concentrated on the activities of the National Security Council during 1984-86, when Congress had specifically prohibited military assistance to the CIA-*contras*.

That deliberately narrow focus ensured that only a short, expurgated chapter of the full story would emerge. As a committee researcher later observed, "Not enough was made of the fact that the *contra* resupply operation was not just an NSC affair, but entirely a U.S. government operation. This was not just the NSC running amok."³⁷¹

*"On November 25, 1986, when Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams was asked by a congressional committee if he knew of any foreign government that was aiding the contras, he neglected to reveal that he had personally solicited the promise of a \$10 million contribution to the contras from the government of Brunei. During the Iran-*contra* hearings, Abrams was asked to explain why he hadn't revealed the solicitation. 'I felt I did not have the authority to do that,' he explained. 'I felt I was not supposed to do that.... As I have stated several times, I did not believe I was authorized to... reveal that solicitation.'*

"Will somebody please authorize this man to tell the truth?"

— Peter Carlson, *Washington Post*, 28 December 1987

Even within the narrow framework of the investigation, significant leads were not pursued. When a committee member tried to question a witness about published reports of a White House plan to summarily imprison U.S. citizens should they protest an invasion of Nicaragua, he was silenced by the chairman and instructed to save his questions for closed session; the issue has never been publicly addressed.

Other threads left dangling: the unauthorized use of military installations in El Salvador and Costa Rica to support the CIA-*contras*; clear indications that Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams had misappropriated funds, substituted weapons for "non-lethal" aid, and committed perjury; the illegal use of Navy SEALs and other elite military units to support the CIA-*contras*; the financing of attacks on troublesome politicians with funds raised through the private *contra* aid network; and evidence that the "secret team" of retired military and CIA personnel that helped the White House arrange the arms-for-hostages deal has been in place since the Vietnam War, and is likely to find similar employment in the future.

Consequently, the elaborate apparatus with which presidents conduct their private wars remained essentially unmoled. Indeed, the committee's final report reaffirmed the compelling "national security interest" in covert operations, a conclusion which disturbed former CIA analyst David MacMichael: "The reluctance to end these activities, particularly in the aftermath of the Iran-Contragate scandal, is a danger for the people of the United States and a threat to world peace."³⁷²

Political fallout

Despite the best efforts of Congress to conceal the extent of Reaganite treachery and the threat to democracy posed by presidential wars, the political fallout from the scandal was substantial. Not even the CIA's "freedom fighters" could escape the consequences, and their brief moment of glory soon faded. By the end of 1987, public opinion polls were once again disclosing a pattern of two-to-one opposition to military assistance for the CIA-*contras*.

Worst affected was the cherished popularity of Ronald Reagan, whose reputation was badly wounded by the fiasco — again, primarily because of the Iranian connection, not the devastation of Nicaragua. Opinion polls showed that, “Reagan’s approval rating fell by almost a third as soon as the nation learned that he had sold advanced weaponry to Iran.... No president’s approval rating had ever fallen so fast.”³⁷³

The subsequent congressional investigation had little to do with it. If anything, the Iran/Contragate hearing was designed to restore public confidence in President Reagan and the presidency. Congress recoiled from the prospect of impeachment, out of anxiety for unintended political consequences and possibly for the impact on national morale.

Nixon syndrome

It was a common belief among congressmen and other deep thinkers that Richard Nixon’s brush with impeachment just thirteen years earlier had left the nation weakened and disoriented. It was feared that another such proceeding, against a president who (unlike Nixon) had once been regarded as extraordinarily popular, might so irrevocably shatter public trust in government as to make a national consensus on any issue impossible in the future.

Of course, to anyone so free of ethical constraints as Ronald Reagan and his handlers, such delicacy presented an irresistible opportunity to continue abusing administrative power. “We dare you to impeach us” might serve as the Reagan administration’s motto.

As noted above, the Iran/Contragate committee tried to limit potential damage to the presidency by concentrating on the 1984-86 activities of the National Security Council. The White House, aided by its friends in Congress and the mainstream press, managed to narrow that focus even further, to one central question: Did Reagan authorize and/or know about the diversion of profits, from the Iranian arms deal, to buy weapons for the CIA-*contras*?

If the answer were “Yes”, then Congress would have to hold its nose and consider impeachment. If not, then the entire country could breathe a sigh of relief, learn the lessons to be ignored in the future, and select some suitable underlings for ritual punishment. Other issues were discussed; but from the outset, the question of Reagan’s awareness was presented as the key to the entire affair.

The answer turned out to be, “Not certain”, which was unclear enough to get Reagan off the hook. In order to arrive safely at that irresolute conclusion, the committee had to dismiss elementary logic, a mountain of circumstantial evidence, and such incriminating documents as the 1986 memorandum in which the president’s National Security Adviser quotes him as saying, “I am really serious.... If we can’t move the *contra* package before June 9, I want to figure out a way to take action unilaterally to provide assistance.”³⁷⁴

It takes a clever mind to interpret “a way to take action unilaterally” as anything other than conscious subversion of congressional restraints. But Congress is full of clever men and women who appeared to experience no difficulty whatsoever in banishing that and more damning evidence from the collective semi-conscious.

Responsibility for the offending behavior was laid at the feet of “a cabal of zealots” in the National Security Council who were said to have carried out this crucial foreign policy initiative unbeknownst to their president. The committee suggested that they ought to be prosecuted for their sins, and by early 1988 a handful of the president’s henchmen had been indicted by a special prosecutor on a variety of relatively minor charges; speculation abounded that they would be pardoned by Reagan after the 1988 election.

Although he eluded impeachment by Congress, Reagan was condemned by the nation at large. Opinion polls indicated that a clear majority of voters weren’t buying the “cabal of zealots” story line. It was felt, rather, that Reagan knew a lot more than he was willing to admit — to believe otherwise was to attribute to him the alertness of a turnip — and that he was cowering behind his subordinates.

Particularly distressing to the old actor was the widespread belief among his former fans that he was lying to them. Reagan's entire occupational experience had been a triumph of style over substance, and he had managed to get through the first six years in the role of president with his image as a real straight shooter more or less intact.

Those days were now over. Even the Iran/Contra gate committee had to acknowledge, in a general sort of way, that the president could not evade responsibility for major foreign policy initiatives. Its final report noted that, "If the President did not know what his national security advisers were doing, he should have.... The President created or at least tolerated an environment where those who did know of the diversion believed that they were carrying out the President's policies."³⁷⁵

Needless to say, the report did not address Congress's own complicity in maintaining an "environment of tolerance" for misconduct by the president and his subordinates.

In due course, all this bad news for the Leader of the Free World was supplanted by the inevitable onset of fresh disasters. By the end of 1987, the scandal had already begun to subside in public consciousness; it figured to be a minor or non-existent issue in the 1988 presidential campaign, except for the residual damage it might yet inflict on Vice President George Bush, the Republican candidate.

As for the prevaricator-in-chief, he slowly regained some of the precious popularity squandered on the Iran/Contra gate scandal, but it was too little and too late to arrest the decline of his political fortunes. Reagan's lame duck presidency had been severely crippled, making it easier for congressional moderates to balk at military aid to the CIA-*contras*, and for Latin Americans in general to resist U.S. pressure.

The net result for Nicaragua was therefore positive. The temporary increase in public dread of the Sandinistas and sympathy with the CIA-*contras* was more than offset by the relaxation of the White House grip on Congress.

Violations of U.S. Law by the Reaganites

THE CASUAL DISREGARD OF INTERNATIONAL LAW that is such a prominent feature of the Reagan administration's foreign policy is mirrored in its indifference to the legal niceties at home. Although it is not the first outlaw administration, it appears to have stretched the limits of constitutional government further beyond the breaking point than any of its predecessors.

On such rare occasions as that provided by the Iran/Contragate scandal, Congress is encouraged or compelled by the pressure of events to investigate executive misconduct. This perilous task is undertaken with enormous reluctance and timidity, concluding with a report that may or may not lead to corrective legislation. Such legislation, if enacted, is typically subverted or ignored; that's what happened to the legal restraints placed on the CIA after its high crimes and misdemeanors were exposed in the congressional hearings of the 1970s.

Impeachment, the most effective sanction available to Congress, is avoided like the plague. There seems to be an implicit quota of only one presidential impeachment per century, and that has already been met by Andrew Johnson and Richard Nixon. Subsequent presidents of the 20th century, especially if they are careful to convey the amiable aura of a Ronald Reagan, should therefore be able to violate as many laws as they please.

It may occasionally be necessary to suspend an illegal operation, and sacrifice a loyal subordinate or two for a brief term at Club Fed. But time heals all political wounds, yielding fresh opportunities for international mayhem. Any inconvenience to the scapegoats is generously compensated with fat TV/book contracts, fortunes mined from the right-wing rubber chicken circuit, and countless other charities for those convicted of crimes committed in the name of freedom. Most of the principal

bandits of the Nixon administration's Watergate scandal, for example, are today doing quite well for themselves.

The Reagan administration appears almost to be dedicated to illegality as a matter of principle. The following is a partial list of its malfeasance concerning just one "covert op", the assault on Nicaragua.

Neutrality Act of 1794

Nearly as venerable as the Constitution, this act prohibits anyone, including government officials, from giving money to or participating in any military activity against any foreign state, colony or district with which the U.S. is not legally at war — a condition that requires a formal declaration by Congress.

The Reaganites' frequent violations of this law were compounded when they used it as a pretext for siccing the FBI on U.S. individuals and groups opposed to White House policies toward Central America.

War Powers Resolution

A rather tardy congressional reaction to the undeclared Vietnam War, this resolution requires the president to notify Congress within 48 hours of any situation "... in which the U.S. Armed Forces are introduced (1) into hostilities or into a situation where imminent involvement in hostilities is clearly indicated by the circumstances; (2) into the territory, airspace, or waters of a foreign nation, while equipped for combat." This has been violated most transparently by supply and surveillance flights in Nicaraguan territory, the participation of military advisors in CIA-*contra* raids into Nicaraguan territory, and naval intrusions which include the mining of Nicaraguan harbors and artillery attacks on Corinto and Puerto Cabezas.

Violations of U.S. Law by the Reaganites (cont.)

Constitutional treaty obligations

The Constitution requires that the president take care to uphold all of its provisions, among which is the explicit stipulation that all international treaties ratified by Congress automatically acquire the full force of law — just as though they had been incorporated into the original document. The Reaganites' assault on Nicaragua violates U.S. treaty obligations to the United Nations, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the Inter-American Development Bank and the Organization of American States.

The last-named is especially relevant, since the Reaganites have so often and so falsely accused Nicaragua of ignoring its obligations to the OAS, the charter of which declares: "No State or group of States has the right to intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever, in the internal or external affairs of any other State.... No State may use or encourage the use of coercive measures of an economic or political character in order to force the sovereign will of another state."

Intelligence Oversight Act

A congressional response to past CIA abuses, this act requires the Director of the CIA to keep Congress "... fully and currently informed of all intelligence activities which are the responsibility of, are engaged in by, or are carried out for, or on behalf of, any department, agency or entity of the United States, including any significant anticipated intelligence activity."

Pretty amusing stuff to the old boys at The Company, who routinely withhold vital information from Congress and frequently lie to it outright. The oversight ("overlook") committees of the House and Senate are

Violations of U.S. Law by the Reaganites (cont.)

sworn to secrecy and remain silent, even when they know they have been bamboozled. Consequently, the act has become a mere formality, a legalistic device for concealing evidence of CIA misconduct from the public.

Nothing more clearly demonstrates the tendency to presidential despotism than the failure of Congress to demand compliance with the Intelligence Oversight Act and the War Powers Resolution. A few more laws like that and there will be little need for a Congress to pass and ignore them.

Federal spending restrictions

On several occasions in recent years, Congress has included language in military appropriation bills which explicitly disallows the use of government funds for the assault on Nicaragua. For example: "No funds available to the CIA, the Department of Defense, or any other agency or entity of the U.S. involved in intelligence activities may be obligated or expended for the purpose of which would have the effect of supporting, directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua by any nation, group, organization, movement or individual."

The Reaganites have tried to circumvent the obvious intent of such crystalline language by assigning responsibility for the assault on Nicaragua to the National Security Council, which is not empowered to conduct military operations. Taunted with that arrogant fiction, Congress has chosen to suspend disbelief — during the Iran/Contragate hearing, for example. But the CIA and the Pentagon are demonstrably involved and, in any event, the argument is absurd. It is as though the Reaganites

Violations of U.S. Law by the Reaganites (cont.)

instructed the Department of Agriculture to organize and finance an invasion of Canada, then declared that it could not possibly be an invasion — since everyone knows that Agriculture only deals with seeds and fertilizer.

There are also very explicit restrictions on military construction without congressional authorization. These have been violated to staggering excess in Honduras and El Salvador, and ignored by Congress in equal measure.

Drug running, perjury, burglary, etc.

Other federal laws violated by the Reaganites include the Arms Export Control Act, the Federal Racketeering Act, and a constitutional requirement that all funds raised by the government or its agents be processed through the national treasury.

The CIA and its *contras* developed a drug-running operation to help out with expenses. An investigation into the drug trade by the FBI's Miami office was abruptly terminated at the order of Attorney General Ed Meese. "No Problems Ed" also played a central role in the illegal destruction of Iran/Contragate evidence by National Security Council staff members.

The heavy weight of government has also been brought to bear on U.S. opponents of administration policy toward Central America, funds have been misappropriated, testimony perjured, burglaries perpetrated, etc., etc.... Doubtless many other patriotic acts will come to light in the years ahead, possibly in good time to divert attention from the next wave of crimes committed in the name of freedom.

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

While the CIA-*contras* were going about their murderous business and the pseudo-debate over their care and feeding was blustering in the United States, Nicaragua was receiving a broad range of support from the rest of the world. United States allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have been especially helpful to Nicaragua during its long siege.

That support has remained fairly constant, despite pressure from the Reaganites and lingering doubts about the ultimate intentions of the Sandinistas. In early 1981 an Under-Secretary of State was dispatched to Western Europe to enlist support for the CIA destabilization program; his mission ended in failure.

Two years later, the U.S. was still alone on its crusade, with the National Security Council urging the Secretary of State to "Increase communication/public diplomacy efforts in Western Europe, Mexico and other countries.... In Europe, systematically emphasize the military nature of Soviet/Cuban/Nicaraguan policies and actions. In Latin America and with European Socialists, emphasize the Sandinista betrayal of the original anti-Somoza revolution. Undertake major effort to have Christian Democrats condemn Cuban/Nicaraguan intervention [in El Salvador]." ³⁷⁶

All to no avail. Far from aiding and abetting U.S. aggression, most of Europe has consistently opposed it. Citizens have responded to Reaganite policies with an outrage reminiscent of the Vietnam era. Their governments have tended to be more circumspect in public, usually noting diplomatically that they see the issue as "a north-south problem rather than an east-west conflict". In either case, the message is much the same — a clear rejection of U.S. rationalizations for its unprovoked aggression.

One result has been the provision of significant amounts of economic assistance to Nicaragua from governments, individuals and solidarity groups. According to *Business Week*,

"Aid to Nicaragua reflects a widespread hostility to U.S. policies, and even sympathy for the Sandinistas among voters — including some conservatives — in allied countries." ³⁷⁷ Some 150 sister-city relationships between Nicaragua and Europe had been established by the end of 1987.

A strong indication of the way the international winds were blowing came in 1982, when Nicaragua was hoisted onto the U.N. Security Council over the furious opposition of the United States. The announcement of Nicaragua's elevation ignited wild rejoicing in the General Assembly: "A U.N. officer said that he could remember only one occasion when there was a similar response — when China was admitted to the United Nations [after decades of opposition by the U.S.]" ³⁷⁸.

Since then, the only thing preventing passage of a Security Council resolution condemning U.S. aggression has been its lonely self-serving vote. The General Assembly, meanwhile, has approved several such condemnations by overwhelming majorities. The response of the Reagan administration has been to accelerate its retreat from U.S. commitments to the United Nations.

The 1985 trade embargo was another diplomatic disaster. Not a single country joined it, and every relevant international body condemned it. The General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) noted that the embargo violated the United States' obligations under an international treaty [and therefore, the U.S. Constitution, as well]. Declared the Caribbean Community of Foreign Ministers, "We are strongly opposed to the use of sanctions outside the United Nations system", and the Latin America Economic System (SELA) "rejects the total trade embargo." ³⁷⁹

The Parliament of the European Economic Community (EEC) said that it "is alarmed by the decision of the President" to impose the embargo, and has reacted accordingly. In 1984 the EEC embarked on a five-year plan of economic assistance to the region, stressing "the importance of a greater European link to reduce Central American dependence on the United States" ³⁸⁰. The foreign ministers of the EEC have met annually

with those of the Central America and Contadora nations, ignoring U.S. objections to the meetings in general and to the participation of Nicaragua in particular. [For a discussion of Contadora process, see page 380 ff.]. The resulting aid has averaged over \$33 million per year, and the EEC has committed itself to significant increases in the future. Nicaragua has been a prime beneficiary.

Fractured alliance

Ben Linder, the first U.S. citizen murdered by the CIA-contras was the ninth *internacionalista* to be so honored. Preceding him to the grave were eight among the thousands of Europeans who every year volunteer their labor. They represent, in turn, thousands of solidarity groups and sister cities established throughout Europe to provide material assistance, counteract disinformation, and lobby their respective governments on behalf of Nicaragua. Unions, churches and socialist youth groups have been especially active in this grass roots movement, but it embraces the entire spectrum of political inclinations.

The solidarity movement has provided governments with all the democratic justification they need to defy the United States, and they have done so with mounting confidence. Particularly worrisome to the Reagan administration is the prevailing sentiment of its principal NATO allies. All but two have openly supported the Sandinista revolution. As for the other two, the right-wing governments of Great Britain and West Germany, they have been unable or unwilling to offer the U.S. any diplomatic comfort *vis-à-vis* Nicaragua — very likely because the political cost at home would be prohibitive. West Germany, for instance, has given birth to nearly 400 local solidarity committees.

Much of this opposition to U.S. aggression can be attributed to the efforts of the Socialist International. Throughout Europe, socialist parties comprise either the government or its principal opposition — a long-standing political reality that would no doubt come as a great surprise to most U.S. citizens,

who have been indoctrinated to regard “socialism” as a word only slightly less dirty than “communism” and have never bothered to learn the difference.

By applying intense pressure, the U.S. did succeed in persuading France and the Netherlands to stop supplying Nicaragua with military equipment — and thereby force it into dependence on the Soviet bloc. But apart from that single concession, based largely on the U.S. claim to an overriding “national security interest” in Central America, NATO allies have taken their own counsel. “The worst error we could make would be to follow the policy adopted by the United States,”³⁸¹ declared France’s foreign minister.

France has on several occasions presented a pointed alternative to U.S. military intervention by offering to serve as a mediator for regional conflicts. After the CIA mined Nicaraguan harbors in 1984, the French government offered the services of its navy’s minesweepers.

Nicaragua is the third largest recipient of French economic assistance in Latin America; only the vastly larger countries of Mexico and Brazil receive more. France has donated roughly \$70 million since 1979, including 24,000 tons of wheat flour and equipment for drilling geothermal wells that generate \$5 million worth of electricity annually. Telecommunications, food processing, agriculture, transportation and healthcare projects have all benefited from French equipment and technical assistance. Trade credits have been provided on France’s most generous terms.

Spain’s socialist government has also made a significant contribution, despite its own severe economic difficulties. Although its direct economic assistance has not been as great as that of France, Spain has acted as a diplomatic bridge between Nicaragua and Europe, counteracting U.S. efforts to isolate the Sandinistas.

Norway has been steadily increasing its support of the Sandinista revolution. It responded to the 1986 Congressional approval of \$100 million in military assistance to the CIA-*contras* by voting 100 million kroner (ca. \$13 million) for their intended victims. The contribution of the Netherlands’ has been

"I was one of four Nobel laureates who went to Nicaragua with the 'peace ship' sent by the Norwegian government.... Americans should understand that the Reagan administration's policies toward Nicaragua have not won the approval of our friends and allies in Western Europe. Our disregard of international law and our recent refusal to recognize the decisions of the World Court... are added sources of their dismay and our nation's increasing isolation. "

— Prof. George Wald³⁸²

even greater — well over \$100 million since 1979, and more on the way. Sweden, Denmark, Italy and Belgium have also contributed significant amounts.

Even the right-wing governments of Great Britain and West Germany have refrained from antagonizing the broad-based solidarity movements in their countries, declining to act on U.S. suggestions that they veto EEC assistance to Nicaragua.

West Germany's may be the most effective solidarity network in Europe. It was the first to respond to Nicaragua's call for *brigadistas*; several have since been killed by the CIA-*contras*, and many others have been wounded and/or raped, much to the detriment of U.S. prestige abroad. One indicator of the level of support for Nicaragua is the help given to a peasant resettlement project by the youth organization of West Germany's ruling Christian Democratic Party, whose leaders have condemned the Sandinistas in terms remarkably coincident with those employed by the U.S. ambassador to Bonn.

O Canada!

On the northern side of "the world's longest undefended border", Canada has continued its established pattern of abstention from the U. S. anti-communist crusade. As in the cases of Cuba and "Red" China, Canada has resisted all invitations to join in the attack on Nicaragua. "Within the climate of public opinion," notes a Canadian political scientist, "it would be difficult for the Canadian government, even if it wanted to."³⁸³

The government criticized the Reaganites' 1985 embargo, and permitted Nicaragua to transfer its Miami trade office to the city of Toronto. The expansion of trade between the two countries has been hampered by transportation difficulties, but it has grown steadily.

A 1981 visit to Nicaragua by a delegation of trade unionists has resulted in an energetic solidarity movement. In addition to the unions, which are considerably less inclined to commie-bashing than their AFL-CIA brethren to the south, Canadian churches and the socialist New Democratic Party (NDP) are actively involved in assistance projects and lobbying efforts. An NDP legislator from British Columbia achieved some notoriety in 1987 by loudly denouncing the U.S. assault on Nicaragua during President Reagan's visit to Parliament. Elliott Abrams has publicly complained that the Canadians are "helping to establish a Marxist regime in Nicaragua".

Tools and farmers for peace

Tools for Peace, started by British Columbia union activists, had by 1987 diversified into a nationwide collection of rubber boots, pencils, blankets and medical supplies worth one million Canadian dollars. Six other countries, including New Zealand and Great Britain, have adopted it as a model.

Taking root in Canada's prairie provinces, Farmers for Peace had by 1986 grown an annual budget of US\$374,000. The money has been used for several agricultural projects, including a much-needed equipment repair shop that fell victim to a CIA-*contra* attack which left ten dead, many others wounded, and a \$119,000 investment in ruins. The attack prompted the Minister of External Affairs to denounce "the tragic outcome of the attempt to obtain a military solution" and to reaffirm his country's commitment to helping Nicaragua.³⁸⁴

Volunteer projects are augmented by a government program that grants four tax dollars for every dollar raised from private sources; some provincial governments throw in an additional subsidy. By the end of 1987, Canada had contributed \$40 million in technical and economic assistance, and had

waived repayment of a Can\$14 million credit line from 1984. Its allocation of direct economic aid has steadily increased and is set at \$7 million for 1988.

In these and numerous other ways, the countries to which the U.S. government refers as the “western democracies” have provided support to Nicaragua.

Meanwhile, the Reaganites have been reduced to reliance upon the oppressive regimes of Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, S. Korea and South Africa to share the burdens of freedom fighting.



Another load of “Tools for Peace” is readied for shipment from British Columbia, Canada.

Reagan’s Law

When the United States began to organize Central America for its benefit at the turn of the century, one of the first institutions it devised was the Central America Court. It was conceived as a regional supreme court that would peacefully resolve the kinds of disputes that had so often in the past erupted into war.

Whether or not the nations of Central America would have learned to live by the court’s judicial wisdom can never be known: “Within nine years the institution was hollow, because twice — in 1912 and 1916 — the United States refused to recognize Court decisions that went against its interests in Nicaragua. The North Americans destroyed the Court they helped create, and in doing so vividly demonstrated how the Progressive faith in legal remedies was worthless when the

dominant power in the area placed its own national interests over international legal institutions.”³⁸⁵

With that historical curiosity as an illegal precedent, the Reaganites have demonstrated a contempt for domestic and international law with few parallels in U.S. history. Their administration’s most blatant gesture of contempt for international law, thus far, has been its rejection of several rulings in Nicaragua’s favor by the International Court of justice, or “World Court”. The court is the judicial branch of the United Nations and during its 40 years of existence has ruled on some 30 cases, over a third of them brought by the United States

Nicaragua’s U.S. attorneys filed a complaint against the U.S. in April 1984. Among its principal requests were for: a determination that the U.S. assault on Nicaragua violated international treaty obligations; a “cease and desist” order; and reparations for damages.

Since it understood from the start that its actions were legally indefensible, the Reagan administration simply announced that the World Court had no jurisdiction in the case, and that the U.S. would therefore decline to participate. But the court is itself the sole arbiter of jurisdiction, and it ruled in that Nicaragua’s petition would be accepted for review. The U.S. was bound to accept that ruling by virtue of its subscription to the U.N. Charter, Article 94 of which requires all signatories to honor decisions of the World Court. In addition, Article VI of the U.S. constitution states that international treaties ratified by Congress become the “supreme law of the land” until superseded by congressional action.

There *is* a procedure by which a nation, in rare cases, may withdraw its subjugation to the World Court. But it requires six months’ notice, a provision meant to preclude “a renunciation of any intention to withdraw our obligation in the face of a threatened legal proceeding”, as the Senate noted when it ratified the treaty in 1946. Avoiding its legal obligations is, of course, precisely what the Reagan administration was trying to do; the withdrawal was announced just three days before Nicaragua filed its complaint.

In an exquisite irony, the last nation to weasel out of World Court jurisdiction was Iran. In 1980 it resorted to that remedy in order to avoid a U.S. complaint about the hostage incident that had so much to do with the election of Ronald Reagan. On that occasion, Iran was everywhere condemned; the U.S. State Department expressed a nearly universal sentiment when it declared that the land of the ayatollahs had, by its withdrawal, “placed itself outside the boundaries of civilized nations”. The world’s reaction to the Reaganites’ uncivilized mimicry was similar but — given the realities of U.S. power and its wanton application — more subdued.

Guilty, guilty, guilty

The World Court issued its findings in June 1986. There were sixteen separate rulings, most of them going against the United States by votes of 12-3 or 14-1. It could hardly have been otherwise, since the U.S. lawlessness presented one of the most open-and-shut cases ever presented to the court.

Nicaragua’s case was considerably strengthened by the testimony of several well-placed witnesses, of which the most devastating were Edgar Chamorro and David MacMichael.

Edgar Chamorro is a member of the famous publishing family (see page 154) and a former Jesuit priest. Early disaffected with the Sandinista revolution, he had served briefly as information officer of the CIA-*contras*’ political front. In that

“I know of a village where all the draft-age men have been abducted [by the CIA-contras]; of an invalid who was killed ‘for the fun of it’; of women raped; of a body found with its eyes gouged out; of a 15-year-old girl who was forced to become a prostitute at a camp located on the Honduran side of the border. A girl of 16 was murdered, cut into pieces, and her remains scattered about. A truck with postal workers who had volunteered to pick coffee was attacked by mortar fire in an ambush.... They poured gasoline on the truck and set it on fire with the passengers still inside....”

— Rev. Jean Loison, French priest; testimony before World Court

capacity, he had occasion to observe at first-hand the CIA's supervision of the assault on Nicaragua.

Chamorro's testimony to the World Court constitutes a basic text on the methods of the CIA and its mercenaries. Among other things, it describes: how the CIA recruited and financed the *contras*; how it set up the political front solely for public relations purposes; the "recruitment" of peasants through terror and kidnapping; the bribing of Costa Rican and Honduran journalists to denounce the Sandinistas and praise the CIA-*contras*; the origins of the infamous "assassination manual", etc.

"The atrocities I heard about," testified Chamorro, "were not isolated incidents, but reflected a consistent pattern of behavior by our troops. There were unit commanders who openly bragged about their murders, mutilations, etc." The entire operation "was created by the CIA; it was supplied, equipped, armed and trained by the CIA; and its activities — both political and military — were directed and controlled by the CIA. Those Nicaraguans who were chosen (by the CIA) for leadership positions within the organization... were those who best demonstrated their willingness to unquestioningly follow the instructions of the CIA."

Another witness was former CIA analyst David MacMichael, who in 1984 quit in disgust at the Reagan administration's "hyperbole and deception". MacMichael, whose duties included preparing assessments of arms traffic from Nicaragua to El Salvador, told the court that his government had by 1981 developed a plan to destabilize Nicaragua. The idea was to start by provoking the Sandinistas into "hot pursuit across its international borders, a clampdown on civil liberties and, ultimately, the harassment of U.S. Embassy personnel in Managua". These preliminaries were to be followed by various "sanctions", leading up to invasion by a compliant Organization of American States.

MacMichael also testified that CIA analyses revealed only sporadic shipments of supplies from within Nicaragua to El

(Continued on page 372)

Excerpts from World Court Decision

THE COMPOSITION OF THE COURT was much the same as for cases previously decided in favor of the United States. All rulings were determined by votes of either fourteen to one, with the only dissenting vote coming from either the U.S. or the Japanese judge, or twelve to three, with the U.S. and Japan joined by Great Britain. The other judges were from Algeria, Argentina, Brazil, France (two judges), India, Italy, Nigeria, Norway, the People's Republic of China, Poland and Senegal. Some of the key rulings were:

"By 12 votes to 3, [the court] decides that the United States of America, by training, arming, equipping, financing and supplying the contra forces... has acted against the Republic of Nicaragua in breach of its obligation under customary international law not to intervene in the affairs of another state.

"By 12 votes to 3, decides that the United States of America, by certain attacks on Nicaraguan territory in 1983-84, has acted against the Republic of Nicaragua in breach of its obligation under customary international law not to use force against another state.

"By 12 votes to 3, decides that by laying mines in the internal or territorial waters of the Republic of Nicaragua during the first months of 1984, the U.S.A. has acted against the Republic of Nicaragua in breach of its obligation under customary international law not to use force against another state, not to intervene in its affairs, not to violate its sovereignty, and not to interrupt peaceful maritime commerce.

"By 12 votes to 3, decides that the U.S.A. is under a duty immediately to cease and refrain from all such acts as may constitute breaches of the foregoing legal obligations.

“By 12 votes to 3, decides that the U.S.A. is under an obligation to make reparation to the Republic of Nicaragua for all injury caused to Nicaragua by the breaches of obligations... enumerated above.”

The court also ruled that the funding labeled “humanitarian” obviously is not, and that ideological differences cannot justify aggression: “If the provision of ‘humanitarian assistance’ is to escape condemnation as an intervention in the internal affairs of Nicaragua, not only must it be limited to the purposes hallowed in the practice of the Red Cross, namely to ‘prevent and alleviate human suffering... to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being’; it must also, and above all, be given without discrimination to all in need in Nicaragua, not merely to the contras and their dependents....

“Adherence by a State to any particular doctrine does not constitute a violation of customary international law; to hold otherwise would make nonsense of the fundamental principle of State sovereignty, on which the whole of international law rests, and the freedom of choice of the political, social, economic and cultural system of a State... The Court cannot contemplate the creation of a new rule opening up a right of intervention by one State against another on the ground that the latter has opted for some particular ideology or political system.”

Further: “The protection of human rights, a strictly humanitarian objective, cannot be compatible with the mining of ports, the destruction of oil installations, or again with the training, arming, and equipping of the contras.... In international law there are no rules, other than such rules as may be accepted by the State concerned, by treaty or otherwise, whereby the level of armaments of a sovereign State can be limited, and this principle is valid for all States without exception.”

(Continued from page 369)

Salvador's guerillas, and that those consisted "principally of medicine, clothing and ammunition.... I became convinced that intelligence on the crucial question of the arms flow from Nicaragua to the Salvadoran rebels was being badly misused to support administration policy. In my opinion, analysis was strained and even distorted in the effort to convince those in Congress, the public, and the press who might have doubted the foundation of the policy."³⁸⁶

Other incriminating testimony came from a French priest and a former legal advisor to the U.S. Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, both of whom presented voluminous evidence of atrocities by the CIA-*contras*. Research on the economic impact of the destabilization campaign was conducted under the supervision of a U.S. Nobel laureate in economics.

Who cares?

The court's decision was greeted with widespread approval outside the United States. In Europe, on the seventh anniversary of the Sandinista revolution, a modern pantheon of famous authors, artists and other celebrities issued a joint appeal in support of the decision. Among those calling on the U.S. to honor its legal obligations were author Graham Greene, actress Julie Christie, composer Mikis Theodorakis, and Economics Nobel laureate Jan Tinbergen.

Naturally, the U.S. government was pleased not to comply. The State Department proclaimed that, "Today's opinion demonstrates what we have stated all along. The court is simply not equipped to deal with a case of this nature involving complex facts and intelligence information.... We consider our policy in Central America to be entirely consistent with international law."³⁸⁷

The legislative branch of government had already rendered its opinion on the case. Since the filing of Nicaragua's complaint in 1984, and the World Court's preliminary "cease and desist" order in that same year, Congress had ignored a

massive unauthorized military build-up in Central America and had approved over \$127 million in direct funding for the CIA-*contras*. On the very day in 1986 that the World Court issued its ruling against the United States, Congress approved \$100 million in military goods for the president's terrorists.

The mainstream press could not entirely ignore the issue. The *New York Times* treated the court's decision as one of three relatively low-level stories; the headline read, "World Court Supports Nicaragua after U.S. Rejected Judges Role". Competing for attention at the top of the front page were the lead article, "Reagan Is Likely to Use New Fund to Aid Pentagon", about some fairly typical fiscal legerdemain on behalf of modern warfare, and the equally significant item, "The Irish Uphold Ban on Divorce by 2-3 Margin".

The news from the World Court became deathly old in a matter of days, intruding sporadically over the following weeks in an occasional letter-to-the-editor or guest article. The majority of U.S. citizens effortlessly remained innocent of this legal trifle and, within a matter of weeks, the subject was seldom mentioned again in polite society.

THE OTHER AMERICA

The responses of Latin American nations to Nicaragua's predicament have been less uniformly supportive than those of Europe and Canada. This is hardly surprising, given the preponderance of reactionary governments in the region, and the giant shadow of the United States.

The few Latin alliances that Nicaragua *has* forged have been weakened by shifts in national politics and world markets. Venezuela was a strong supporter of the Sandinista revolution at first, but that changed abruptly when right-wing President Lusinchi came to power in 1984.

Mexico was also an important source of economic and diplomatic assistance until 1984, when a slump in the world market for its oil led to a fiscal crisis and desperate hopes for U.S. relief from its enormous debt burden. The Mexican

ernment has since scaled back its open defiance of U.S. policy in Central America, but the grassroots solidarity movement remains very strong and the government has done much to encourage it.

By 1988 the Sandinista revolution was openly embraced by only one Latin government besides Cuba, that of Peru. Celebrating the new constitution during a visit to Managua in 1987, President Alan Garcia delivered a rousing speech:

“We are fighting for the same goals: peoples’ sovereignty and freedom, the recovery of our historic unity, the vindication of our cultural heritage and true liberation.... When I see this land robbed of its men, its economy under siege, I feel a deep and genuine identification with your cause... the cause of the people, the poor of America.... The greater the aggression against you, the closer together we shall stand. In Peru, as in Nicaragua, we will never surrender, nor will we purchase indulgences by renouncing the honorable defense of Nicaragua.”³⁸⁸

While they might not share President Garcia’s lyrical identification with the poor, the majority of Latin American governments do share his interest in “the honorable defense of Nicaragua” against U.S. aggression. Apart from the dictatorships of Chile and Paraguay, and its client states in Central America, the United States’ penchant for military intervention has met with cold resistance.

“Why does the United States treat us Latin Americans with such a humiliating lack of respect?... For decades, the U.S. baffled us with its unconditional support for Central American dictators — so much so that many Latin Americans now suspect the word ‘democracy’. Those dictators created exclusive societies based on systematic injustice — breeding grounds for explosive discontent.... Our problems smoulder, then burst into flame, but one thing remains constant: the unbearable paternalism of the United States and its apparent distrust of any Latin American with a sense of self-respect. ”

— Carlos Andres Perez, President of Venezuela, 1974-79³⁸⁹

Notes one Latin observer, "The Sandinistas are not popular in Latin America.... What creates feelings of sympathy toward them are Reagan's policies — the support of the *contras*, the attempts [sic] to mine Nicaragua's harbors, the trade embargo. The U.S. is repeating with Nicaragua the counterproductive policies it has applied against Cuba."

Rebuking the Reaganites

In consequence, there has been a resurgence of resentment at the habitual bullying of the United States, giving rise to some embarrassing moments for the Leader of the Free World. The U.S. Vice President and Secretary of State were loudly booed at a 1985 reception for hemispheric leaders in Brazil; Daniel Ortega was greeted with warm applause. Shortly thereafter in Uruguay, Ortega received a similar demonstration of support from the general public: "Who received [U.S. Secretary of State] Shultz when he arrived in Montevideo? Two Mercedes and 600 bodyguards. Who received Ortega? Three hundred thousand people."³⁹⁰

Resentment at U.S. intervention has been expressed in a variety of ways, most notably by refusing to be drawn into the crusade against Nicaragua. The U.S. government has on several occasions asserted that Latin America was solidly behind its Central America policy, only to be bluntly contradicted.

In 1986, for example, a speech delivered by President Reagan urged congressional funding of the CIA-*contras* by claiming that both Brazil and Colombia approved the proposal, since both were said to



Jaime Perozo

A young Nicaraguan browses a children's library donated by a Venezuelan solidarity committee.

have been subjected to subversion instigated by the Sandinistas. In an unusual public rebuke, Brazil issued an immediate denial and requested an official explanation of Reagan's unfounded assertion, certifying that Nicaragua "has at no time intervened in Brazil's internal affairs".

Colombia's foreign minister termed the U.S. administration "intransigent and extreme... assaulting peace and international law". Its president added, "No one in Latin America likes the White House proposal.... I know we can get more through negotiation."³⁹¹

By 1987, opposition to Reaganite policies had become so solid that the Latin American Economic System (SELA) of 26 nations passed a resolution of support for Nicaragua and repeated its condemnation of the U.S. trade embargo. Guatemala's showcase civilian government risked the wrath of the dominant army by canceling Nicaragua's \$200 million debt and establishing a special commission to facilitate future trade. Even Honduras started to emit faint signs of independence, as resentment and anxiety at the presence of the CIA-*contras* spread among the populace.

The wrath of Latin America

Behind all this tweaking of the giant's nose are two fundamental concerns: a yearning for independence from Yankee hegemony, and mounting disquiet about the ultimate consequences of U.S. military intervention in the region.

Carlos Fuentes, author and former Mexican Ambassador to France, contends that, "Things now are certainly not as they were 30 years ago, when Jacobo Arbenz was overthrown in Guatemala.... If Nicaragua were to be invaded by U.S. troops, for instance, you'd see all of Latin America rising up in great anger.... You would see young Argentines, Peruvians, Columbians and Mexicans rushing to Central America to fight there.... We would see international brigades, like in the Spanish Civil War."³⁹²

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U.S. Diplomatic Isolation

“Nicaragua — Has Anything Changed?”

*Democratic Study Group
U.S. House of Representatives*

The Reagan administration has repeatedly claimed that there is strong private support among our Latin American allies for its policies of aiding the *contras*, despite their public disagreement with Administration policies....

This contention has been directly contradicted by the findings of three congressmen — Representatives Barnes, Richardson and Slattery — who recently spoke privately with the foreign ministers of 12 Latin American nations involved in the Contadora peace negotiations. The congressmen reported that they were unable to find any evidence of Latin American support for the Administration’s claims. In fact, they found that the Latin foreign ministers are even more strongly opposed to *contra* aid in private conversations than they have stated in public....

In effect, the Administration’s *contra* aid program enjoys no public or private support from the Latin American democracies. In addition, our allies in Western Europe have become increasingly outspoken in their objections to the Administration’s policies....

The worldwide lack of support among U.S. allies can also be seen from the following:

- Not one country has joined the U.S. economic embargo of Nicaragua imposed last May by President Reagan;
- Both the President of Colombia and the President-elect of Costa Rica, which borders Nicaragua, have publicly called on the Administration to stop aiding the *contras*; and

(continued on next page)

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Whether or not Nicaragua can, in fact, rely on that breadth of support against a U.S. invasion is by no means certain. But Fuentes does strike a note that has resounded throughout Latin America for decades.

Memories of Vietnam

Anxiety about the consequences of U.S. military intervention has energized a succession of peace initiatives. With one possible exception, all have foundered on the Reaganites' determination to impose their own conception of a final solution on Nicaragua.

Apart from the resentment which it inevitably arouses, the Yankees' imperial strut is not quite as impressive as it once was. For one thing, the post-Vietnam syndrome is alive and well in Latin America: To one of many arrogant chidings by Elliott Abrams, President Arias of Costa Rica responded, "I am not forgetting history, but Mr. Abrams is. He should remember the history of Vietnam; he is forgetting it."³⁹³

There is also an acute awareness that the conditions which gave rise to Nicaragua's revolution are hardly unique.

U.S. Diplomatic Isolation (cont.)

- Our European allies and Japan have refused to endorse Administration policies and have called on the Administration to support the efforts of the Contadora nations....

The Reagan Administration is pursuing aid to the contras without the support of any Latin American democracy or of any Western democracy. The Contadora nations and the four 'support nations'... represent 300 million people and every democracy in Latin America except Bolivia and Ecuador.

— *April 9, 1986*

While elitist governments might not find anything to admire in the Sandinista revolution, most of their subjects certainly could.

Accordingly, there is a widespread fear that the persistent failure of the CIA's destabilization program might lead to direct intervention by U.S. forces. That, in turn, could ignite an uprising throughout Central America, and quite possibly beyond.

Alarmed at that prospect, and despairing at U.S. intransigence, Latin American leaders of every political inclination have made numerous attempts to nurture a peaceful resolution of Central American conflicts, especially by seeking a *modus vivendi* with the Sandinista revolution.

Nothing so pacific was ever included on the agenda of the Reagan administration, which was determined from the outset to get rid of the Sandinistas, not to negotiate with them. But some congressmen and a great many citizens of the United States *will* keep nattering about peace and the like; political realities demand that such sentiments be accorded due lip service. A former congressman explains that, "When any administration wants to obtain something essential for fighting a war, it opens the bidding by showing how much it really wants peace."³⁹⁴

Until 1987, the Reaganites managed to fend off the threat of peace by making demands that Nicaragua could not possibly accept — e.g., the reinstatement of *La Guardia Nacional* — and by sabotaging nascent peace agreements. As for the CIA-*contra* terror campaign, claims the White House, that's just to "force the Sandinistas to the negotiating table".

While that diplomatic quadrille was being executed, Nicaragua's repeated efforts to resolve its differences with the United States were being rejected or ignored — as when priest and Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto journeyed to Washington in hopes of an audience with Secretary of State George Shultz. Having reacted to a faint hint that Shultz was finally prepared to start talking, Rev. D'Escoto hung around the State Department for five days, only to be told by a clerk that there

was no point in his loitering any longer; Shultz had left town, because "he had to play golf in Atlanta."³⁹⁵

And so it went. Nicaragua has volunteered scores of peace initiatives, including "consideration of and respect for all the legitimate security concerns that the United States has raised, either in regard to itself or to the region", only to be met with unrelenting arrogance and hostility from the Reaganites.³⁹⁶

A U.S. priest familiar with this anti-diplomatic history concludes, "Formal statements notwithstanding, [the Reagan administration] has consistently refused to seriously undertake negotiated approaches in Central America. The United States seems prepared to use diplomacy only if it will achieve what could not be achieved by force. That is, the United States is prepared to negotiate only... the capitulation of the Sandinista government to U.S. hegemony."³⁹⁷

The peace of Contadora

Defying the Reaganites and their preference for war in Central America, Latin leaders have on several occasions come perilously close to promoting peace in the region. The most broadly based effort was the Contadora initiative, named after the Panamanian island where the governments of Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Panama met in early 1983 to work out a proposal that would be satisfactory to all concerned.

The original four members of the Contadora Group, as it came to be known, were joined in 1985 by Peru, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay. Together, the eight nations comprise 80% of Latin America's population. Their efforts were emphatically endorsed by nearly the entire membership of the United Nations. More concretely, Canada, France, Belgium and other U.S. allies offered their services for the implementation of any agreement that might be concluded.

The first Contadora proposal was offered in 1984. Among the more significant of its 21 points were the provisions that all five Central America nations: forbid the use of their territories for any effort to destabilize their neighbors; limit the

size of their armies and arsenals to agreed-upon levels; prohibit foreign advisors, war games or military bases on their territory; promote regional communication and co-operation on security problems so as to minimize the possibility of war; and refrain from supporting insurrections against neighboring governments. Implementation of the agreement would be monitored by an international commission.

Much to the Reaganites' surprise and dismay, all parties agreed to the proposal. The agreement presented a serious threat to the plans of the White House warriors. For one thing, it demonstrated the Sandinistas' willingness to negotiate, making it all the more difficult to portray them as the belligerent scourge of Central America.

Worse, the agreement required the U.S. to dismantle its enormous military complex in Honduras, shut down the CIA-*contra* terror campaign, and withdraw its support for the military rulers of El Salvador and Guatemala.

"Applied across the board, the Contadora proposals would frustrate U.S. policy objectives. If the *contras* were deprived of their sanctuaries in Costa Rica and Honduras, their supplies from the U.S. and Honduran armies and their CIA funding, they would cease to be a serious threat.... The Salvadoran insurgency's main strength, on the other hand, is internal. It is the government and army that are propped up by the United States."³⁹⁸

Trumping peace

In order to prevent such a disagreeable outcome, El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica were instructed to rescind their consent to the draft proposal and introduce a completely new set of demands more in keeping with Reaganite policy.

The three little client states obediently carried out their assignment. It was back to square one. "These are little tiny countries," observed an anti-*contra* U.S. congressman. "We're pouring huge sums into them, and they can't afford to thumb their nose at the President."³⁹⁹

The crisis averted, a National Security Council memorandum conveyed the glad tidings: "We have trumped the latest

Nicaraguan/Mexican efforts to rush signature of an unsatisfactory Contadora agreement... although the situation remains fluid and requires careful management... We have effectively blocked Contadora group efforts to impose the second draft of the Revised Contadora Act. Following intensive U.S. consultations with El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica, the Central Americans submitted a counter-draft... Contadora spokesmen have become notably subdued recently on prospects for an early signing."⁴⁰⁰

At the same time, the White House stepped up its pressure on the Contadora nations. Mexico, which had been Nicaragua's most energetic champion, got the message and reduced its support to a diffident murmur. Panama adopted a similarly prudent attitude. The problem of Venezuela was solved by the succession of a right-wing government.

Only Colombia resisted the strain of U.S. opposition. For many months, President Betancur kept the Contadora process alive almost single-handedly, and his outspoken opposition to Reaganite policies continued to displease. A typical example: "I firmly believe that any foreign support to guerilla groups, whatever the origin, is clearly in opposition to the prevailing doctrine in Latin America regarding foreign intervention in the internal affairs of our continent.... I haven't spoken with any Latin American leader who feels differently."⁴⁰¹

Betancur's persistence was rewarded in 1985, when Peru, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay signed on. The first official pronouncement of the reconstituted group of eight noted that, "If a peaceful and negotiated solution is not found to the conflict, it will affect the potential and the social stability of all of Latin America. In the search for such solutions, time is a fundamental factor."⁴⁰²

Led by Colombia and Peru, the eight nations began to act on that sense of urgency. The peace negotiations were reactivated and, in an extraordinary display of united purpose, the foreign ministers of all eight countries descended on Washington in early 1986 to lobby against the latest White House request to Congress for CIA-*contra* funding. Although emphatically ignored by the Reagan administration, their efforts

were endorsed by the European Common Market and Japan, and were credited with an influential role in the subsequent rejection by Congress of that particular *contra* aid request.

The Contadora process was further legitimated when the secretaries general of the United Nations and the Organization of American States — the latter in rare defiance of the USA — came forward with an unprecedented offer of a combined peace-keeping force. Nicaragua accepted; the other four Central American countries followed orders and rejected it.

Undeterred, the two secretaries general and the foreign ministers of the Contadora Group visited all five capitols to seek acceptance of the most recent draft agreement: “Nicaragua welcomed their visit; Washington’s satellites — Honduras, Costa Rica and El Salvador — ignored or criticized it. The Reagan administration worked frantically to undercut and discredit the initiative, while the major U.S. media, along with most of official Washington, appeared not to notice or to understand its significance.”⁴⁰³

Unwelcome intrusion

Naturally, the Reaganites were much offended by the intrusion of the UN and OAS leaders; the State Department was prompted to express its “deepest concern” at their mission. As for the Contadora initiative, it was once again creating panic in the White House which, with sublime irony, deplored “the exacerbation of interventionist policies and actions by countries from outside the Central American area”.

Exacerbating or not, the Contadora Group seemed to have a peaceful conclusion within its grasp. A State Department memo warned that, “We need to develop an active diplomacy now to head off efforts at Latin American solidarity aimed against the U.S. and our allies, whether they are sponsored by the [Contadora] support group, the Cubans, or the Nicaraguans. We need to find a way to turn pressure they bring to bear on us or our friends to our advantage.”⁴⁰⁴

One element of the resulting “active diplomacy” was the assignment of Philip Habib as a Special Ambassador to Central America. As a former colleague of Henry Kissinger, the administration assumed that Habib would serve its bellicose purposes. He was also highly regarded by liberals and moderates in Congress, and his appointment would therefore help to mute complaints about too little diplomacy and too many guns.

But a strange thing happened on the way to the negotiating table: Habib apparently took his publicly declared role as peace-maker seriously. By April 1986, he had worked out a tentative agreement which committed the U.S. to disbanding the CIA-*contras* in exchange for Nicaragua’s divestment of its foreign military advisors and much of its arsenal.

When a letter from Habib outlining the terms of the agreement leaked out, right-wingers in Congress and elsewhere erupted in fury. The administration immediately amputated Habib’s handiwork, declaring that he had been “in error and imprecise”, and vociferously reasserted its devotion to the CIA-*contras*. Once again, the three little client states in Central America were instructed to back away from an agreement to which they had already consented, and once again they did as they were told.

Dutiful civil servant that he was, Habib took the heat for his error and imprecision — even though the offending letter had originally been approved by his administrative superior, Elliott Abrams — and could be heard months later denouncing the agreement that he had labored to produce; eventually, he resigned. A congressional observer of Habib’s futile exercise noted that, “In all the months he held his post, he wasn’t permitted to meet at any time, in any place, with a representative of the Sandinista government. His problem was that he really wanted peace.”⁴⁰⁵

Much the same thing happened to an earnest ambassador to Honduras who was fired in 1986 for permitting that government to seek negotiations with the Sandinistas. “I always thought that we meant what we said,” lamented John Ferch

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The 'Civilized' Peace of the CIA

The new Directorate [of the CIA-*contras*] had to make inroads with the press. This was done by creating events that could be covered as news, even if the content of those events was questionable. The first public relations campaign to construct a press event involved the drafting and promoting of a 'Peace Initiative'. It was released on January 13, 1983. The CIA instructed us step-by-step how to draft it. They wanted us to look democratic and reasonable — 'civilized' was the word they used. They suggested that we come up with an appealing plan, with points that anyone could accept. But they wanted us to include some clause or point that would be entirely unacceptable to the Sandinistas, so that when we proposed it to them, they would have to reject it. I asked why we should propose something we knew they would reject; I couldn't see where that would get us. The rejection, the CIA agent told me, was what we wanted. It was important to make the Sandinistas look intransigent, and to be able to blame them for the failure to reach a democratic or political accord with the *contras*.

After the peace proposal had been drafted, we had something to take around to the press and to the Central American governments. We could create a whole series of press events and arguments centered on the peace initiative and on the Sandinistas' failure to accept it.

The CIA gave top priority to these 'diplomatic' moves, which were nothing more than an attempt to neutralize the Contadora proposal. Ours was an unacceptable, shabby proposal, a parallel document without substance, whose purpose was to confuse the public.

— Edgar Chamorro, former official of CIA-*contras*⁴⁰⁶

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afterward. "We wanted pressures so we could negotiate.... They're going for something else. If it is not negotiations, it is really a push on the military side."⁴⁰⁷

That conclusion was seconded by a State Department official who was hounded out of his job by Elliott Abrams for "not being on the team", after submitting unflattering assessments of the CIA-*contras'* military capability. The administration has been so relentlessly antagonistic toward all peace initiatives, testified Francis McNeil to a congressional committee in early 1987, that, "At this time, no one in Latin America believes we are seriously interested in a real peace settlement. The fear in Washington is that negotiations would lead to the consolidation of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua."⁴⁰⁸

Solo Arias

The Habib episode convinced the Contadora group that it was futile to pursue its project in the face of U.S. intransigence. The initiative petered out, with no apparent hope of revival.

But at least one Central American nation besides Nicaragua was determined to give peace another chance. Concerned about the distinct possibility of a regional war, President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica revived the moribund process in early 1987. By some accounts, he was also following a personal agenda, with an eye on the leadership of the United Nations and/or a Nobel Peace Prize. Brokering a peace agreement in Central America would serve both ambitions.

His fresh start was perfectly timed, coinciding with the disintegration of the Reagan administration. Its troubles began to accumulate in late 1986, when the Democratic Party regained control of the Senate and, thereby, comfortable majorities in both houses of Congress.

But it was the protracted ignominy of the Iran/Contragate scandal that most severely clipped the wings of the Reagan war eagle. As noted above (cf. "Political fallout", page 351),

the public's disapproval stemmed primarily from disgust at the administration's perfidious dealings with Iran's Muslim fundamentalists. Nor did it help that political necessity compelled Reagan's handlers to concede the painfully obvious — that The Leader of the Free World was a bumbling incompetent whose primary function had always been to read scripts with a sincere and reassuring demeanor. At one point, the doddering figurehead was reduced to defending himself by saying that he would have to ask his staff what he had said at a crucial White House meeting.

By November of 1987, even the *New York Times* could detect which way the wind was blowing: "The Congressional report on the Iran-contra affair is not likely to do significant new harm to the Reagan Presidency, because the damage is already done. The affair knocked President Reagan off his feet a year ago."⁴⁰⁹

The presidential stature was further diminished in late 1987 by setbacks in the domestic political arena: two attempts to fill a Supreme Court vacancy with a judicial reactionary were defeated; and a devastating stock market collapse, attributed to gross economic mismanagement, evoked fears of another Great Depression and eliminated the Reaganites' last remaining claim to competence.

All this was known in Costa Rica, of course, and it provided Arias with more room to maneuver than any U.S. vassal had previously enjoyed. One Latin American observer concluded, "I have little doubt that this [Iran/Contragate] affair is leading to a certain rupture between the Reagan administration and some of its Central American allies. This is in part due to the perception by many Central Americans that, since the Democrats gained control of Congress, and Irangate, the Reagan administration is basically crippled."

That assessment was echoed by an adviser to President Arias: "It is very likely that what will emerge from all of this is a loose alliance between Costa Rica, Guatemala and Nicaragua, which will push for a settlement with or without El Salvador. Honduras's position will also probably become less

pro-United States.... As for us, the decay of the Reagan administration has changed a lot of things. We know the administration has to put up with us speaking badly of their policies and still give us aid."⁴¹⁰

That analysis underestimated the Reaganites' willingness to punish Costa Rica for its delinquency (see page 116). But, in the end, the White House was unable to forestall what came to be known as the "Arias peace plan".

Momentum toward a final agreement began to pick up in the summer of 1987. As the climactic moment approached, the Reaganites threw up their final obstruction in the form of a hastily contrived alternative to the Arias proposal. The administration's alternative, containing several provisions which Nicaragua could never accept, was lobbed into the midst of the five presidents of Central America just one day before they were due to meet in August. The intent was to remind El Salvador and Honduras, especially, of the side their guns were buttered on, and to confuse the negotiations into futility.

To nearly universal astonishment, this rather typical act of sabotage had just the opposite of its intended effect. The Reaganites, apparently oblivious to the ramifications of the Iran/Contragate mess and the plummeting market for Yankee arrogance, had finally overplayed their hand. The foreign ministers followed the lead of President Arias, ignored the U.S. counter-proposal and unanimously approved the peace plan.

Terms of the agreement

Building on the Contadora proposals, the agreement called for:

- an end to hostilities and a general amnesty in those countries experiencing armed conflict (i.e., all except Costa Rica)
- "national dialogues" between the five governments and their *unarmed* opponents
- an end to restrictions on civil and political liberties
- regional discussions on arms reduction and mutual security

- national and local elections in accordance with each country's constitution
- a 1988 election for a Central America Parliament
- supervision by representatives of the Contadora nations, the UN, the OAS, and National Reconciliation Commissions in all five countries
- an end to support for insurgencies by all governments within and outside the region.

For Nicaragua, the last of these was the essential component. Although the prohibition of outside interference applied to Taiwan and the Soviet Union, among others, its greatest impact would clearly be on U.S. maintenance of the CIA-*contras* and the ruling elites of its client states.

In exchange for dissolution of the president's terrorists, Nicaragua would be required to suspend its state of emergency and grant amnesty to the CIA-*contras*. Since that was precisely what the Sandinistas had been trying to negotiate for years, and had already conceded on numerous occasions (an amnesty program had been in force since 1983) they were perfectly willing to accept.

White House counter-attack

Although it was somewhat short on implementation details, the "Arias plan" was greeted by the international community with a collective sigh of relief. Even West Germany's conservative government, so sympathetic with the Reagan White House in other matters, expressed its approval.

A final bitter pill of world opinion was shoved down the administration's throat when the Nobel Peace Prize committee awarded its 1987 prize to President Arias. The bracing effect of that development on the undulating spine of Congress was palpable.

But the Reaganites were nothing if not persistent in their eagerness to promote war in other countries. They were not about to succumb to the threat of peace without a fight.

The White House declared the Arias plan to be “fatally flawed”, and Reagan was trotted out for a prominent photo opportunity with the political front of the CIA-*contras*. Congress was put on notice that it would soon be receiving a request for \$270 million of decidedly lethal terrorist funding.

The CIA frantically resupplied its *contras* in the field in order to fortify them against any subsequent ban on such shipments. For that purpose, a new supply base was established on Swan Island in Honduras, from which CIA planes delivered over 100 tons of supplies per month.⁴¹¹ In order to demonstrate their fighting mettle to vacillating congressmen, the terrorists were instructed to step up their attacks. They stole their finest hour by breaking a Christmas truce — to which the Sandinistas had reluctantly agreed at the urging of Cardinal Obando — with a brief slaughter of civilians at the remote mining town of Siuna.⁴¹²

The CIA’s network of radio stations sought to alarm Nicaraguan peasants about fictitious evils of the peace plan — for example, that it required all farms distributed under the land reform program to be returned to their former Somocista owners. Reagan chimed in with words of encouragement, urging his “freedom fighters” to continue the battle and ignore the peace initiative.

On the eve of their negotiations with the Nicaraguan government, Miskito *contra* leaders were offered bribes of \$3000 per month to resume hostilities. When the charismatic leader, Brooklyn Rivera decided to make his peace with the Sandinistas, he was refused entry to Honduras to speak with Miskito associates, and other leaders still on the CIA payroll were instructed to publicly repudiate his authority. “Basically,” concluded Rivera, “a sector of the U.S. administration is pressuring, threatening some of the leadership to denounce what we are doing, or to expel groups negotiating, or something even worse than that.”⁴¹³

Back in the Home of the Brave, the CIA-*contra* political front — once again reconstituted, this time as “The Nicaraguan Resistance”, after yet another wave of defections — announced

plans to solicit more funds from the anti-communist faithful for “non-lethal” purposes. It was as though the Iran/Contra-gate scandal had never occurred and the Neutrality Act never decreed. On the contrary, two prominent Republican senators made a well-publicized show of hefty contributions to the worthy cause.⁴¹⁴

Shifting the focus

In addition to sustaining the terrorists, this flurry of activity was clearly intended as a warning to the four U.S. client states that had so unexpectedly defied their master by signing on to the Arias proposal in August. The unmistakable message was: You can sign all the peace agreements you want, but Uncle Sam is going to continue the assault.

Within days of the peace agreement, Elliott Abrams & Co. were hard at work twisting arms into more belligerent attitudes. At one point, Abrams and the president’s National Security Adviser made the rounds of Central America with a thinly veiled threat: the presidents of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica were warned that, either they find some way to support the CIA-*contras*, or “there will not be a sudden surge of interest in things Central American or other kinds of aid.”⁴¹⁵

President Cerezo of Guatemala did not appear to be greatly moved by Abrams’ huffing and puffing. Arias was somewhat more malleable, escalating his rhetorical attacks on the Sandinistas, but also pointing out from time to time — in a respectfully oblique manner — that continued U.S. support of the CIA-*contras* was not doing much for the cause of peace.

As so often in the past, the civilian governments of Honduras and El Salvador proved to be the most subservient to the Reaganites’ will. They were especially helpful in shifting the focus of attention from the region as a whole to Nicaragua in particular — driven as much by a desire to obscure their own deficiencies as by deference to the Yankees.

Blind-siding the puppets

The strategy that eventually crawled out from the wreckage of the Reagan administration was to depict the Sandinistas as “untrustworthy”. Assisted by fierce denunciations of Managua from San Jose, San Salvador and Tegucigalpa, the Reaganites sought to redefine the peace plan in accordance with its own agenda.

They maintained, for instance, that no progress toward peace was possible until Nicaragua first revoked the national state of emergency. This condition contradicted the principle of simultaneity implicit in the Arias plan; i.e. all steps by all parties were to be taken more or less at the same time. (Exactly how that was to be accomplished was to be the subject of negotiations.)

The White House also demanded that the Sandinistas negotiate directly with the CIA-*contra* leadership. But this was not required under the proposed agreement — only unarmed opposition groups qualified for direct negotiations — and it was by now obvious that the president’s terrorists were not exactly free to speak for themselves.

The administration’s attempt to short-circuit the Arias plan in August had been so hastily contrived that, “It fell to Abrams to spring the news on the [*contra* political front] that night, after the deal had been struck.... ‘All this time we’ve been laboring to demonstrate that the *contras* are more than U.S. proxies,’ lamented one administration official. ‘And then we blind-side them publicly and send them packing. We made the Resistance look like nothing more than puppets.’”⁴¹⁶ Months later, with the Arias plan in motion, the puppets were still dancing on their strings: “The *contra* response to the Sandinista cease-fire plan is being drafted by U.S. officials.”⁴¹⁷

As Daniel Ortega put it, there did not seem to be much point to negotiating with the CIA-*contras*, since it was necessary “to deal with the ringmaster, not the clowns.”

Another extraneous demand by the White House was that Nicaragua release all prisoners from its jails as part of the amnesty requirement. But the Contadora amnesty provision

referred only to armed insurgents who first surrendered their weapons and agreed to participate peacefully within a constitutional framework.

Other contrived preconditions were that Nicaragua, alone, hold a new national election before the legally scheduled date of 1990, stop accepting military assistance from the Soviet bloc, unilaterally reduce the size of its army, and expel all foreign military advisors — none of which was called for by the proposed agreement.

Trouble in the House

Failure to comply with these arbitrary demands was said to constitute clear evidence that the Sandinistas had no intention of “democratizing” Nicaragua. Only additional “pressure” from the CIA-*contras* would make that possible, argued the Reaganites, and they returned to Congress for another siege of the national treasury.

When Jim Wright succeeded Tip O’Neill in 1987 as Speaker of the House in the 100th Congress, the Reagan administration expected its difficulties with the legislative branch to abate somewhat. In this it was sorely disappointed.

Wright numbered many Spanish-Americans among his constituents. He was fluent in Spanish, had traveled widely throughout Latin America, and was familiar with its history. What’s more, as a representative of the “redneck” state of Texas, no one could accuse him of being that *bête noire* of the anti-communist crusade, an “Eastern Liberal”. As a result, when he chose to take an active role in the search for peace, he was better insulated from the fiery rhetoric of the Cold War than was his predecessor.

With delicious irony, it was a bit of cleverness by the Reagan administration that made it possible for Wright to assume a leadership role in the peace process. In its frantic efforts to head off the Arias plan in August, the White House had invited the Speaker to co-author an alternative proposal. “But in fact, officials conceded privately, the administration’s

motives were more than a little disingenuous.... The real goal was to expose the Sandinistas' intransigence and thereby increase the prospects for continued contra aid.... The object, acknowledged another official, was to 'put Congress in a corner. The whole purpose of this plan is to facilitate contra funding down the line'." ⁴¹⁸

But when the five Central American presidents astonished the world by accepting the Arias plan, Wright lined up solidly behind it and informed the White House that it would be "counter-productive" to seek additional aid for the CIA-*contras*. The camel's nose was well within the tent; soon he would be sitting down at the negotiating table, with or without his original host.

The Speaker as diplomat

For years, the White House had been seducing congressional moderates into funding the CIA-*contras* by promising to seek a negotiated settlement of its differences with Nicaragua. Of course, the Reaganites never had any intention of keeping that promise; they ignored, sabotaged or unilaterally withdrew from every one of the numerous diplomatic openings presented to them (cf. pages ff.).

But political necessity dictated that the administration continue to pretend a sincere interest in negotiations. That pretense was put to the test by Jim Wright in the autumn of 1987, as he sought to demonstrate just how easy it was to deal with the Sandinistas. In essence, he took upon himself the diplomatic function that the administration had systematically neglected.

It was an extremely unusual role for a congressional leader: Theoretically, Congress is empowered only to pass judgment on U.S. diplomacy, not initiate it. But it was made possible by the convergence of several factors: the coy invitation from the White House for Wright to participate in "the search for peace" (i.e. its attempt to sabotage the Arias proposal); the unexpected agreement of the Central American presidents to the Arias plan; the confusion which that caused to Elliott Abrams & Co.; and the general disintegration of the

Reagan administration resulting from the Iran/Contragate scandal and other disasters.

Wright filled the ensuing policy vacuum by energetically promoting the peace process. In November, during a visit by Daniel Ortega to Washington for a gathering of the Organization of American States, the Speaker arranged a meeting with the Nicaraguan president and Cardinal Obando at the Vatican Embassy. The three emerged with an 11-point cease-fire plan, drafted by the Sandinistas, and endorsed in principle by both Obando and Wright.

"This must really be ruining Ronald Reagan's breakfast," remarked one congressman, as he watched this extraordinary tableau being enacted on television.⁴¹⁹ The administration was all righteous outrage at what it styled the speaker's usurpation of an executive function. As the jurisdictional dispute raged on, Wright calmly endured the wrath of the Reaganites and the sententious cluckings of the mainstream press. The subtitle of a *Newsweek* article was fairly typical: "Ortega tries to rope Washington into cease-fire talks and the speaker of the House muscles in". But in the process, Wright was given ample opportunity to defend his actions and, in so doing, managed to convey some information and ideas which the White House would have preferred the public not to hear.

After a scolding in the White House for his meeting with Obando and Ortega — which Elliott Abrams had in vain tried to persuade the Vatican Embassy to abort — Wright declared his belief that there were some "in the State Department and elsewhere who don't want the peace plan to work, who are literally terrorized by the prospect that peace may break out....

"I regard the relationship between the executive and legislative branches as a co-equal relationship, and I think it is my responsibility to uphold the dignity of the legislative branch.... If you want to know why people in Central America want to come and talk to me, I don't know; but I suppose it may be because I treat them as equals. I don't look upon them as inferiors.... I think the administration sometimes gives the unfortunate impression that it looks upon people in Central

America as inferiors, by scorning them, lecturing them, holding them up to ridicule, refusing to see them.”⁴²⁰

The Reaganites were not used to that sort of bold challenge from Congress, and it was an index of just how significantly the balance of power had shifted toward the legislative branch. Although Wright continued to receive abuse for his “meddling”, the net result was some breathing space for the peace initiative. The Arias plan was still on track, however tenuously; the Sandinistas had been given an opportunity to demonstrate their willingness to negotiate; and the White House had demonstrated that its only interest was in causing more death and destruction. As a consequence, the administration decided to indefinitely postpone its request for \$270 million in more blood money for the CIA-*contras*, and Wright confidently proclaimed that the president’s terrorists were finished in Congress (but not quite, as it turned out).

Moderate anxieties

Wright’s active involvement in the peace process had given heart to congressional liberals. But “moderates”, especially his Democratic colleagues from southern states, were still dreading the prospect of once again being forced by the president to declare themselves for or against his “freedom fighters”, and remained susceptible to any device that would enable them to straddle the issue.

It helped, somewhat, that Arias had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in October. But even that was not sufficient to fortify the courage of Democratic moderates in the House of Representatives. With a nervous eye on their anti-communist images, they refused to line up behind Wright and other opponents of CIA-*contra* aid. The delicate condition of the moderates made it possible for the White House to extort a trickle of continued support for the terrorists, and even to recapture some lost momentum — no matter that it blatantly violated the letter and spirit of the peace initiative.

Twice in the closing months of 1987, Congress approved additional funding for the CIA-*contras*, to be distributed by

those well-known humanitarian agencies, the CIA and the Department of Defense. Just under \$7 million was approved in October. As usual, the “non-lethal” funds were used to deliver weapons and ammunition to the president’s terrorists: “There’s no question that they’re delivering both humanitarian aid and lethal weapons on the same flight,” reported a congressional aide.⁴²¹

To register its opinion of that familiar duplicity, Congress approved another \$8.1 million of “humanitarian” and \$6.3 million of unequivocally lethal aid, just before the Christmas holidays. This gesture of peace and good will was facilitated by attaching it to a \$606 billion appropriations bill for the federal government. Reagan was instructed to warn that he would veto the entire bill unless the terrorist funds were approved by Congress. That would shut down the entire federal government and it appeared likely that, given the general public’s sophistication in such matters, Congress would end up with the blame for Reagan’s intransigence.

The House of Representatives accepted the president’s challenge, and approved a compromise that catered to moderate sensibilities — a trifling \$5.5 million in “non-lethal” aid. The Senate, however, stood by its president and voted for the full \$14.4 million. The bill was then referred to a House-Senate conference committee, and the resulting “compromise” was that the Reaganites got everything they asked for, including the military funds and the continued involvement of the CIA. Merry Christmas.

The Sephardic connection

An important influence on this vote for more war — despite Jim Wright’s confident prediction of the *contras*’ demise, just one month earlier — was the political effect of the Miranda hoax engineered by Elliott Abrams (see “The Art of Media Manipulation”, pages 426 ff.). That episode may help to explain the odd behavior of Democratic senators such as Daniel Inouye of Hawaii.

Inouye had served as co-chairman of the Iran/Contragate committee during the summer of 1987 and was largely responsible for its pathetic outcome. He was also a prime mover of the above-noted conference committee's approval of the \$14.4 billion in terrorist funds. He forced the issue, said Inouye, because the poor chaps were in desperate need of fresh supplies — this, despite evidence from his Democratic colleagues that the CIA-*contras* had enough stockpiled to last them at least another six months.

Then, having seen to that little matter, the good senator pushed through something really important — \$8 million to subsidize a school for North African Jews residing in Paris. This was done at the behest of Inouye's friend and campaign contributor, a New York real estate developer on the board of an organization formed to assist Sephardic Jews. What that has to do with Nicaragua and the U.S. federal budget is suggested by the reaction of a House member of the conference committee: "Just what we needed. It doesn't make any sense, except that Dan Inouye wanted it badly."⁴²²

And that's how the CIA-*contras* got their Christmas bonus, the Sephardic Jews of Paris got their educational subsidy, and the Reaganites were given reason to hope that the new year would offer fresh opportunities for the destruction of Nicaragua.

In early January 1988, a seasoned observer could report that, "Only a few weeks ago, renewed contra funding appeared doomed, a casualty of the Iran-contra affair. But prospects for approval have been on the upswing since last month's revelations by a ranking Nicaraguan defector.... Evidence that the administration had regained the initiative came Dec. 22, when Congress passed an omnibus appropriations resolution for fiscal 1988 containing more than \$14 million in supplies and services for the *contras* through February, nearly double the originally intended amount."⁴²³

Diplomatic poker

While congressional moderates and conservatives were conspiring with the administration against the peace initiative, the government of Nicaragua was struggling to keep it alive. The “Arias plan” presented an opportunity to dismantle the terrorist component of the CIA destabilization program and, in the game of diplomatic poker played through late 1987 and early 1988, the Sandinistas were prepared to use every card and bargaining chip at their disposal.

There were some new factors working in favor of the peace process — Jim Wright’s active intercession, for one. For another, the game was finally being played to a large audience in the United States. Due to a lack of interest from the mainstream press, the many previous efforts to get the White House to negotiate had gone largely unnoticed. That made it possible for the Reaganites to accuse the Sandinistas of intransigence, a charge repeated loudly and often. Even those congressmen who knew better could not trust their constituents’ to be aware of the administration’s duplicity.

But this time, what with the controversy over Wright’s congressional diplomacy, the unexpected participation of the United States’ Central American client-states, the consequent disarray of the Reaganites, and the publicity surrounding Arias’s Nobel Prize, peace was finally given a chance to be heard in the mainstream press. It thus became possible for the Sandinistas to conduct negotiations with the U.S. public and its representatives in Congress.

There followed a peculiar courtship of Congress, in which the Reaganites snipped and tailored their requests for CIA-*contra* funds to suit the requirements of the congressional “moderates”, while Nicaragua countered by offering one concession of precious sovereignty after another in an effort to soothe moderate anxieties.

Among those lobbying Congress on behalf of Nicaragua was a U.S. Jesuit priest from the Central American Historical Institute in Managua, and he was struck by the queerness of the proceedings: “We must have talked for about an hour

with each of at least five House members. Some were very hard line, which was hard for us to deal with, coming from here [Managua], knowing the reality, and then running up against all the lies.... During the whole day before the vote [on CIA-*contra* aid], I had the feeling of being in a courtroom, waiting for the verdict in a capital case. I think we were all struck by the tremendous concentration of power in Washington, with one vote by Congress literally deciding between life and death for thousands of people. It's a crime that they have that power, but they do — that's the reality, and that's why we went." ⁴²⁴

As noted above, such efforts were less than completely successful, but they helped to moderate the capitol punishment meted out by Congress. Far more influential, however, was the conciliatory behavior of the Nicaraguan government, which went far beyond its formal obligations.

Nicaragua was the first of the five signatories to appoint a National Reconciliation Commission, taking a great political risk by placing Cardinal Obando at its head. From all indications, the *contra* cardinal was no less antagonistic to the Sandinista revolution than ever. But his image was highly respected in Congress, and he was the leading symbol of the opposition forces in Nicaragua.

There were, as well, intimations of a thaw in the church's attitude toward the government: The Vatican had in recent years thought better of its dogmatic opposition to liberation theology, had appointed a conciliatory papal nuncio to Managua, and had been urging Obando to seek a rapprochement with the Sandinistas. They, in turn, calculated that the cardinal's potential value as an agent of national reconciliation outweighed the risk that he might resort to his old tricks.

That was a miscalculation; Obando eventually turned out to be the same old *contra* cardinal, after all. But in the early stages of the peace process, his appointment as head of the commission was greeted as a welcome sign of good faith on the part of the government. Not only Obando's, but the other appointments to the reconciliation commission were so

“Ultimately, the debates and votes in Congress over how much money to give the contras and under what conditions to give it to them served as a barometer measuring the resistance that the Reagan administration could expect, from the Congress and from the public, to its policy of escalating war. The administration’s intense lobbying efforts were aimed less at the immediate goal of securing a few million dollars for the contras than at the longer term goal of breaking the back of the domestic political opposition.”

— William LeoGrande⁴²⁶

clearly well-intended that the local co-ordinator of UN programs described them as “excellent”, and his counterpart from the OAS declared them to be “extraordinarily well-chosen.”⁴²⁵

Sandinista concessions

The Nicaraguan government followed with a series of concessions which earned such widespread approval that the Reaganites had a devil of a time thinking up ways to discredit them. The pro-*contra* news media, *La Prensa* and *Radio Catolica* were permitted to resume publication, a freedom which they cheerfully abused with more of the same vicious propaganda that had led to their suspension in the first place (cf. “Censoring the CIA”, page 237).

As before, the brutality of the CIA-*contras* was of no interest to the reinstated media: “*La Prensa* doesn’t attack the *contras*,” observed its editor. “We are totally opposed to the system imposed on Nicaragua and we are fighting that system as civilians.”

The manner in which that opposition is expressed was illustrated by *La Prensa*’s coverage of an anti-draft demonstration in Masaya by forty mothers, which was answered on the following day by a counter-demonstration of 20,000 people. In its report, *La Prensa* blithely united the two opposing groups into one giant protest against “Sandinista persecution”.⁴²⁷

In addition to allowing the CIA to resume its publishing activities, the Nicaraguan government decreed a unilateral 30-day cease-fire in three designated zones in order to provide the CIA-*contras* with an opportunity to take advantage of the amnesty. This gesture was answered with a sharp escalation of attacks on civilian targets. The few terrorists who took advantage of the amnesty risked execution by their leaders for doing so.

After three months, Nicaragua had done more than any of its four co-signatories to honor the terms of the peace agreement, but that still wasn't enough to turn off the CIA-*contra* tap in Congress (cf. "Moderate anxieties", page 396.) Accordingly, the Sandinistas decided in November to remove the last craven excuses of congressional moderates by making further concessions not required by the agreement.

Despite the condition that only unarmed opponents need be recognized by the government, it offered to commence indirect negotiations with the CIA-*contras*, with Cardinal Obando as mediator. Nearly 1000 terrorists and former *guardias* were released from prison with full pardons. The CIA-*contras* were offered another month-long truce in which to disarm and accept amnesty, and provisions were made for lifting the state of emergency as soon as the U.S. and Honduras stopped supporting the terrorists. At a later date, the government also disbanded the Anti-Somocista Tribunals (cf. page 260).

Test of loyalty

In surrendering so much to its courtship of congressional moderates, the Sandinista leadership had abandoned fundamental positions, sorely testing the loyalty of its constituency at home. The announced plans to broaden the amnesty and negotiate with the CIA-*contras* were especially troublesome to the faithful:

"On October 29, directorate member Bayardo Arce delivered a fierce message to the Sandinista Assembly, promising no compromise of the principles of the revolution, no 'political dialogue'. Slogans along those lines dominated the banners

[of those who] assembled to hear Daniel Ortega's speech on November 5, with its offer of indirect cease-fire talks.... The crowd greeted the announcement in disconcerted silence, cheering only when Ortega promised no amnesty for National Guard war criminals."⁴²⁸

Though not required by the peace agreement, a general amnesty was high on Obando's wish list and therefore of interest to congressional moderates. But there was no more painful issue to the majority of Nicaraguans: "Spearheading the movement against total amnesty is a national association of women whose sons and daughters were killed during the insurrection against Somoza or in the contra war.... 'Those who ask for total amnesty, let them give us back our children,' read one mother's placard.... In a *De Cara al Pueblo* town meeting with women on September 26 in celebration of AMNLAE, the women's association, the issue of amnesty was raised again and again. The majority of those who spoke were strongly, sometimes tearfully, opposed to total amnesty, and many said they had problems with even a partial amnesty, but see it as a necessary precondition for peace."⁴²⁹

Despite such anguish, plans to extend amnesty even to the last dregs of Somoza's *Guardia Nacional* were drafted, to go into effect once CIA-*contra* aggression had ceased. As an alternative, Nicaragua offered to release these most vicious of war criminals to the United States or any other country outside of Central America, on the condition that they not be allowed to return to the region. There were no takers.

In any event, nothing could ever satisfy the Reaganites. All proposals and concessions were immediately dismissed as insincere and untrustworthy, while the administration labored to push more CIA-*contra* funding through Congress in direct contradiction of the peace plan. For Christmas 1987, it was blessed by Congress with \$14.4 million of "humanitarian" and military funds.

Elliott Abrams & Co. drafted a counter-proposal for the CIA-*contras* in the spirit of previous attempts to make the San-dinistas appear intransigent by presenting them with impossible demands (cf. page 385, "The 'Civilized' Peace of

the CIA"). The list included the dissolution of agricultural co-operatives and the Sandinista Defense Committees, an end to subsidies for basic foods, and suspension of the military draft. President Arias observed, "When you look at the list of conditions and prerequisites... you become very pessimistic."

The Abrams-*contra* proposal came with a map of the areas from which the Nicaraguan Army would be required to withdraw. It comprised over half of the nation's territory which, since the terrorists did not control a square inch of it, struck most observers as a bit much. The Sandinista newspaper, *Barricada*, published a reproduction of the map and jeered, "We're not pulling your leg, dear readers.... This is the map from the U.S. counter-proposal. So, if you are in Esteli, Matagalpa, Ocotal, Juigalpa, San Carlos, Bluefields, Puerto Cabezas, and the list goes on, then you should know that as of today, you are in *contra* territory." Arturo Cruz, former figurehead of the CIA-*contra* political front, flatly described this demand as "crazy"⁴³⁰.

In short, it was business as usual at the Reagan White House, leading one liberal congressman to lament, "Every concession [of the Nicaraguan government] is greeted by more airdrops and more *contra*-aid requests. This is very much a stick-and-stick approach."⁴³¹

Isolating the victim

The Arias plan was supposed to involve all Central American countries, but a key element of the Reaganites' strategy was to focus attention on the question of Nicaragua's compliance or lack of it. For reasons of their own, the U.S. client states were eager to assist in that project.

Arias, himself, at first refused to appoint a National Reconciliation Commission for Costa Rica, arguing that his country was experiencing no conflicts serious enough to require him to fulfill this obligation of his own plan. He relented when the other signatories, especially Honduras, threatened to follow his poor example.

It had never been Arias' intent to make things easy for the Sandinistas. He was under intense pressure from powerful right-wing forces in his own country to oppose the socialists next door. By one account, "The Costa Rican has sold his plan to Democrats in Washington and to his own countrymen as a vehicle for weakening the Sandinistas politically, ultimately laying the basis for their removal from power."⁴³² Arias also maintained a close personal and business relationship with Alfonso Robelo, a leader of the CIA-*contras*' political front.⁴³³ And he was no doubt eager to atone for his unmannerly independence from the United States.

All of which probably helps to explain why the peacemaker's objections to continued support of the CIA-*contras* were oblique and deferential — even though it was the single greatest obstacle to the peace process — while his denunciations of the Sandinistas grew increasingly sharp and accusatory. He even fell to echoing the extraneous demand that the Sandinistas negotiate with the CIA-*contras*. If Nicaragua refused to do so, he insisted, "The entire world should isolate them; that is the sanction I would call for."⁴³⁴

The other three U.S. client states had plenty of their own reasons to focus attention on Nicaragua and away from themselves. Apart from the pressing need to appease the Reaganites, there was the problem of covering up their appalling records of human rights abuse. Because the Arias plan was perceived as a threat by reactionary forces throughout the region, it provoked an escalation of violence: "'The situation has gotten worse since the signing of [the peace agreement],' said a Western diplomat. 'It called for a process of democratization which would cause a loss of power for the military, so they invent an internal enemy.'

"While many acknowledge the human rights situation in Honduras is worsening, all say the abuses pale in comparison with those in neighboring El Salvador and Guatemala, where political murders are an almost daily occurrence."⁴³⁵

The slaughter did have one advantage, however. Since the customary sanction for opposition to the right wing in those countries tended to be banishment or death, it was seldom

“Mireya Lucero is a Salvadoran woman of 25, a peasant organizer who has lost nine members of her family, including her husband and her brother, to rightist terror. She remarked, ‘They didn’t make this plan for El Salvador; they made it against Nicaragua.’... The words ‘state-influenced press’ do no justice to the docility with which the major U. S. news media have followed the agenda of the Reagan administration and, it seems fair to say, of Oscar Arias himself in invoking the plan exclusively to cast suspicion on the intentions of the Sandinistas, while ignoring the outrages to peace and decency being wrought on a daily basis by [the other signatories].”

— Alexander Cockburn⁴³⁶

necessary to release anyone from prison. It was therefore possible to adopt an attitude of moral superiority to Nicaragua, which had chosen to incarcerate *guardia* war criminals, CIA-*contras* and collaborators, instead of killing them. Righteous indignation at the plight of these “political prisoners” became a popular theme for Cardinal Obando, the pro-*contra* opposition and, of course, the Reaganites.

National monologues

The U.S. client states were somewhat less than enthusiastic about initiating “national dialogues”, as called for in the peace accord. President Cerezo appeared to make a genuine attempt to engage Guatemala’s “leftist” insurgency in negotiations, but the army continued to exercise its veto over any significant concessions, such as land reform (cf. pages 263 ff.). The few brief encounters between the government and the guerrillas went nowhere fast.

President Azcona of Honduras reluctantly appointed a national reconciliation commission so thoroughly populated with reactionaries that no one took it seriously. It was the same, in El Salvador: “Diplomats interviewed here say that in contrast to Nicaragua’s commission — to which the government named a principal opponent [two out of four, actually] — the Salvadoran commission has no such figure. ‘They’re all

sympathizers of the right and the military,' a Latin American ambassador says. 'With this panel, Duarte has closed the political space for dialogue. In the commission, who is for dialogue? Nobody,' says a West European diplomat."⁴³⁷

Of course, when it came to peace negotiations, Duarte's situation was far more precarious than that of the Sandinistas. He was supported by only a small portion of El Salvador's population (no truly popular candidate was allowed in the country for the 1984 national election), real power was in the hands of the army, and he confronted a genuinely popular uprising.

The rector of El Salvador's Central American University, a Jesuit, compared the uprising in his country with the U.S. mercenaries in Honduras/Nicaragua: "The FMLN is a movement founded, promoted, led and sustained by Salvadoran forces.... With respect to the *contras*, we can say almost the opposite. As soldiers, they are in fact Nicaraguans; but as a movement, they are a foreign creation, in that their army is promoted, financed and directed by the United States.... If material support to these two armies disappeared, their futures would be very different. The FMLN wouldn't even be noticeably weakened, while the *contras* would tend to disappear."⁴³⁸

Consequently, discussions between the figurehead government and the FMLN were short and unsweet. After they were interrupted by a sharp increase in death-squad activity in October, Duarte announced that he had fulfilled his obligations under the peace agreement and declined all further offers to negotiate.

It probably didn't matter much, since the government could not speak for even a plurality of the population. An opinion poll, taken before the nation-wide municipal elections held in the spring of 1988, indicated that 75 percent of the populace did not feel represented by any of the available candidates.

A reporter from the *London Observer* captured the essence of Salvadoran democracy, on election day in a remote village:

(Continued on page 409)

The Voices of Central America

From September to December 1987, random-sample surveys were conducted by the University Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP), a department of the Jesuit-run Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in San Salvador, the Psychology Research Institute of the University of Costa Rica, and the School of Journalism of the National University of Honduras. Among their findings:

- The United States — not Cuba or the Soviet Union — was named by 79 percent of Salvadorans and 61 percent of Costa Ricans as the country that most meddles in the internal affairs of Central America.
- When asked to choose whether the United States should support the Central American peace plan or continue to provide military aid to the *contras*, only 19 percent of Costa Ricans and 20 percent of Salvadorans surveyed embraced the Reagan administration's position.
- In defining the cause of armed conflict in Central America, only 12 percent of Costa Ricans and 4 percent of Salvadorans cited Communist subversion.
- Asked what the United States should do to achieve peace in El Salvador, 63 percent of Salvadorans surveyed said "stop interfering", "halt military aid", "support peace negotiations", or similar answers.
- Less than 15 percent said El Salvador enjoyed democracy and political freedom.
- Although not quite as confused as their counterparts in the U.S., some Costa Ricans can not accurately sort out U.S. friends and enemies in the region: 21 percent said the U.S. supports the guerrillas in El Salvador, while 11 percent said Cuba or the Soviet Union backed the *contras* against Nicaragua.⁴³⁹

(Continued from page 407)

“By midmorning, everything was in place. The only thing missing was the candidates. No one knew who they were. ‘I suppose there must be candidates,’ said a villager, ‘but we have no idea who they are.’ The election officials who arrived in the helicopter weren’t much more helpful. ‘We are only here to administer the election,’ said one of them. ‘We do not know anything about that.’”⁴⁴⁰

Flag kisser

The peace agreement created so many predictable difficulties for the U.S. client states that there was widespread bewilderment as to why they had signed it in the first place. Certainly they must have expected an immediate backlash from Elliott Abrams & Co., and it was not long in coming (see “Shifting the focus”, page 391). The need to make amends for their unauthorized gesture on behalf of peace soon became the most obvious concern of the wayward “democracies”.

Of the four, President Cerezo appeared least susceptible to U.S. pressure, perhaps because Guatemala was receiving the least Yankee largesse. Arias prudently limited his role to muted criticisms of the CIA-*contra* program and one-sided denunciations of the Sandinistas.

As so often before, El Salvador and Honduras were the most contrite and malleable. During a visit to Washington, El Salvador’s Duarte “chose to demonstrate his gratitude for Washington’s military and financial backing by literally kissing the American flag”, a performance which earned the derision and contempt of his countrymen.⁴⁴¹ He then sought to compound the blessings of that osculatory diplomacy by emitting a steady stream of accusations against the Sandinistas — models of hypocrisy that were doubtless pleasing to the Reaganites.

But it was Honduras that had the toughest public relations task. As the region’s principal collaborator in the U.S. terror campaign, it could hardly comply with the peace agreement

and continue to do the bidding of the United States. Of course, it never had any possibility or intention of observing the terms of the agreement: "The Hondurans' know they can't kick the *contras* out, and they are clearly in a state of impotence in terms of their ability to comply with some of their obligations,' a Western diplomat says."⁴⁴²

Progress report

It all made for some curious posturing in January of 1988, when the International Commission for Verification and Compliance (ICVC) met as planned. Established under the peace agreement, the commission included members from the five Central America nations, the UN and OAS, plus the eight nations of the Contadora Group.

The ICVC was supposed to determine the extent to which each of the five signatories had complied with the terms of the agreement; but its task was complicated by the fact that the U.S. client states refused to allow on-site inspections. Honduras was especially nervous about the commission tripping over the CIA-*contras* and their vast arsenal of U.S. weapons. An attempt by journalists and a Honduran legislator to inspect the military base at Aguacate — long known to be a *contra* staging area — had been repulsed by gunfire.

Fresh from their invigorating Christmas victory in the congressional wars, (cf. "Moderate anxieties", page 396), the Reaganites hoped to scuttle the ICVC with another heavy dose of intimidation and bribery of their client states, and they were partially successful. An ICVC official confided that, "Our conclusions are vague because the Central Americans were involved in drawing them up, and Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala are watering them down all the way."⁴⁴³

Despite these efforts to dilute the final report, the commission did reach some conclusions and they were not very helpful to the Reaganites. After much acrimonious debate, the ICVC singled out one government for its systematic obstruction of the peace process: "The government of the United States

of America maintains its policy and practice of providing assistance, military in particular, to the irregular forces operating against the government of Nicaragua. The definitive cessation of this assistance continues to be an indispensable requirement for the success of the peace efforts."

The commission also concluded that, after Costa Rica, Nicaragua had the cleanest human rights record in the region and was making definite progress toward greater democracy, despite the severe pressures of the war. It also pointed out that the Communist Party is prohibited in some U.S. client states, that thousands were still being victimized by torture and "disappearances", and that the offense of political opposition was frequently punished by murder. As Daniel Ortega put it, the report "brought out all the dirty laundry in the Central American countries, including those that pretend to be examples of democracy."⁴⁴⁴

Needless to say, those examples of democracy were less than thrilled with the report. So they decided to get rid of the commission that wrote it. It was replaced by the five Central American foreign ministers, two or three of whom could be relied upon to gang up on Nicaragua at the behest of the United States. The dissolution of the ICVC "was a major concession by Nicaragua, which strenuously opposed the move, arguing that the Central American countries cannot legitimately be 'both parties and judges'. Had Nicaragua not yielded, however, the White House and its allies would have blamed Managua for stalling the peace process."⁴⁴⁵

But the horse had already left the barn when the Reaganites tried to shut the door, and the report's clear message was expected to have an influence on subsequent votes for CIA-*contra* aid in Congress. One analyst in Washington predicted that, "This direct appeal will have an effect on Congress. It certainly will be used by the liberal opponents of *contra* aid. This is the first time that all five Central American countries, all eight Contadora countries, and representatives from the UN and the OAS have joined in a call for a complete cutoff of *contra* aid."⁴⁴⁶

Of course, the political implications of that development would depend, to a great degree, on how much and what

kind of notice the U.S. mainstream press would deign to give it. On that score, the White House had no reason to worry: It was objectivity as usual for the mainstream press. A fairly typical example was provided by *Newsweek's* January 25th account of the ICVC meeting. Headlined "Peace Now, Pay Later", it began: "Eyeball to eyeball with his Central American antagonists, Daniel Ortega blinked. The region's five presidents were meeting in... Costa Rica last week as time ran out on the peace plan they signed in Guatemala last August, and Nicaragua was still far from compliance." It ended: "No electoral change is possible until 1990, when Ortega's term ends. But his actions over the next few weeks will determine how troublesome the rest of his tenure is."

Don't mention it

There was no mention of the commission's most urgent demand, an end to the CIA-*contras*. Readers of *Newsweek* would never suspect from its account that Nicaragua's record of compliance was by far the best in the region, or that the ICVC report carried the authority of the UN, the OAS and the eight Contadora nations. Nor did this "liberal" publication find it necessary to mention Nicaragua's progress on human rights and democratization, the widespread abuses in U.S. client states, or anything else that might tend to cast Nicaragua in a comparatively favorable light.

As noted earlier, *Newsweek* has been one of the least delinquent in its reporting on Nicaragua and the CIA-*contras*. There are certainly far worse examples, many of them provided by *The New York Times*; its brief mention of the ICVC report stated flatly — and for those unfamiliar with its style of objectivity, incredibly — that, "A meeting of the verification commission ended last weekend with little agreement."

This was the kind of journalistic complicity which the Reaganites had come to rely on; with precious few exceptions, it persisted long after its deficiencies had been exposed. It seemed that nothing — not the Iran/Contragate scandal, not

the Arias plan — could disentrall the mainstream press from the spell of White House propaganda.

After the shock of the Arias plan's acceptance by the U.S. client states, the administration directed its efforts toward undermining the peace process and winning more CIA-*contra* aid battles in Congress. For those related purposes, a few basic themes were contrived by the Reaganites and conveyed to the public via the mainstream press.

“Untrustworthy” by decree

Central to the administration's strategy was the portrayal of Nicaragua as “untrustworthy” and “insincere”. To some extent, this was accomplished by simply declaring that it was so, over and over again. As usual, the press was content to pass these accusations on with little or no comment. Sometimes they were even regurgitated as fact, as in this wholly unsubstantiated assertion in the 11 January 1988 edition of *Newsweek*: “The Sandinistas similarly agreed to democratic reforms they don't really believe in, just to forestall more U.S. aid to the rebels.”

Another component of the White House strategy was to impose arbitrary demands on Nicaragua that were neither required of any other signatory, nor part of the actual peace agreement. The Sandinistas' reluctance to submit could then be depicted as non-compliance, since hardly anyone in the news media appeared to have read the actual document or otherwise bothered to learn its contents. The bastard demands were further legitimated by the likes of Cardinal Obando, who was very fond of the one about total amnesty for the terrorists, and President Arias who vowed that he would call down the wrath of the world on the Sandinistas if they did not start negotiating with the CIA-*contras* — a requirement he neglected to include in his own proposal.

When the Nicaraguan government held its nose and agreed to these extraneous demands for the sake of keeping the peace process alive, it was depicted as a cynical ploy to defeat CIA-*contra* funding (the legitimacy of which was seldom

questioned): “Mr. Ortega took the new steps toward compliance less than three weeks before Congress is scheduled to vote on new aid for the *contras*,” sniffed *The New York Times*. *Newsweek* greeted additional concessions with the headline, “Nowhere to Run, Nowhere to Hide”, over an article that began: “Daniel Ortega’s promise-them-anything offensive was in high gear last week....”

As a veteran critic of the mainstream press observed, “Submission is translated into cynicism, and unilateral moves not even required by the accords [are] translated into compliance.”⁴⁴⁷

Stoning the mothers

Another theme of the White House and the mainstream press was the capricious insincerity of the Sandinistas in lifting the state of emergency. To promote this story, the pro-*contra* opposition and the CIA manufactured events in Nicaragua that could be reported in the United States with the appropriate anti-Sandinista spin.

As in the past, the usual method was to break the law — for instance, by holding a mass rally without obtaining a permit, as required in the United States and elsewhere — and then cry “oppression” when the illegal activity was punished or restricted. News media in the U.S. faithfully report such events as evidence of totalitarian tendencies.

One of the most effective dramatic devices was the small group of women dubbed the “January 22 Organization of Mothers of Political Prisoners”, who were funded by the United States to demonstrate for a total amnesty that would free the most deprived criminals in Nicaraguan prisons. Appropriately enough, January 22 is the date of a massacre perpetrated by Somoza’s *Guardia Nacional* in 1967.

These relatives of CIA-*contras* and former *guardias* acted out a few protests which attracted a great deal of attention in the United States; participants numbered in the hundreds. Counter-demonstrations by “Mothers of the Heroes and the Martyrs”, with as many as 5000 women, were largely ignored.

Sandinistas stone relatives of prisoners

This headline actually ran on the front page of the Hearst empire's daily newspaper in Seattle. A less petrifying account of the incident can be found in the accompanying text on this page.

In this fashion, consumers of objective journalism received the impression that virtually all the mothers of Nicaragua were rising up against Sandinista oppression.

On one occasion, a scuffle broke out when the "January 22" mothers organized a demonstration without a permit, then started tearing down banners being put up for an FSLN celebration to be held later that day. There was pushing and shoving, some rocks and bottles were thrown in both directions, and a few people received minor injuries. Inevitably, this was played up in the U.S. as yet another example of Sandinista oppression; the outcome was preordained, as in all ritual dramas. The Hearst daily in Seattle actually ran a front-page headline reading, "Sandinistas stone relatives of prisoners".

Something similar happened in the town of Masaya, when 40 mothers of young men started a demonstration against the military draft that eventually grew to include a mixed crowd of nearly 1000 protesters. This protest also attracted a tremendous amount of attention from the U.S. press, especially since the military draft had long been one of Cardinal Obando's favorite targets.

The same organs of objectivity were not very interested, however, in the counter-demonstration on the following day in support of the draft — possibly because it only attracted 20,000 people. One paper which did refer to the counter-demonstration was the *Washington Post*; it reported, however, "less than 1000 people showed up" to support the government. That was an odd slice of journalism, since even the CIA's *La Prensa* could count up to 20,000.⁴⁴⁸

Another key item of evidence that the Sandinistas were not serious about their pledges of democracy was a widely

reported sentence from a speech by Daniel Ortega. The carefully selected morsel was, "If the FSLN were to lose elections, it would give up the government, but not power." Invariably omitted was the following sentence: "The people made a revolution and conquered power for the workers, putting in place profound changes that are irreversible."

A few days later, Ortega expanded on that theme in his address to the closing session of the National Assembly: "Power originates in the people, power resides in the people, and the people can remove or install any party whenever the people regard this as proper. Power does not belong to any particular party or political organization, but to the Nicaraguan people."⁴⁴⁹

Thomas Jefferson and James Madison might well have applauded such a formulation; and Abraham Lincoln's venerated Gettysburg Address includes the very similar reference to "government of the people, by the people, for the people". But those former presidents would never have learned about that from the U.S. mainstream press. The episode bore a strong resemblance to the distortion of remarks by Tomas Borge years earlier (see page 168).

Diversiory focus

While they were unable or unwilling to accurately convey the message of Daniel Ortega, U.S. news media continued to offer every courtesy to Elliott Abrams and his venomous tongue. As though he had not repeatedly confirmed his standing as one of the most relentless propagandists to disgrace a modern nation since Josef Goebbels, Abrams was granted every indulgence. His most shining hour was the "Miranda hoax", with which he stampeded congressional moderates into approving funds for the CIA-*contras* in celebration of the 1987 Christmas season (cf. "The Art of Media Manipulation", page 426 ff.).

Whether or not it was intended, the effect of such journalistic malpractice was to continue a long tradition of service to the White House. The administration's strategy required

that constant pressure be kept on Nicaragua, while the U.S. client states were spared the indignity of too much scrutiny.

Likewise, it was important that the press not concern itself with the fact that continuation of the CIA-*contra* terror campaign was the single greatest obstacle to peace in the region. Not to worry. Apart from an occasional passing reference, mainstream news of that little hindrance was not permitted to obstruct the warpath of the Reaganites. The November 6th *New York Times* report on congressional approval of \$3.2 million in "short-term aid.... to be used strictly for non-arms assistance" is representative, tactfully failing to note that the terrorist funding violated the Arias plan. (Another article in the same edition refers to the "thousands of Nicaraguans convicted of anti-Sandinista acts", validating the Reaganites' distinction between Sandinistas and genuine Nicaraguans.)

Necessary exceptions

Of course, there were exceptions. There have to be exceptions, so that purveyors of mainstream news can cite them to certify their objectivity. One of the best examples of this "safe criticism" (*pace* Noam Chomsky) was an article in *The New York Times'* 20 January 1988 edition, which starts off: "The Central American peace treaty is in danger of being converted into a series of demands directed only at Nicaragua," and proceeds to an excellent review of the failure of the U.S. client states to comply with the Arias plan.

What the *Times* delicately refrained from mentioning, however, was that it shared a major portion of responsibility for that unfortunate circumstance. A survey of *Times'* coverage of the peace process from 7 August 1987 to 18 January 1988 disclosed "about one hundred stories on Nicaragua's compliance with the accords; half a dozen on El Salvador's; two on Honduras'; and none on Guatemala's."⁴⁵⁰ The general tenor of that coverage is indicated above.

At the start of 1988, things did not look so good for the Arias peace plan, which by then had become the Nicaraguan peace maneuvers. The effectiveness of the Miranda hoax

appeared to neutralize all the good will earned by Sandinista concessions. The subsequent renewal of outright military funding to the CIA-*contras* at the end of 1987 indicated that congressional moderates were once again lining up behind the Reaganites.

At the January meeting of the peace plan's International Commission of Verification and Compliance, the U.S. client states gave notice that their brief moment of independence was coming to an end. They watered down the final report and then disbanded the commission, so that they would not have to be embarrassed by its conclusions again. As the February 3rd deadline for another crucial vote in Congress approached, Arias could be heard via U.S. media saying things like, "The future of more aid to the *contras* is entirely in Daniel Ortega's hands. If he shows good faith in carrying out his promises, then there's no more reason for war."⁴⁵¹

The Sandinistas decided it was worth the risk of still more unpopular concessions in order to appease the U.S. Congress. Following the ICVC meeting in January, they announced a willingness to commence direct negotiations with the CIA-*contras*, with Cardinal Obando as mediator. They also lifted the state of emergency without any guarantee from the enemy, and offered to release all counter-revolutionaries detained since 1981 if a government outside the region would offer them refuge; none did. An offer by the Nicaraguan government to establish an international commission, including Democratic and Republican members of Congress, to monitor any agreement was ignored.

When the administration submitted its request for \$36.2 million to Congress for the February vote, it insisted that a small portion of the total be allocated to openly lethal purposes. Since the negotiations between Nicaragua and the CIA-*contras* were still in progress, the demand for more guns provided nervous "moderates" with a solution to their dilemma. They could now vote against the funding, but still claim devotion to the terrorists by arguing that they were trying to give peace a chance. Grasping that fragile straw, they helped to defeat the measure by a margin of eight votes.

That was supposed to put an end to the matter for at least half a year, and very likely for the balance of the Reagan administration. In return for their consent to the \$14.4 million CIA-*contra* Christmas package at the end of 1987, Democratic congressional leaders had won an agreement that the February vote would be an “ultimate test”. If it passed, any subsequent request would be granted the courtesy of expedited legislative procedures. But if it failed, any request for additional funds would have to follow the standard path through Congress, which meant that no funding measure could be considered until the end of the year, if at all.

However, the Democratic moderates whose votes were so crucial to the final outcome were so consumed by “soft on communism” anxieties that they exacted yet another concession from their party leaders. In exchange for their votes against the lethal-aid proposal, they demanded an opportunity to vote soon after on a purely “humanitarian” alternative — so that they could continue to have it both ways. Otherwise, they would consent to anything the Republicans presented, which was certain to include a specifically lethal component.

Strange bedfellows

Since moderate votes constituted the margin of victory, the Democratic leadership had no choice but to concede. They cobbled together a package of \$30.8 million, and thus began one of the strangest episodes of political maneuvering ever seen in Congress.

The Reaganites continued to insist on the inclusion of specifically lethal aid and, as a consequence, found themselves in a tacit alliance with congressional liberals who could not swallow a vote for the terrorists under any circumstances. The *contras*, on the other hand, risked the displeasure of their White House keepers by endorsing the proposed compromise — they wanted that money.

In the end, the Reaganites and the uncompromising liberals won; the funding proposal was rejected by a margin of eight votes. The terrorists wound up without a fresh infusion of

dollars, and the White House was seen to have rebuked the moderates who had so frequently conspired with it in the past. The net result was a comparatively stable majority — for a time — against specifically lethal aid. The moderates “have more reason to be angered at their twenty conservative Democratic colleagues and the many Republicans who voted against the aid plan than at [most of] the liberals, who gave it their best shot. Inadvertently, the latter achieved the best of both worlds: no *contra* aid and no alienated moderates.”⁴⁵²

This episode caused a lasting rift between the CIA-*contras* and the administration. It turned out to be so destabilizing to their relationship that questions were raised about the White House strategy. By some accounts, it was a simple case of ineptitude and miscalculation; by others, it reflected a growing consensus within the administration that the CIA-*contra* program was essentially dead, and the next best thing was to force a guaranteed losing proposition on Congress for future political effect. “It’s a matter of being able to point to the Democrats and say: You lost Nicaragua,” suggested a nameless State Department official.⁴⁵³

Whatever the reason, the president’s terrorists bitterly lamented their fate. “Thousands of Nicaraguans have died so that U.S. troops didn’t have to fight in Nicaragua,” complained a leader of the political front, “and this is the way they repay us.” Adolfo Calero grimly concluded that the U.S. is “more unreliable than the Soviet Union.”⁴⁵⁴

They were further dismayed by a major military defeat. Immediately after the Reaganites contrived the rejection of the “non-lethal” funding measure, the Nicaraguan Army inflicted heavy losses on a large concentration of CIA-*contra* forces assembled near the border with Honduras. That defeat prompted the White House to cry “invasion” for the second time in two years, in an attempt to reverse its losses in Congress (cf. “In hot pursuit of an invasion”, page 428). The terrorists suffered heavy casualties and lost a large portion of their supplies. Perhaps most significantly, the deadly encounter demonstrated once again that they were no match for the people’s army of Nicaragua.

That came as something of a shock to most of the mainstream press which, since the signing of the Arias accord the previous August, had been busily validating White House propaganda about the fine fighting fettle of the CIA-*contras*. *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Miami Herald* and others had published numerous articles praising the giant strides of the “insurgency” in girding their loins and in winning the hearts and minds of their countrymen. A typical example was the *Miami Herald*’s November 7th piece, “*Contras build peasant support*”. The source of this information? The CIA-*contras*, naturally.

Phantom occupation

Perhaps the most egregious example of mainstream advertising for the president’s terrorists was the front-page article of *The New York Times*’ Christmas day edition. Describing the attack on Siuna with which the CIA-*contras* violated the Christmas truce brokered by Cardinal Obando, the *Times* declared that they had conducted their “largest and most successful military operation of the war” and had occupied the remote mining town for two days.

If true, this would be heartening news for congressional moderates, since their main objection to the terrorist program was that it seemed unlikely to succeed. “Why can’t they take a town?” was the nagging question. But the *Times* story was a tad premature, as it turned out. There was no “occupation” — only the customary slaughter of defenseless civilians.⁴⁵⁵

Thus, the Nicaraguan Army — which apparently does not estimate the enemy’s strength by studying *The New York Times* — encountered virtually no resistance when it mopped up the CIA’s border bandits in early March. That, on top of the two successive votes in Congress denying additional terrorist funds, apparently persuaded the political front that it was time to cut a deal with the Sandinistas. A State Department official acknowledged: “They saw the need for a ceasefire. They recognized that they were in a difficult position, politically here and militarily on the ground.”⁴⁵⁶

For Nicaragua, the omens were propitious. The strange events in Congress had resulted in a major split between the Reaganites and the CIA-*contras*, who were spinning in political space and riven by internal disputes.

As for the Reagan administration, its entire Central America program was in a shambles and the chief architect was under attack by “moderates” in the White House. Elliott Abrams’ stock was lower than a snake’s belly: Not only had he “lost” the votes in Congress and control of the terrorists, his efforts to remove General Manuel Noriega from the leadership of Panama had failed miserably, while helping to expose the seamy history of collaboration between Noriega and the U.S. in drug trafficking and other activities.

In Honduras, there was an outbreak of anti-U.S. rioting by the natives, and the generals were sending subtle hints to Washington that they wanted the CIA’s terrorists removed as soon as possible. The Reaganites’ man in El Salvador, President Duarte, lost national elections that were boycotted by three-fourths of the population, and the guerrilla movement was gaining strength. The empire seemed to be losing its grip.

In that context, the Sandinistas decided to offer the CIA-*contras* an olive branch and a chance to save face, in an attempt to put an end to the fighting. They were in a relatively favorable position to do so, since the patience and timing of the “politically unsophisticated” Sandinistas had left them with near-total military and political superiority over the terrorists.

Thus it was that in March the government invited them to direct negotiations inside Nicaragua. It was a major reversal of policy, and Ortega sought to reassure the faithful: “Why did the government of Nicaragua decide to talk directly with the *contra* leadership, when we had repeatedly asserted that we would not negotiate with them? We did it because we found that, at that moment, there were conditions favorable to reaching an agreement independent of the will of the U.S. government.... The *contras*, having been used as a tool of the Reagan administration for more than six years, became convinced that they have been defeated by the Nicaraguan people.”⁴⁵⁷

The negotiations began at the town of Sapoá near the border with Costa Rica, *without* the mediation of Cardinal Obando. Apparently ignoring the counsel of the Vatican nuncio in Managua, Obando reverted to his pro-*contra* modality and adopted their bargaining positions as his own — not generally acceptable behavior for a mediator. The Obando/*contra* demands were, as usual, given prominent display by the U.S. mainstream press, and were soon regarded as indispensable by congressional moderates. “Obando showed he was no longer neutral,” concluded a Latin American diplomat, apparently unaware or unwilling to concede that the cardinal had never been neutral.⁴⁵⁸

Cease-fire agreement

The cardinal’s services were therefore not required when the two parties met at Sapoá in late March. The government delegation was led by the president’s brother, Defense Minister Humberto Ortega. After three days of surprisingly cordial discussions, a cease-fire agreement was signed. The major provisions were:

- a 60-day cease-fire to run from April 1 – May 30
- relocation of CIA-*contras* to seven designated zones in Nicaragua, where they would receive aid from the Red Cross
- amnesty for all political prisoners, including former *guardias*
- representation of CIA-*contras* in the National Dialogue established under the Arias plan
- verification by Secretary General Soares of the Organization of American States, using OAS facilities; Cardinal Obando was also named to the verification panel.

Reaction to the agreement by the majority of Nicaraguans was “generally favorable, but remarkably subdued — largely because of the amnesty provision.... Amnesty for the former National Guardsmen is a particularly charged issue....

“Another reason for the less-than-jubilant reaction is widespread doubt that the *contras* will actually keep their promises.”⁴⁵⁹

The Reagan administration was characteristically gracious: “Fundamentally the agreement reflects the fact that Congress abandoned the *contras* and left them on the battlefield without food or weapons,” hissed Elliott Abrams.

But Congress continued its errant ways, greeting the unexpected development with a cease-fire aid package that included \$17.7 million of allegedly non-lethal aid to the terrorists, an equal amount for medical treatment of children victimized by the terror campaign (the first U.S. reparations), and another \$10 million to support the verification commission.

Doubtful outcome

As this book was going to press in May 1988, the final outcome of the process begun at Sapoá was still very much in doubt. Everything depended on the terrorists moving to the cease-fire zones and laying down their arms; but their leaders kept presenting new demands as conditions for doing so. Those demands involved major revisions of the constitution, which had been created through an extensive national exercise in participatory democracy (cf. pages 82 ff.). The government was naturally disinclined to surrender the people’s constitutional rights to the terrorists who had been trying to destroy them. The terrorist leaders also demanded the right to travel freely through the country to promote their program. Defense Minister Ortega had to remind them that, “Your troops are not here in Managua forcing us to negotiate.”

As the 60-day truce ticked away, and the cease-fire zones remained empty, it became increasingly evident that the negotiations were being hampered by violent divisions among the terrorists. The Sapoá agreement had been signed by figureheads in the political front; but key military leaders regarded it as a capitulation, a view shared by Elliott Abrams & Co. The dispute erupted into a fist fight at a conference of Nicaraguan exiles in Miami, and there were reports of death threats. In

Honduras, Enrique Bermudez needed the help of the CIA and the Honduran Army to put down a mutiny against his leadership of the terror campaign.

These disputes left the Nicaraguan government uncertain about the authority of those with whom it was attempting to negotiate: "It worries us," said a Sandinista negotiator, "that in a document signed here, the ex-National Guard is not represented, since they dominate the *contra* military apparatus. At any time they can renege on the accords, create a new *contra* directorate, brush up their image, seek out new financial support, and continue the war."⁴⁶⁰

There were also signs of disarray in the White House, with reports of a policy battle between moderates who felt it was time to finally work out a *modus vivendi* with the Sandinistas, and hard-liners in the Elliott Abrams mold who rejected any thought of diplomacy. One administration official observed that, "Nobody is really in charge now."⁴⁶¹

But Abrams was still making his presence felt. Attempting to justify the administration's refusal to honor its long-standing commitment to begin negotiating with the government of Nicaragua as soon as it were to sit down with the CIA-*contra* leadership, Abrams said, "We don't need bilateral talks with the Sandinistas. We need to talk most of all about Soviet arms going into the region."

But as one of his disaffected assistants anonymously confided, "I don't know why we would want to talk about Soviet shipments with Nicaragua. We could talk to the Soviets directly. We don't want to talk with the Soviets about Central America. We just want to complain to them."⁴⁶²

It seems that Abrams also succeeded in getting key CIA-*contra* leaders back on the leash. After he met with them in Miami in late April, they became noticeably more recalcitrant and terrorist violations of the Sapoa accord began to proliferate. A religious service was attacked, leaving two children dead and several others wounded; a village priest was kidnapped; several *campesinos* were raped, tortured and killed....⁴⁶³

The terrorists refused to accept aid from the International Red Cross, contending (to the bewilderment of the world at large) that it was not an impartial agency. Instead, they received cash and “non-lethal” supplies from the U.S. government, in direct violation of the Sapoa accord. When OAS Secretary General Soares submitted a written protest, Cardinal Obando undermined him by declaring that it was not the official view of the verification commission.

In short, it was business as usual, with the Reaganites laboring to sabotage the peace process and pin the blame on the Sandinistas. According to one report, the general strategy was “to string the Sandinistas along in prolonged cease-fire talks, and then rely on a victory by the Republicans in the American presidential campaign to bring renewed military aid.”⁴⁶⁴

At the end of April, Ronald Reagan registered his opinion of the peace process by signing an extension of the trade embargo initiated in 1985. According to the presidential decree, “The actions and policies of the government of Nicaragua continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States.”

* * *

THE ART OF MEDIA MANIPULATION

A RECURRENT EPISODE in the popular comic strip, “Peanuts”, depicts the character named Lucy playing the same dirty trick on poor old Charlie Brown over and over again. She offers to steady a football while Charlie kicks it, but removes it at the last moment, so that he is thrown off balance and falls flat on his back. This happens every time; but, despite this repeated experience, Charlie never fails to be persuaded by Lucy on the next occasion that she will behave herself. Of course, she does not, and he ends up flat on his back once again.

The ritual encounter between Lucy and Charlie serves as a metaphor for any number of dysfunctional relationships, of which that between the White House and the mainstream

press is surely a prime example. For, although they know full well that they have been repeatedly suckered by the Reaganites, the mainstreamers keep coming back for more abuse. The consequences are more severe than Charlie Brown's wounded pride and bruised back, however. Beyond the compromised integrity of the press, they include a misinformed and confused public, degradation of the political process, and a chronic deficiency of resistance to the depredations of an outlaw presidency.

Media safety valves

The Reagan White House gave notice of how far it was willing to go in manipulating public opinion when in 1983 it invaded Grenada in order to distract the nation from a bloody fiasco. The invasion was indisputably an act of international aggression that came just 48 hours after 240 U.S. Marines were blown up by a car bomb in Lebanon, to which they had been sent for reasons that no one could explain very well.

Representing about as much of a threat to the United States as the bad breath of a gnat, Grenada was just the thing for knocking the dead Marines off the front pages and the nightly newscasts. The tawdry incident suggests a new use for tiny countries — i.e. as media safety valves for presidents whose symbolic armor might be tarnished by a spot of adverse publicity (a theme subsequently developed in the film, "Wag the Dog").

In promoting its assault on Nicaragua, the Reagan administration has manipulated the press almost at will. It has done so primarily by staging phony events, most of them designed to portray Nicaragua as a threat to peace and democracy. When these events are subsequently found to have been contrived from questionable or non-existent evidence, the administration may be inconvenienced by a scathing editorial, a snide cartoon or the indignation of a liberal columnist. But such petty nuisances come after the initial, formative blast of "objective" reporting, and never with a banner headline on the front page or a thorough exposé on the TV news.

In hot pursuit of an invasion

It is this passive contradance of the White House/mainstream news which makes it possible for the Reaganites to get away with something like the Great MiG Hoax, so effective in obscuring the impressive results of the 1984 national election in Nicaragua (see "MiG madness", page 231). There have been many other episodes of a similar nature.

Twice on the eve of crucial votes in Congress, the White House has created a "threat of invasion" by Nicaragua into Honduras, in order to persuade wavering congressmen to fund the war. It is a threat that can be invoked at just about any time, since the CIA-*contras* are continually slinking back and forth across the border. In fact, the government of Honduras has ceded control of its border territory to the CIA, and openly tolerates "hot pursuit" by the Nicaraguan Army. The government in Tegucigalpa asks only that its counterpart in Managua give notice of all cross-border troop movements; it has done so, by telephone, on several hundred occasions in recent years.

For the administration's media manipulators, then, the problem is simply one of characterizing an instance of hot pursuit as an invasion that threatens the integrity of Honduras (the Reaganites being so terribly concerned about Honduran integrity). This was first done just before a key congressional vote on CIA-*contra* aid in March 1986. The front pages and the television were full of the grave crisis. The government said to be in peril, however, did not seem all that worried; the president of Honduras and most of his associates chose to grapple with the crisis by nipping down to the seaside for the Easter holiday. The Reaganites had to beg and bribe their imperiled allies into appealing for help. A Honduran official confirmed that the episode was all "part of the political and propaganda tactics of the Reagan administration".

The White House tried the same trick two years later, in March 1988, as the administration desperately tried to reverse a major congressional setback to its CIA-*contra* program. Secretary of State George Shultz warned: "Those who may have

believed that cutting off aid to the freedom fighters would help achieve peace and freedom have made a grave mistake. They must undo the error before it is too late." To help errant congressmen correct their mistake, another invasion was invented. Once again, the Reaganites had to beg the president of Honduras for an invitation to save his country from the Sandinista hordes. His reluctant request did not reach the White House until after plans had already been set in motion to dispatch 3200 U.S. troops to the theater of action.

The troops were sent down on the very same day that a special U.S. prosecutor issued indictments against two key participants in the Iran/Contragate scandal. So here was an invasion threat that served two media purposes and, instead of disgraced White House officials slouching across the front pages, the nation saw its modern gladiators applying their jungle make-up before flying off to stand tall for America. Was that perfect timing or what?

This time, the mainstreamers were a little quicker to get the joke. But their heightened acumen did not prevent them from consigning their front pages and newscasts to "objective" reports of the fictional invasion. As things turned out, the ersatz invasions were only partially successful in turning the congressional tide; but they probably did help to further convince the vaguely attentive U.S. public that Nicaragua posed a serious threat to the rest of Central America.

The rite of defection

Without question, the administration's most spectacular media coup was the Miranda Hoax perpetrated just before Christmas, 1987. What made it so sublimely incredible was that it was floated in the wake of the Iran/Contragate scandal, with its voluminous evidence of administration duplicity. Worse, the chief huckster was none other than the interminably mendacious Elliott Abrams. Under those circumstances, the press could hardly claim innocence on account of objectivity.

Abrams set the hoax in motion with a "special briefing" for the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time* magazine, and

the *Associated Press*. These four pillars of the journalistic community were treated to a carefully orchestrated presentation by Maj. Roger Miranda, former assistant to Nicaragua's Minister of Defense. Miranda had defected in mid-October, but Abrams kept him on ice until he could be trotted out for maximum effect which, in this case, was to help push another CIA-*contra* funding measure through Congress. Referring to "secret documents" that he was supposed to have smuggled out, Miranda made several accusations against his former colleagues, of which the most useful to Abrams were that:

- Nicaragua was planning to increase the size of its armed forces to 600,000 with the help of the Soviet Union; the two countries had already drawn up a long-term planning document to that effect.
- The list of weapons to be supplied by the Soviets included MiG aircraft.
- Nicaragua had drawn up plans to invade Honduras, bomb Costa Rica, and take U.S. hostages in the event of a U.S. invasion.
- The Sandinistas were continuing to provide military assistance to El Salvador's *guerrilla* movement
- The Arias plan was viewed merely as "a weapon" with which to defeat the CIA-*contras*.
- Virtually the entire countryside was opposed to continued Sandinista rule. "What we have really been fighting all these years," quoth Miranda, "is a peasant insurrection."

The major's performance was a media sensation. "The disclosures prompted front-page stories in newspapers across the country in an outpouring of editorial outrage that surprised even some of Miranda's handlers. They acknowledged privately that he offered little that was new. Caught up in the excitement, Congress quickly passed" the \$14.4 million in CIA-*contra* aid.⁴⁶⁵

The Kinzer report

Stephen Kinzer's objective report in the December 14 edition of the *New York Times* was typical, of him and of the mainstream press in general. Headlined "Soviet Is Aiding Nicaragua in Buildup, Defector Says", it began: "A former senior officer in the Nicaraguan Army who defected recently to the United States has told American officials that the Soviet Union is preparing to send large quantities of new weapons to Nicaragua, despite provisions of the new regional peace accord that called for limiting the size of national armies in Central America," and continued in that mode for ca. 70 column inches.

Lest *Times* readers evade the import of Kinzer's account, the editors provided subheadings such as "Soviet and Cuban Collaboration... Plan to Draw Region into War... Disillusioned Communist Finds a Peasant Revolt... Arms Laundering for Salvadoran Rebels". The alarming news was further embellished with two short stories accompanying the main event: "Ortega Warns the Opposition" and "Reagan Adviser Says Buildup Would Be 'Threat' to Region".

The *Washington Post* headlined its version, "Nicaraguan Describes Major Arms Buildup; Defense Minister Projects Force of 600,000", and pitched its story to match. As usual, the momentous news was lifted off the wire services and passed on to local readerships. The *Miami Herald*, gladdened the fiery hearts of the city's Cuban and Nicaraguan exiles by bugling, "Defector: Peace Bid Was a Sham". And so it went, all around the land.

The journalistic Big Four, whose privileged access led to the first wave of feverish excitement over Miranda's "revelations", had based their reports almost entirely on the defector's live performance at the State Department. In the days that followed, evidence emerged which contradicted nearly every one of his claims that the mainstreamers had faithfully conveyed. Of course, by then the damage had been done; it was unlikely to be rectified by anything so insignificant as the facts.

The most politically useful accusation was the one about the 600,000-man "armed forces". The Sandinistas had been

“talking peace while planning a military buildup”, as the case was often put. But the presumably incriminating documents on which the defector’s tale was supposed to have been based disclosed something very different; so did subsequent interviews with anonymous “senior government officials”.

Upon inspection, the Nicaraguan plans were found to call for a *reduction* of the standing army. As the *Wall Street Journal* noted on December 21, five days after the first blast of publicity, the “army actually would decline to between 60,000 and 70,000 from the current 80,000; the balance would be a reserve force to be mobilized during the U.S. invasion that Mr. Miranda says the Sandinistas believe is ‘inevitable’.”

As the document states, the purpose of the large militia is “to more convincingly avert the possibility of a direct invasion by U.S. troops”. (The Reaganites’ eagerness to throw troops at Nicaragua became manifest just three months later, when 3200 of them were dispatched to deal with a phony invasion threat; see above, “In hot pursuit of an invasion”.)

Civil defense

The militia was to be modeled on Switzerland’s “citizen army”, equipped only with rifles and a few bullets, and therefore not very likely to be used for invading other countries. The plan, which would have armed a large segment of the eligible adult males in the country, seemed to raise questions about Miranda’s talk of a “peasant insurrection”. The New York area daily newspaper, *Newsday*, quoted an administration official on December 17: “Ortega makes the argument that the large number of armed civilians, who don’t run off and join the *contras*, proves his government is popular. It is kind of hard to knock down that argument.”

In any event, there was no need for the United States to be alarmed at the prospect of a military buildup, because Nicaragua had been offering for years to negotiate an agreement that would give full regard to “U.S. security interests”. It had in fact signed three such agreements, complete with verification procedures, only to have them sabotaged by the

White House because none provided for the expulsion of the Sandinistas (cf. pages 380 ff.).

The Reaganites declined yet another opportunity to negotiate arms limitations during the very week that Miranda was priming the mainstream press. While in Washington for a summit meeting with Reagan, Soviet leader Mikhael Gorbachev offered to discuss a de-escalation of the arms race in Central America. But this overture was dismissed as “ludicrous”. An anonymous administration official explained, “You don’t understand. Miranda was for the press and Congress, not for Gorbachev.”⁴⁶⁶

On a related matter, Miranda reported that there were only twelve Soviet and less than 500 Cuban military advisers in Nicaragua. This placed him at odds with the administration, which had long been complaining about 100 Soviet and 2500 Cuban advisers. Miranda also testified that none of the Cubans had been flying helicopters or leading combat units, as the Reaganites had so often asserted. Asked to explain these discrepancies, the State Department stuck by its original story, raising doubts about the credibility of its own informant.

Customary credibility

The rest of the “revelations” proved to be equally credible. As the facts eventually revealed:

- The MiG aircraft that were said to threaten the military balance of the region were of a 1950s vintage, deemed even by U.S. defense experts to be of use only as defensive weapons, and certainly no match for the F5E attack fighters which the U.S. had just agreed to supply to Honduras (they were used to attack Nicaraguan territory in response to the phony invasion of March 1988). In any event, there was no indication that any additional MiGs would soon be forthcoming. Along with the armaments mentioned by Miranda — the bulk consisting of rifles and bullets for the militia — the MiGs were included only in a sort of “wish list” submitted to the Soviets for consideration.

- The Soviets had no intent or need to establish “another Cuba” in Central America. In fact, Miranda drew a picture of somewhat strained relations, with the Sandinistas concerned about the depth of the Soviet commitment. Those anxieties were underlined by the persistent lack of access to modern aircraft and other equipment. The *Wall Street Journal* noted that, “There is less here than meets the eye. Many of the weapons shipped to Nicaragua are aged, Warsaw Pact cast-offs.... The mechanized army’s mainstay continues to be the T-55 tank’, a 1950s weapon older than most of the Nicaraguan soldiers who drive it.”
- There was *no* evidence that Nicaragua planned to bomb Costa Rica, invade Honduras or take U.S. personnel hostage. The 44 pages of documentation provided by the State Department mention no goals other than defeating the CIA-*contras* and defending against a U.S. invasion. Administration officials later euphemized that Miranda’s claims in this regard were merely “speculative”.
- Equally “speculative” was the accusation of extensive support for Salvadoran revolutionaries. There was nothing to contradict all the accumulated evidence that this was just another Reaganite hoax. As a U.S. congressman observed, “We are the principal suppliers of the rebels”.
- Nicaragua has never attempted to conceal its desire to end the CIA-*contra* terror campaign by any means possible. It had been trying to negotiate an agreement with the U.S. for years before Arias slipped his proposal through, and was pleased to accept it. As Foreign Minister Miguel D’Escoto put it, “Of course we want to stop the war. The continuation of funding for the *contras* means more war, more death, more destruction. Yes, we want to stop it.”⁴⁶⁷ To critics of the Sandinistas, however, that’s all just so much “insincerity”.

So much for the evidence. There were also some questions about the reliability of the witness. In addition to directly

challenging his testimony regarding the Soviet and Cuban military advisers, administration officials let slip that Major Miranda had changed his story several times, “had difficulty” passing lie detector tests, and seemed to be lacking knowledge about Nicaragua that a casual reader could have easily gleaned from the U.S. mainstream press. Nevertheless, he was paid \$800,000 for his efforts, considerably more than the usual reward for defection.

Fruitful investment

Apparently it was worth it. The media magic that Miranda touched off was instrumental in securing congressional approval of more CIA-*contra* aid, offering the hope of recaptured momentum after the setbacks of the Iran/Contragate scandal. The deluge of free publicity also threatened the Central American peace process, and reinforced negative opinion of the Sandinistas. The media blitz was augmented by the likes of President Arias, who chimed in with statements such as, “I regret that the Sandinistas might be thinking about increasing their already-powerful army.”

Better still, the memory of Miranda’s “damaging revelations” lingered on long after they were demonstrated to be false. The *New York Times*, for instance, ran a modest retreat from its promotion of the defector’s charges at the bottom of page eight in the December 18 edition. While it was far from a comprehensive analysis, it did point out that the so-called plan to invade Honduras was “speculative” and that there was no evidence that the Soviets had agreed to supply Nicaragua with MiGs. The short article also noted that the 600,000 “armed forces” were to consist primarily of “lightly armed militia”.

That article’s relative obscurity may help to explain why it appears not to have registered on the author of the *Times*’ lead editorial in the same edition, which clucked about “Nasty Choices on Nicaragua: These are not easy times for those conscientiously seeking a responsible policy on Nicaragua.... What makes the choices harder is the confirmation... of start-

**The mainstream two-step,
as performed by the *New York Times***

Step I. December 14: 70 column inches, top of front page:
“Soviet Is Aiding Nicaragua In Buildup, Defector Says”

By STEPHEN KINZER
Special to The New York Times

Step II. December 18: 22 column inches, bottom of page 8:

“Defector’s Data on Nicaraguans
Called ‘Speculative’ by U.S. Aide”

By RICHARD HALLORAN
Special to The New York Times

-ling information from a defector. It seems that the Sandinistas are secretly planning to build a 600,000-man army.... For a near-broke regime even to propose a 600,000-strong army is at best vainglorious, at worst indicative of expansionist aims.”

There was more in the December 18 edition. A lengthy profile of House Speaker Jim Wright reported: “His high-profile foray into Central American diplomacy continues to rankle the White House and now, in light of reports about plans for a Soviet-supported Nicaraguan military buildup, leaves some of his Democratic supporters uneasy.”

In its 11 January 1988 edition, i.e. nearly a month after Miranda’s performance and its critical reviews, *Newsweek* was objectively reporting (in “Why the Arias Plan Is Failing”) that “The Sandinistas show no sign of giving up their Cuban and Soviet advisers and are planning a new military buildup. A prominent Sandinista defector... accuses his former cohorts of continuing aid to Salvadoran guerrillas.... Miranda’s revelations and the initial failures of the peace plan may bolster the case of pro-contra lobbyists....” and so on.

That Miranda hoax has legs, as they say in Hollywood, and gives every indication that it will play well for years to come. It is far from improbable that Elliott Abrams will be able to look on with pride, from the comfort of his Club Fed suite or publisher's office, as the progeny of this particular illegitimacy cavort through the pages and airwaves of mainstream media.

Come the revolution in El Salvador, for example, we may be edified by an editorial in the *New York Times* entitled, "The Neglected Lessons of Major Miranda", which might start off something like this: "As the Marxist-Leninists in El Salvador intensify their iron grip on the that country's unfortunate populace, few may recall the grave warning issued just before Christmas 1987 by Major Roger Miranda, a high-ranking defector from Nicaragua's Sandinista regime. But now that a second Central American nation has entered — for who knows how long? — the dark night of communist tyranny, the 101st Congress may be justly called to account: What have you done to prevent the wave of Sandinista subversion that now threatens to engulf the entire region, and which was so clearly predicted by Major Miranda?"

THE NEXT NICARAGUA

IT IS ENTIRELY POSSIBLE that Nicaragua could have arranged poverty and oppression for itself, without the assistance of the United States. Some other nations seem to have managed that, more or less on their own. But given the persistence and enormity of U.S. intervention throughout most of the past century, the question of Nicaragua's independent capacity for promoting the misery of its people must remain in the realm of such speculations as what might have happened if Napoleon had won at Waterloo, or the Kerensky government had withstood the Bolsheviks.

For anyone troubled by the United States' capacity for destruction, epitomized by the Reaganites' merciless assault on Nicaragua, the most urgent question is: Why do they do it? A precise answer might be of some use in halting, or at least limiting, the damage inflicted by future administrations on hapless Third World nations.

Unfortunately, there are many answers and not much precision — a quality that may be too much to ask of anything so fluid and complex as the behavior of a modern superpower. It is beyond the scope of this study to attempt an analysis of the process by which foreign policy is contrived, but it does seem appropriate to review alternative explanations for the relentless persecution of Nicaragua.

Spurious sanctimonies

One explanation that can be immediately dismissed is the "freedom fighter" rationale of the Reagan administration. As previously documented, the assault on Nicaragua has nothing to do with devotion to democracy, human rights, religious freedom or any other sanctimonious motif of U.S. politics.

On the contrary, the United States has consistently shown itself to be the enemy of democracy in Latin America, and an unflinching supporter of regimes so barbarous as "to stun the senses".

That tendency was underlined by a study, published in 1981, of the relationship between U.S. foreign aid and the human rights climates of recipient countries. "There *is* a relationship between human rights and American foreign policy: namely, the more the human rights climate deteriorates, the more American aid increases. The correlation was strong. There was no correlation between American aid and need.... Aid has tended to flow disproportionately to Latin American governments which torture their citizens, to the hemisphere's relatively egregious violators of human rights."⁴⁶⁸

Whatever the United States has been up to in Central America, it is difficult to discern in its conduct a deep respect — or the slightest consideration — for the essential humanity of the people who live there.

National security

No Latin American government, and certainly not that of Nicaragua, presumes to dispute the obvious fact of U.S. military dominance in the Western Hemisphere. Nicaragua has repeatedly acknowledged the "legitimate security interests" of the United States and has already signed three drafts of agreements that would secure those interests, only to see those efforts sabotaged by the White House (cf. pages 380 ff.). It has long been apparent that the Reaganites have no interest in negotiating anything with the Sandinistas: "The idea of negotiating a peaceful settlement with Nicaragua was rejected in early 1983, after a fierce struggle within the administration. Any agreement that would leave the leftist Sandinistas in power has not been seriously considered since."⁴⁶⁹

Clearly, if getting rid of the Sandinistas was deemed more important than bolstering national security, the latter cannot have been greatly imperiled. Nor was it; the overwhelming military threat to all of Latin America has been and continues

to be the United States: "In Central America, there has been no history of Soviet or Cuban intervention. However, on more than 30 occasions, the United States has invaded and occupied parts of Central America. If the U.S. does invade Nicaragua, there is little that Cuba or the Soviet Union can do. Neither country has made any commitment to defend Nicaragua."⁴⁷⁰ The State Department's own Jacobsen Report confirmed that, "The bottom line is that Nicaragua would have to defend itself" (cf. page 211).

The Reagan administration's oft-expressed anxieties about the establishment of a "communist beachhead" in Central America don't even get a very sympathetic hearing at the Pentagon: "In a reversal of the usual textbook version of how bureaucratic politics are supposed to work, the State Department argued for a military approach... while the military leaders in the Pentagon opposed it."⁴⁷¹

In short, the facts indicate quite clearly that worries about U.S. national security can explain the assault on Nicaragua no better than a sudden enthusiasm for democracy, freedom and human rights. These are merely the official explanations; their function is to minimize public opposition to a policy adopted for other reasons and, wherever possible, to enlist support for that policy.

The profit motive

One of the most popular explanations for the attack on Nicaragua is that it represents an attempt to maintain control of its wealth, so that it can be poured back into the United States. In the immortal words of the Watergate scandal's anonymous Deep Throat: "Follow the money." The trouble is, following the money doesn't seem to get you very far in this case, and the trail branches off in several divergent directions.

To be sure, in the good old days of naked Dollar Diplomacy, rich Yankees seeking to get richer had everything to do with the U.S. Marines' occupation of Nicaragua and the establishment of the Somoza surrogacy. Since then, however, the

“Only days before Senator [and Republican presidential candidate] Robert Dole was in Nicaragua, reiterating the oft-repeated U.S. attack on Nicaragua’s relations with the Soviet Union, Honduras signed its first trade agreement with that country.... The Honduran Minister of Business and Commerce said the agreement provides for most favored nation status between the two countries.”

— Envio, *Central American Historical Institute; October 1987*

rules of the game have changed considerably, and it is not at all clear that military intervention is necessary or even helpful in the pursuit of corporate profits.

The most striking example, of course, is provided by the recent history of Japan. Having failed drastically to bring Eastern Asia under its control by force, it has proceeded to dominate the entire world’s economy without brandishing so much as a samurai sword in anger. While it is true that the circumstances of that remarkable transformation are quite special — the protection and support of the United States were crucial — it demonstrates that there is no simple causal relationship between the application of military power and the accumulation of wealth. If anything, Japan’s experience suggests the opposite.

Another instructive example is provided by Canada, the United States’ largest trading partner. Its economy is owned and controlled by U.S. interests to such an extent as to arouse grave concern among Canadian nationalists. Again, not a single shot has been fired and, again, the circumstances are very different from those confronting Central American nations. But the principle is once more confirmed: The road to international riches is not necessarily paved with military casualties.

One final point in this regard: Since Nicaragua is accused of the sin of communism, it is especially ironic that so many U.S. corporations should be scrambling to drum up business in “Red” China and the Soviet Union. When they are eating McDonald’s hamburgers in Peking and drinking Pepsi Cola in Moscow, it is time to ask if it is really necessary to throw the “Marxist-Leninists” out of Managua in order to make a buck.

Apparently some of the largest corporations based in the United States do not think so (cf. page 233). The Reaganite trade embargo has not exactly helped the U.S. computer and tractor salesmen whose incomes have been diminished by its effects. The same goes for General Motors, which has seen its Nicaraguan dealers convert painlessly to Toyotas; if recent U.S. automotive history is any indication, those dealers are unlikely to switch back to Chevrolets once the embargo is lifted.

Finally, it should be noted that the economic ties between Nicaragua and the U.S. were never terribly extensive. "The source of no important raw materials, Central America represents only one percent of all U.S. trade and investment."⁴⁷² Nicaragua's share of that commerce was among the smallest in the region.

Export vs. extraction

So much for the arguments militating against the role of purely economic motives in the Reagan assault on Nicaragua. But as one learns in Economics 101, it is never that simple.

The complications can be made plain by shifting the focus from U.S. enterprises that sell manufactured goods in other countries — e.g., the aforementioned computers, tractors and automobiles — to those which make it their business to extract the natural wealth of countries like Nicaragua and sell it to the rest of the world.

In the same general category as the traditional extractive industries, such as mining and agribusiness, must be included several types of enterprise of fairly recent origin. One involves a growing trend toward employing the Third World as a cheap and pliant garbage dump for the industrialized nations. Honduras, for example, is just now wrestling with an offer to accept two million tons of U.S. toxic wastes annually for incineration in the region of the Miskito Indians, on whom the Reaganites have lavished so much tender concern. Another resource of interest to multinational corporations is the large pool of impoverished workers, who can be hired at minuscule

wage rates to assemble the television sets, clothing and golf carts of America in "runaway sweat shops" that are of growing concern to U.S. labor unions.

If a corporation were running the United States, one could expect to extrapolate its foreign policy on the basis of its niche in the world economy. Those which depend on selling consumer items abroad have an evident interest in free trade and in the broadest possible distribution of health, wealth and education. Those which seek to extract natural resources at the lowest possible cost have a presumptive interest in corruptible politicians, societies dominated by collaborating elites, and a consequently large pool of ignorant and impoverished workers. The United States is endowed with both types of enterprise. To further complicate matters, the trend to willy-nilly "mergers and acquisitions" has resulted in corporate conglomerates that conduct both types of business.

Thus, in the matter of foreign policy, there would seem to be the potential for conflicts of interest between exporting and extractive industries. However, any review of Latin American history will disclose that it has been the extractive industries which have dominated the economies and politics of the U.S. backyard, in a pattern stretching from as long ago as 1829, when Simon Bolivar lamented, "It seems that Providence has ordained the United States to plague Latin America with misery in the name of freedom."

Among the more devastating outbreaks of that plague in recent years have been the CIA operations which overthrew the elected governments of Guatemala and Chile. The former was accomplished almost entirely at the behest of the United Fruit Company⁴⁷³, and the latter with the very active involvement of such corporate giants as ITT, Anaconda and Kennecott (cf. pages 95 ff.).

Those little "covert operations" were the logical outgrowth of what has been described as a system of dependency. "This dependence, the theory runs, has stunted the Latins' economic growth by forcing their economies to rely on one or two main export crops, or on minerals that are shipped off to the industrial nations. These few export crops, such as

bananas or coffee, make a healthy domestic economy impossible... because their price depends on an international marketplace which the industrial powers, not Central America, can control. Such export crops also blot up land that should be used to grow foodstuffs for local diets. Thus malnutrition, even starvation, grows with the profits of the relatively few producers of the export crops.... Latin American development, in other words, has not been compatible with United States economic and strategic interests.⁴⁷⁴ There is certainly much in Nicaragua's experience to lend credence to such a theory. Central elements of the Sandinista economic program — such as land reform and basic food subsidies — have been designed to correct precisely the inequities that dependency theory describes.

Still, the fact remains that U.S. business interests in Nicaragua are not nearly large enough to justify the enormous investment of military resources and political capital which the Reagan administration has invested in its policy of aggression. Figures from the Department of Commerce for 1977, two years before the fall of Somoza, indicate that direct investment



Jaime Perozo

Multi-national corporations have found that it is quite possible to conduct business in a Nicaragua governed by the Sandinistas.

by U.S. companies in Nicaragua was the second lowest in the region. It amounted to some \$108 million, compared with \$178 million in Costa Rica and \$155 million in Guatemala. The \$2.442 billion invested in nearby Panama was almost four times as much as in all five Central American countries.⁴⁷⁵

Regional hegemony

If the comparatively modest value of Nicaragua to the U.S. economy cannot in itself explain the brutal attentions of the Reaganites, quite possibly its location in a larger system can: "The United States sees Central America as part of Latin America — an area which provides the second largest market for U.S. products after Western Europe, and accounts for nearly 80 percent of U.S. direct and financial investment in the third world. Any threat to U.S. interests in one country — be it Nicaragua, Chile or El Salvador — is viewed as a threat to the totality of U.S. economic control. Washington fears that a rash of imitative nationalist or revolutionary governments could threaten its considerable economic interests in Latin America."⁴⁷⁶

Within this perspective, Nicaragua's significance is that of a crucial link in a chain which, according to some critics of U.S. superpower, is clenched around the entire globe. One of the most persuasive exponents of that view is Noam Chomsky, who explains that a foreign policy elite, convened during 1939-1945 by the State Department and the ostensibly private Council on Foreign Relations, developed a comprehensive plan for U.S. postwar domination of the world economy.

"The conception that they developed," writes Chomsky, "is what they called 'Grand Area' planning. The Grand Area was to be a region that was subordinated to the needs of the American economy... the region that is 'strategically necessary for world control'. [It] had to include at least the Western Hemisphere, the Far East, and the former British Empire.... Detailed plans were laid for particular regions of the Grand Area, and also for the international institutions that were to organize and police it."⁴⁷⁷

The U.S. did of course emerge as the colossus of the post-war period, and Latin America's primary role in the resulting international political-economic system was as a provider of raw materials, preferably at low cost: "After World War II, Washington officials had concluded that access to Latin American food and raw materials, at the lowest possible prices, was essential for the West's security."⁴⁷⁸

It was also considered desirable that the region not require too much looking after from a military standpoint so that, in the great game of the Cold War just getting under way, the U.S. could concentrate its resources in such hot spots as Korea and the Middle East. In the reasonable tones of the Secretary of War (the "Defense" euphemism had not yet been adopted in 1945), "I think that it's not asking too much to have our little region over here which has never bothered anybody."⁴⁷⁹

"Our" raw materials

The enviable predicament of the United States was illuminated on several occasions by George Kennan, whom Chomsky describes as "one of the most thoughtful, humane and liberal of the [Grand Area] planners". In 1948, Kennan wrote: "We have about 50 percent of the world's wealth, but only 6.3 percent of its population. In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity."

Two years later, Kennan explained the situation at a meeting of U.S. ambassadors to Latin America. Their duty, he said, was to oversee:

- "1. The protection of our [sic] raw materials;
2. The prevention of military exploitation of Latin America by the enemy; and,
3. The prevention of the psychological mobilization of Latin America against us."

If Europe were to turn against the United States, warned Kennan, "Latin America would be all we would have to fall back on."⁴⁸⁰

That was in 1950, and the world has changed a great deal since. But it is difficult not to discern the outline of that general strategy in the history of U.S.-Latin America relations since World War II, and even before. In 1927 the Undersecretary of State for Latin America explained why the Marines were chasing Sandino and his peasant army around the Nicaraguan countryside: "The Central American area constitutes a legitimate sphere of influence for the United States.... Our ministers accredited to the five little republics have been advisers whose advice has been accepted virtually as law.... We do control the destinies of Central America, and we do so for the simple reason that the national interest dictates such a course.... There is no room for any outside influence other than ours in this region.... Until now, Central America has always understood that governments which we recognize and support stay in power, while those which we do not recognize and support fall. Nicaragua has become a test case. It is difficult to see how we can afford to be defeated."⁴⁸¹

That's plain enough. Of course, in the modern fog of public relations and *pro forma* respect for national integrity, one does not hear such blunt talk from U.S. leaders in public. The closest thing to it was the admission by Ronald Reagan in a 1986 press conference that he was going to continue beating up on Nicaragua until the Sandinistas "cry uncle" and do as they're told.

In this context, the current assault on Nicaragua makes perfect sense. The great sin of the Sandinistas is that they propose to liberate Nicaragua from the system of political, military and economic dependency which the U.S. has maintained in Latin America since the start of the 20th century. If they succeed, it could inspire other components of the system to attempt something similar. In the expressive phrase of Dianna Melrose, the Sandinista revolution poses "the threat of a good example".⁴⁸²

Threatening example

"You know, we do represent a threat," acknowledged one citizen of the new Nicaragua. "It is the sort of threat a worker represents to an enterprise which is breaching the labor laws. If all of a sudden one worker speaks up, the owner begins to worry. Nicaragua is not only challenging the U.S. It challenges the belief that there could not be another revolution [than Cuba's] in Latin America for the rest of this century. If people believe something cannot be achieved, they will not attempt it. We are becoming a stimulus to other Latin American countries, just by being. Therefore, I believe that the U.S. has concluded we must be stopped."⁴⁸³

If that is the case, it would explain a lot of Reaganite behavior. It certainly suggests an explanation for the monstrous gap between the reality of the Sandinista revolution and the Reaganites' distorted vision of it. If Nicaragua does pose the threat of a good example, it is vital that the rest of the world remain ignorant or at least confused about it. (The actual threat may be of another sort; see below, "Circumstantial evidence").

An insistence on Latin American dependency might also account for the United States' enthusiasm for dictatorships, with or without the adornment of civilian government. For the maintenance of such a system, "stability" is to be desired above all other virtues, the better to protect The American Way of Life. Of course, there are those who argue that the kind of stability imposed by a Somoza or a Pinochet with U.S. military assistance creates social pressures that are bound to erupt into revolution, sooner or later.

This debate has been sharpened by the policies of the Reagan administration. "Washington and its allies contend that priority for Central America should be political and economic stabilization. The key elements of their view are short-term stability, an export-oriented economy, private sector dominance, and reliance on the United States.

"On the other side are the advocates of structural change, who propose new economic priorities that stress production

for the internal market, widespread participation in the political process, and the satisfaction of the basic needs of all classes in society. The proponents of reform opt for national self-determination and reduced U.S. control."⁴⁸⁴

If the foregoing description of reform seems familiar, that is perhaps because it constitutes the basic program of the Sandinista revolution. Just as clearly, the Reaganites have been pursuing the policy of "stabilization" with which the U.S. has typically responded to Latin American conflicts. But many U.S. businessmen and military leaders feel that it is likely to guarantee the very outcome it is supposed to prevent.

A businessman and engineer with over 20 years of experience in the region has outlined the standard sequence of events as follows:

- "1. The elite maintains economic, political and military control over the people.
2. Protests rise from the poor about social injustice.
3. The elite rejects protests, standing firm on its privileges.
4. Frustrated protesters rebel.
5. The elite suppresses rebellion.
6. Rebellion escalates to revolution
7. The U.S. gives military assistance to the elite for the suppression of the poor.
8. The U.S.S.R. gives military assistance to the poor.

"The concept which should be clear is that the U.S. is allied with the wealthy elite in their effort to maintain their privileges. The U.S.S.R. identifies with the common people.

"Economic assistance provided by the U.S. is funneled down from the top, and it tends to dry up before it reaches the poor. The U.S.S.R., on the other hand, works from the bottom, and its influence tends to grow with the escalation. The difference is not missed by the miserable majority."⁴⁸⁵

The uses of communism

That doesn't sound very much like the story told by the U.S. government, which has characterized the "communist threat" as an effort at global tyranny, fatal to the happiness of rich and poor alike. But that kind of talk strikes critics of U.S. hegemony as a smokescreen deployed to obscure the imperial purpose of the United States, and engineer the consent of the voters at home.

The real threat of communism, argues Chomsky, is its potential for interfering with U.S. dominion over the world economy. "Communism," he writes, is "the belief that 'the government has direct responsibility for the welfare of the people'. I'm quoting the words of a 1949 State Department intelligence report which warned about the spread of this grim doctrine, which does, of course, threaten 'our raw materials'.... [A later study] concluded accurately that the primary threat of Communism is the economic transformation of the Communist powers 'in ways which reduce their willingness and ability to complement the industrial economies of the West'." ⁴⁸⁶

From that perspective, "communism" is only incidentally concerned with the writings of Marx and Lenin, or the socio-economic order of the Soviet Union. More to the point in this context, it is anything that threatens control of Latin American economies by the United States and its surrogate elites. That is why the label of "communist" is applied so freely — to priests, teachers, doctors, and anyone else who dares to tinker with the established order. By this commodious definition, the Sandinistas are communists, after all, because they clearly believe that "the government has direct responsibility for the welfare of the people", and have flaunted their determination to reduce Nicaragua's dependence on the United States.

But such a delineation of the communist threat would never do at home. The majority of U.S. citizens might become uneasy were their government to justify the struggle against the Red Menace by citing the necessity of maintaining their "position of disparity" with respect to the world's wealth. In the Home of the Brave and the Land of the Free, the fight

against communism must be nothing less than a “selfless enterprise” (as noble Nixon glorified the rape of Vietnam). A basic tenet of U.S. political culture is that the country is populated preponderantly by decent folks who mean well. That is possibly true; hence the anti-communist crusade.

To engineer the consent of decent folks to evil policies, there is nothing so efficacious as scaring them half to death. The ongoing crusade against communism has been so successful that the very word has acquired the power to instill dread. Few citizens of the United States have a clear idea what it means, or the slightest inclination to find out (to do so is fraught with risk).

The notion that the U.S. is in imminent peril from communism — a proposition for which there has never been any convincing evidence — is the theme of perhaps the most effective campaign in the history of advertising. It has resulted in a relatively well-educated population with a trained incapacity to comprehend some of the most fundamental aspects of world affairs — e.g. that the United States looms in the same sort of relationship to Central America as does the Soviet Union to Central Europe.

One result is a climate of public opinion which makes it relatively easy for a demagogue like Ronald Reagan to justify aggressive warfare by invoking the Red Menace. The voters may not share the president’s declared sense of urgency; but they are usually prepared to concede the basic legitimacy of his concern. Polling data on the Nicaragua issue confirm this fact of U.S. political life.

The crusade against communism must, accordingly, be included on any list of explanations for the Reaganite assault on Nicaragua. There appear to be millions of U.S. citizens who sincerely believe that the Sandinista revolution poses a “clear and present danger” to the security of the United States, to the cause of Freedom everywhere, to the preservation of religious liberty, etc., etc. These people may have been herded to their beliefs by the most cynical propaganda imaginable, but it works — so well, that it can recoil on the

propagandists (see below, “Raw meat, mad dogs”). These fearful souls constitute a political pressure group of desperate intensity, and their zeal is clearly a significant factor in the formation and conduct of U.S. foreign policy.

One final point in this connection: Anti-communism is such a powerful sentiment that it may be useful from time-to-time to create a “communist threat” where none exists. If an uppity nation like Nicaragua refuses to resume its position in the established order of U.S. things, there is something to be gained by forcing it to become dependent on the Soviet Union. The more often Daniel Ortega visits Moscow, the easier it is for the Reaganites to sound the alarm.

Who is “Washington”?

On the face of it, the suspicion that Nicaragua is being persecuted because of its determination to secede from the U.S. system of dependency seems to explain a great deal. There is little doubt that the United States seeks to control certain events in Latin America. But which events, for what purpose and on whose behalf? Some of the difficulties in answering those questions may be illustrated with a statement quoted earlier: “Washington fears that a rash of imitative nationalist or revolutionary governments could threaten its considerable economic interests in Latin America.”

That has a plausible ring to it, but just who is “Washington”? There are a lot of people in that city. They come and go, and they say and do all sorts of things.

“Naturally, the common people don’t want war.... But, after all, it is the leaders of a country who determine policy, and it is always a simple matter to drag people along, whether it is a democracy, fascist dictatorship, a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in every country.”

— Herman Goering, head of Nazi Germany’s air force⁴⁸⁷

The U.S. ambassador to El Salvador under the Carter administration is now one of the fiercest opponents of the Reaganites' Central American policy. Their own man in Tegucigalpa has turned against them (cf. reference to John Ferch, page 384). In early 1988 one official of the Reagan administration confided his belief that, "Different administration officials had different perspectives about the role of the *contras* that were never resolved, and now that the whole thing is coming to an end, it's hard to say whether we ever really had a clear policy goal in Nicaragua."⁴⁸⁸

If there really is foreign policy establishment intent on keeping Nicaragua and the rest of Latin America firmly within the confines of the Grand Area, as Noam Chomsky contends, who are these people, exactly what are their motives, and how do they make their influence felt?

There have been times and situations for which it has been a lot easier to answer that question. The CIA's 1954 coup against the Arbenz government of Guatemala is a case in point. Key participants in the operation later gave detailed accounts of the complicity between the Eisenhower administration and United Fruit Co., which wanted to retain Guatemala as its corporate preserve. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had been a senior partner in the law firm serving United Fruit, and its principal adviser on foreign operations. His brother, CIA Director Allen Dulles, belonged to the same law firm. Assistant Secretary of State on Inter-American Affairs John Moors Cabot was the brother of Thomas Dudley Cabot, a former president of United Fruit. The overthrow of the Arbenz administration was supervised by General Walter Bedell Smith, a close adviser to Eisenhower and a former CIA director; he was subsequently appointed to United Fruit's Board of Directors.

These facts suggest that the fate of Arbenz could have been foretold merely by superimposing the corporate roster of United Fruit on the personnel chart of the Eisenhower administration. In a somewhat more complex fashion, the same sort of tale is told by the tragic fate of the Allende government in Chile (cf. pages 95 ff.).

Circumstantial evidence

But, so far, there is nothing to indicate a similar conspiracy between identifiable business interests and the Reagan administration behind the assault on Nicaragua. There is, of course, a great deal of circumstantial evidence. One could point to the close ties between the corporate world and the administration, generally; and there is the fact that Reagan is very definitely a product of Big Business (see "The Ronald Reagan Trust Fund", page 457).

Furthermore, the incestuous relationship between the CIA and the corporate world is hardly a secret, and the same can be said of the State Department. Both agencies have lengthy histories of interference in Latin American affairs, and both maintain large staffs for that purpose.

During the Reagan administration, major U.S. corporations have formed something called Caribbean Central American Action (CCAA), which also includes representatives from the National Security Council, Congress, and the U.S. Information Agency. It describes its task as the promotion of trade and development in the region, but that seems to require a certain amount of political action. Its members have been active supporters of the CIA-*contras* and other expressions of the administration's "stabilization" policy. There is obviously a close working relationship between the Reagan administration and businessmen with various kinds of interest in Latin America, and it is entirely likely that they see eye-to-eye on many issues, but it is not something that they are inclined to discuss in public.

As noted previously, however, there are powerful business interests that do not appear to be served at all well by the Reaganites' Central America policy — IBM and EXXON, for example. An extensive 1981 survey of transnational corporations (TNCs) doing business in Central America found that, "In contrast to Reagan, virtually all TNC managers who responded to the survey placed the origins of the political and economic crisis in the region's internal problems, rather than in Cuban or Soviet influence. They also agreed that the Central

American nations face a choice between major reforms and revolutionary change that would be far more sweeping than that in Nicaragua.... Concerning Nicaragua, the survey revealed that most of them objected to the U.S. cutoff of aid to the country.... The experience of the TNCs in Nicaragua was... that they could profitably conduct business there."⁴⁸⁹

The overall picture, then, is rather cloudy. On the one hand, Reagan and his administration have intimate relations with some corporations which may approve of the assault on Nicaragua. On the other hand, many corporate leaders have expressed opposition to that policy. It also appears that similar disagreements have informed deliberations within the administration.

This is not to suggest that there is no "global strategic planning" by the U.S. government. Of course there is, but it has been justified in terms of a struggle for survival against the Evil Empire. To judge from their consistent public utterances, there is every reason to believe that most of those doing the struggling — military planners, State Department officials, CIA agents, etc. — understand their project in those terms.

At the same time, there is obviously an economic dimension to the struggle. It could hardly be otherwise, given that the conflict has been defined as a contest between competing socio-economic systems — communism vs. capitalism (or "freedom", as the latter is sometimes called). It appears that the military and economic aspects have now become so intertwined that it is impossible to separate them. It may very well be that, as Chomsky argues, a lust for the world's wealth is behind it all. But there is often a distinction between the origins of a human phenomenon and its perpetuation; that is especially true of conflicts.

It is not inconceivable that, like some hillbilly feud escalating stupidly across the generations, the hostile engagements and propaganda of the Cold War have transmuted into a self-sustaining holy war. Who needs history, when it is constantly being repeated in places like Hungary and Nicaragua?

The “threat of a good example” posed by Nicaragua, therefore, may simply be the ancient one of heresy. Having been defined (erroneously) as a communist project, it must be prevented from succeeding today so that it may not inspire or proselytize tomorrow. Perceived in that unholy light, Nicaragua’s potential threat to the military or economic security of the United States would be entirely irrelevant as, indeed, seems to be the case with the Reaganites.

In any event, there are as yet no taped conferences, bugged telephone conversations or smoking memoranda to confirm or deny that global economic scheming is the primary driving force behind the current assault on Nicaragua. Until such evidence is uncovered, there are one or two other explanations of the Reaganites’ destructive tendencies to consider.

Raw meat, mad dogs

It is a truism of U.S. politics that success depends on building coalitions of disparate groups and individuals. Furthermore, the wider the scope of the office, the more diversity it must embrace. As the president is the only official chosen by the entire electorate, anyone who aspires to that position must attempt to be “all things to all people”, or at least more things to more people than his opponent is.

The presidential candidate of the Republican Party faces the special problem of dealing with its right wing, the support of which is presumed essential to nomination. The Republican right is the main suppository of fear and hate in national politics, but those very complaints energize it with fervor unequalled by any other major segment of the electorate. Right-wingers vote in disproportionate numbers, are willing to lick envelopes until their tongues turn glue, and understand that “support” is spelled m-o-n-e-y. But if their devotion is fierce, so is their vengeance; these disciples are jealous disciples.

(Continued on page 458)

Financing Ronald Reagan

By 1951, Reagan was playing opposite a chimpanzee in *Bedtime for Bonzo*.... Turning fifty, Reagan was rescued from obscurity by Ralph J. Cordiner, president of General Electric....

Reagan began making public appearances and pro-business speeches across the country on behalf of G.E. Hollywood receded into the background as Reagan collected a vast array of index cards filled with examples of federal bureaucracy run amok, social welfare programs wasting money and ruining lives, and the ever-increasing threat of socialism to America's free-enterprise system....

Several new-money millionaires decided that Reagan had a more promising future than merely speaking at Chamber of Commerce meetings.... [A group of wealthy businessmen] formed the Ronald Reagan Trust Fund to take over his personal finances and free him to concentrate on a political career....

— *Thomas R. Dye*⁴⁹⁰

The tale [of how Ronald Reagan became a millionaire] involves the sale of land so barren and craggy that it seems more suited for mountain goats than for commercial development. Yet it yielded Mr. Reagan an apparent 3000% profit. Still unexplained is why Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp., the land purchaser, ever thought it was such a good deal in the first place.

The president of Fox's real estate unit says that she doesn't know where the records of the sale are, and that she wouldn't discuss it in any event. "Why should we want to air those dirty linens? It would just dirty Fox's name. Maybe the management decided they owed Reagan a favor. Who knows? Who cares?"

— *Wall Street Journal*⁴⁹¹

(Continued from page 456)

The problem for the Republican candidate is that the right wing is usually far out of touch with the rest of the country. To attract the necessary votes of independents and wayward Democrats, it is necessary to perform a “shift to the center”, which is now one of the most firmly entrenched rituals of presidential politics. Having nailed down the Republican nomination, George Bush (Reagan’s vice president) was already segueing into his centrist modality by the spring of 1988.

If Bush should find himself in the White House next year, he and his associates will have to decide on what to do with the right wing. In all likelihood, it will have worked hard for his victory, and will be ready to reap its reward in the form of political appointments and policy initiatives. If there is one policy it can be certain to insist on, it is ferocious anti-communism.

So it was when Ronald Reagan became president in 1980 — a particularly joyous occasion for anti-communist crusaders, since Reagan had for decades cast his image as one of them. As a leading analyst of Republican politics pointed out in 1986, “Ronald Reagan has three or four core beliefs and he just keeps acting on them. One is small government. The other is low tax rates. The third is strong defense. And the fourth is this one — standing up to the Communists.”⁴⁹²

Whether from the sincerity of his beliefs or other motives, Reagan has presided over an administration which has pursued those core policies with such zeal and, until recently, with such success as to inspire talk of a fundamental rightward shift in U.S. politics.

The assault on Nicaragua has been the central prong of the Reaganites deadly thrust against the Red Menace. Indeed, it was a happy accident for the crusade that the Sandinista revolution came along when it did. Not only did it provide a terrific campaign issue; but, once defined as a manifestation of the Red Menace, it offered a handy target — like shooting ducks in a barrel. As it turned out, the barrel-shooters hired for the occasion, the CIA-*contras*, were pretty lousy shots. But they

have at least managed to keep the target off balance: "Few U.S. officials now believe the *contras* can drive out the Sandinistas soon. Administration officials said they are content to see the *contras* debilitate the Sandinistas by forcing them to divert scarce resources toward the war and away from social programs."⁴⁹³

It has also been suggested that, by satisfying right-wingers' blood lust, the assault on Nicaragua has served the useful purpose of keeping them out of White House moderates' hair. "One of the things the Reagan Administration did early on," says former Rep. Michael Barnes of Maryland, "was to turn Latin American policy over to the right-wing loonies. They didn't want the right-wingers meddling in our relations with the Soviets or the Chinese. Their basic attitude was, 'Let's throw some red meat to the hard-core, mad-dog right-wingers.' The meat was Latin America, and the mess we're in today results from it."⁴⁹⁴

Barnes is a liberal Democrat, for which he has been duly punished (cf. page 297). But his conclusion is seconded by a senior vice president of the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing organization with close ties to the Reagan White House: "Conservatives do have control of Central American policy.... No other issue stirs up conservatives so much as Central America. In no other area do conservatives have as much clout. I can see a secretary of state saying, 'Why fight that? Let them have it. It's not worth the aggravation.'"⁴⁹⁵

"Nicaragua is in no way a threat to the United States. It has held elections which were freer of violence and less spoiled by intimidation, and which offered a wider range of ideological choices than most elections in the region. It has pledged not to accept foreign bases, either for nuclear or conventional weapons, on its territory and has offered to sign a treaty with the United States to that effect. Its only danger to Washington is that it sets an example of independence which has been lacking for decades in the Central American isthmus."

— Manchester Guardian editorial, 6 July 1986

The secretary is all the more likely to cave in, of course, if his president shares the right-wing view of the world, and that certainly describes Ronald Reagan.

The same theory has been adduced to explain the ugly phenomenon of Elliott Abrams: "Secretary Shultz has delegated broad powers to Abrams to conduct a policy that greatly pleases the ultra-conservatives and the president, but that perplexes many professionals in the State Department. In what State Department officials describe as an arrangement that evolved over time without any formal agreement, Shultz has, in effect, conceded Central America to the hard-line conservatives, through Abrams. In the meantime, Shultz has been able to exercise a relatively free hand in dealing with the Soviet Union."

In other words, the people of Nicaragua have been used as pawns in a deadly game of political and bureaucratic chess, deriving from the powerful influence of the Republican right wing in the administration of Ronald Reagan.

This does not necessarily mean that the Sandinistas would have been left alone had a Democrat been elected president in 1980. It was Franklin D. Roosevelt, the biggest Democrat of them all, who is alleged to have anointed Somoza as "our son of a bitch". Many of the civilians now fronting for the CIA-*contras*, in Miami with the "Nicaraguan Resistance" or in Managua with COSEP and the *Democratica Coordinadora*, are the self-same creatures of American democracy in whose clutches the administration of Democrat Jimmy Carter had once attempted to place the institutional levers of "Somocismo without Somoza"; to judge from his public pronouncements, Carter has learned very little from subsequent events.

Still, it is unlikely that a Democrat would have felt the same pressure or inclination as Ronald Reagan to pander to the most hateful element of the U.S. electorate. Almost certainly, there would have been an effort at negotiations with the Sandinistas, and Elliott Abrams would have had to find some other outlet for his queer talents.

Finally, it should be noted that much of the Democrats' acquiescence in destructive policies results, at least in part,

from the need to cover their political backsides against red-baiting attacks from the right wing. This is not to excuse such "expedient" behavior, but merely to acknowledge it as yet another dubious achievement of the right wing.

Scarcity of wisdom

Notwithstanding any plausibility that may attach to theories of economic conspiracy, political power brokering, etc., it is always advisable to recall the vital role of ignorance and stupidity in the affairs of humankind. The Reaganites' assault on Nicaragua provides an especially appropriate occasion for such reflection, since it appears to be based so completely on false premises, tortured or non-existent evidence and faulty logic.

It should also be remembered that the consequences which flow from a pattern of behavior do not always account for the motivation behind it. There are many examples, including that provided by the missionaries who set out from Europe in the 19th century to Christianize the benighted tribes of Africa and other outposts of empire. It was presumably not their intent to weaken the bonds of clan and family relationships, or to promote the disintegration of tribal authority so that the natural resources of Africa might be transferred to Europe with minimal interference from the natives. Heaven forbid: All they wanted to do was bring the unspeakable joy of the Christian god's love to souls in need of redemption.

It is not impossible that Nicaragua's destruction has been motivated, at least in part, by analogous impulses of an allegedly noble and uplifting nature. For compelling evidence, it is necessary to look no further than to the mind of Ronald Reagan. That amiable presidential icon, representing most that is intellectually lazy and dishonest in the United States, appears at times to have stepped out from the pages of a Sinclair Lewis novel — part George Babbitt, part Elmer Gantry. His anti-communist zeal certainly has a missionary ring to it.

Concerning Reagan's ignorance there is little doubt. This is the custodian of nuclear might: whose own daughter has,

with indifferent success, struggled to convince him that it is not possible to call back intercontinental missiles once they have been launched; who has stated that vegetation is the major cause of air pollution and has acted accordingly; who must be prepared for days in advance of his rare encounters with the press and often must be “clarified” afterwards by “aides”; etc., etc....

Careful handling, united with deferential treatment by the mainstream press, enabled Reagan to pull off the presidential act to widespread applause for six years. Then came the Iran/Contragate scandal, and all of a sudden neither the press nor its public was willing to suspend disbelief any longer. It did not help that the only defense Reagan’s handlers were able to devise was a confession of presidential ignorance and incompetence. “A joke making the rounds in Washington had Reagan defecting to the Soviets, only to be sent home because the Kremlin discovered that ‘he didn’t know anything’. *The Economist’s* verdict on Irangate was ‘Guilty, but asleep.’”⁴⁹⁶

It was a measure of Reagan’s well-earned reputation as a doofus that, when he claimed that he didn’t know anything about one of the most important foreign policy initiatives of his administration and that it had been pursued for years without his knowledge by a “cabal” of White House subordinates, many believed him.

Commies in Hollywood

Reagan’s belligerence toward communism, and those accused of it has been traced back to his days as president of the Screen Actors Guild following World War II. In the frenzied Cold War spirit of that time, the future president was led to a conclusion touted by the House Un-American Activities Committee. i.e. that the Reds were plotting to take over the dream factory and weaken the Land of the Free from within by means of celluloid thought control.

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“You’d Be Surprised” by Ronald Reagan

“Well, I learned a lot.... I went down [to Latin America] to find out from them and learn their views. You’d be surprised. They’re all individual countries.”

— *Ronald Reagan, 1982*

“Approximately 80% of our air pollution stems from hydrocarbons released by vegetation, so let’s not go overboard in setting and enforcing tough emission standards from man-made sources.”

— *Ronald Reagan, 1980*

“Following a half-hour lecture by the Lebanese Foreign Minister on the intricate realities of his country’s many political factions, [Reagan’s reaction was]: ‘You know, your nose looks just like Danny Thomas’s.’”

“When asked how a Nicaraguan official can be removed from office without violence, Reagan answered, ‘You just say to the fellow that’s sitting there in the office: You’re not in the office anymore.’”

“What do you do when your president ignores all the palpable, relevant facts and wanders in circles? I could not bear to watch this good and decent man go on in this embarrassing way. I buried my head in my plate.”

— *Former Budget Director David Stockman*

“He was used to making movies, an activity in which every word and gesture were scripted. He regarded his daily schedule as something like a shooting script in which characters came and went, scenes were rehearsed and acted out, and the plot was advanced one day at a time, and not always in sequence.”

— *Former White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan*⁴⁹⁷

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“The Communist plan for Hollywood was remarkably simple,” he later wrote. “It was merely to take over the motion picture business for a grand worldwide propaganda base.... From being an active (though unconscious) partisan in what now and then turned out to be Communist causes, I little by little became disillusioned or, perhaps in my case, I should say reawakened.”⁴⁹⁸

Having thus freed himself from the ideological shackles of the New Deal, the “one-worldism” of the United Nations, and other baneful delusions of the liberal Democrats, Reagan was soon riding the Rotary Club and Chamber of Commerce circuit to sound the alarm (at the tax-free expense of General Electric and other benefactors of the American Way of Life).

The more Reagan railed against the horrors of creeping socialism within and totalitarian dungeons without, the more wealthy supporters and wealth he attracted. It wasn’t long before his new friends were urging him to run for political office.

“He once described to me how he got into politics,” recalls a former White House official. He told someone, ‘By God, what am I doing in politics? The kinds of things I’ve done so far are far away from this. But then I thought that a substantial part of the political thing is acting and role-playing, and I know how to do that. So I used to worry, but I don’t anymore’.”⁴⁹⁹

The man and the occasion were well met, therefore, when Ronald Reagan replaced Jimmy Carter in the White House just 18 months after the fall of Somoza. Urged on by kindred ideologues like CIA Director William Casey and Marine Col. Oliver North, Reagan was effortlessly persuaded to play the role of Defender of the Free World at the expense of the Nicaraguan people. It was like giving candy to a baby.

“The president and his closest White House advisers were inexperienced and ignorant of foreign policy,” concludes one historian. “Their background and ideology led them to believe sincerely that the Soviets caused most of the world’s problems, even in Central America. Their approach, moreover,



Tony Auth, Washington Post Writers Group

promised sweet political rewards. By fixing on the area as a first arena for confrontation with the Soviets, the administration could win in its own 'backyard'. The world could then see that Carterism had given way to tough Republicanism. Reagan thus escalated a regional conflict into a global confrontation between the superpowers."⁵⁰⁰

Other observers feel that the president's simple-minded crusade against the Red Menace was fortified by less ideological subordinates who nevertheless recognized the political and career advantages to be gained from it. "Of course, there are a few true believers in the government," concedes David MacMichael, the former CIA agent who testified on behalf of Nicaragua at the World Court, "but for the most part they're a pretty cynical bunch who thought they could win easily in Nicaragua and publicize this as a defeat of the evil empire" (cf. page 235).

The elevation of someone like Ronald Reagan to the U.S. presidency tends to validate theories of conspiratorial elites manipulating U.S. politics. Having been trained to push all the appropriate right-wing buttons, and having been rewarded

handsomely for his performance, Reagan appears to have fuddled through his term in office like a real-life Wizard of Oz. With an amiable automaton like that on the throne, it would not be necessary to issue detailed instructions. Indeed, the fewer details for his indolent mind to grapple with, the better. It would be necessary only to recruit and groom him for office, surround him with eager acolytes such as Oliver North and Elliott Abrams to handle the dirty work, and cultivate his avuncular image for the voters.

There is little hard evidence of any such conspiracy, but the career of Ronald Reagan inevitably raises the question of whether or not, at this very moment, the millionaires of the "Palm Springs mafia" are cultivating his successors for some mean and ugly season yet to come.

A similar thought has occurred to Nicaragua's Vice President, Sergio Ramirez: "I think of Reagan as a sort of Frankenstein's monster. Not in the pejorative sense — but when you think of the Frankenstein legend, the monster was made up of the bodies and brains of different people, with horrible

"Donald Regan was not the first person to tell us that the lights were out in the presidential noggin.... David Stockman's early grenade of a kiss-and-teller warned us that Reagan on the economy was like a kid playing with matches...."

"When Sen. Bob Packwood, R-Ore., quoted Reagan uttering empty-headed campaign claptrap, conservatives said, Ahh, that's just a liberal Republican knocking a conservative. When Al Haig wrote about all the foreign policy stuff Reagan didn't know, we said, Ahh, sour grapes."

"When David Broder, that most even-tempered and fair-minded and centrist of political commentators, wrote of aides trying to 'water the arid desert between Reagan's ears', we shrugged and said, Gee, it's not like David to be that harsh...."

"This is the ideal president for staff members who want to push their own pet projects."

— David Nyhan⁵⁰¹

results. Within Reagan's mind, I don't think there is any one person, but rather a mixture of any number of extremists who have dwelt in the academic and corporate catacombs, who have waited all these years to put their policies into effect."⁵⁰²

Bureaucratic inertia

Frankenstein monster or Wizard of Oz, Ronald Reagan has been served by a ponderous administrative apparatus, ready and eager to continue a lengthy tradition of meddling in Latin American affairs. Granted, it may have been necessary to lop off some department heads, transfer a few troublemakers, and in other small ways whip the machinery of government into shape for aggression. But it has not been necessary for the Reaganites to indoctrinate the CIA and the State Department in the theory and practice of intervention.

The CIA is so active and pervasive south of the border that it functions as a sort of regional meta-government. Needless to say, its agents have been thoroughly imbued with the Cold War twist on things, and most are primed to go out and win one for Freedom. A former agent, whose faith could not survive the horrors and hypocrisy of the CIA's vandalism in Southeast Asia, has described the agency's recruitment and indoctrination methods: "The CIA wants active, charming, obedient people who can get things done in the social world, but have limited perspective and understanding, who see things in black and white and don't like to think too much....

"The orientation course featured melodramatic, frightening movies on communism.... The grand finale, the last word on communism, was to be heard in a lecture scheduled for the last day of the course.... [We were warned that] 'The Soviets attack our flag and country. Stalin is fighting to destroy all religion, our allies, and our way of life. We all jumped up, spontaneously shouting and cheering our commitment.... We quietly discussed how we could defeat this scourge.

"Thinking about it years later, I realized that the purpose of the course was to fire us up emotionally to fight communism

rather than educate us about what communism was and how it operated.”⁵⁰³

Other government agencies provide a similar, if somewhat less intense, education for their staffs. It should not astonish if many of the exposed personnel have been duly infected. That applies to the military services, certainly, and to the Department of State, which has forsaken its putative function of diplomacy to become an instrument of terrorism in accordance with the desires of the Reaganites. At the beginning, there were a few lonely voices of moderation; but they were brushed aside early in the game (as in the case of Vietnam).

“The new administration could not think creatively in political and diplomatic terms. Any tendency to think politically was short-circuited by a purge in the State Department that removed many of the Foreign Service Officers who were most experienced in Latin American affairs and whose places were taken by military officers.”⁵⁰⁴

In attempting to account for the sad fate of Nicaragua, therefore, it is necessary to factor in the administrative apparatus slapped together through all the long decades of U.S. intervention in Latin America. The cold warriors are in place; what they have been trained to perceive, and the advice they give their nominal superiors, may be assumed to coincide with the “national interest” of the United States as it is currently understood. The U.S. may be messing around in Nicaragua simply because that is what it is set up to do, and asking it to get out is rather like asking McDonald’s to stop making hamburgers, or Toyota to stop selling cars.

A breed apart

No discussion of U.S. foreign policy is complete without some reference to the national tradition of insufferable arrogance. “Please do not resent my frankness,” begged Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev of some U.S. journalists in May of 1988, but in addition to their admirable pragmatism, he felt that Americans “also have a trait... which sometimes makes it difficult to deal with them. I mean their confidence that every-

thing American is the best, while what others have is at least worse, if not altogether bad and unfit for use.”⁵⁰⁵

It is far from a novel observation, nor has it occurred only to representatives of the Evil Empire. Some 150 years ago, the famously prescient and sympathetic French chronicler, Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote in *Democracy in America*: “For the last fifty years it has been repeated to the inhabitants of the United States that they are the only religious, noble, and free people. See how among them, until now, democratic institutions prosper, while they fail in the rest of the world. Therefore, they have an immense opinion of themselves and are not far from believing that they form a breed apart from humankind.”

The “immense opinion of themselves” held by many citizens of the United States is partly a reflection of the envy and deference their country is accorded by the rest of the world. After all it was Napoleon Duarte who kissed the U.S. flag; we are not likely to see a Ronald Reagan kissing the flag of El Salvador.

But the U. S. does not need Napoleon Duarte or anyone else to fertilize its arrogance. It was already fully developed when De Tocqueville was struck by it a century-and-a-half ago. It is currently on display in the Reagan administration’s open contempt for international law. Tinged with casual cruelty and racism, it can be heard in the marching chant taught to Marines during basic training: “Napalm sticks to little children, all little children of the world. Red, yellow, black or gold, first they ignite, then they explode.”⁵⁰⁶

Of all the little children of the world, surely none have been subjected to the effects of Yankee arrogance for a longer period than those of Latin America. “The unbearable paternalism of the United States,” as a former president of Venezuela termed it, helps to explain the desperate reliance of the U.S. on dictators and military juntas. It is as though the keepers of the Western Hemisphere long ago dismissed any prospect of Latin Americans developing genuine democratic institutions and decided that they must therefore be content to let the United States install a suitable Somoza or Pinochet to impose “stability” upon them.

"In Honduras, outrage at the blatant U.S. disregard for national sovereignty came to the boiling point with the April 6th kidnapping of Juan Ramon Matta [an accused international drug trafficker]....

"Over 2000 Honduran demonstrators gathered the day after the kidnapping outside the U.S. embassy, set fire to some 25 vehicles and burned the embassy annex. 'The outburst had little to do with Matta and nothing to do with drugs,' said one demonstrator. 'It is a question of principle.... If they could do this to Matta, they could do this to any one of us. Second, if Matta is guilty of drug dealing, which most people believe he is, then let him be accused and tried in Honduras....

"The Matta kidnapping brought to a head the anger felt by all sectors of Honduran society at the systematic violation of Honduran sovereignty by the United States." ⁵⁰⁷

It is an arrogance which may beget precisely the outcome that right-wingers dread the most, i.e. the triumph of communism or something like it in Latin America. That is the view of a prominent member of El Salvador's conservative Christian Democratic Party:

"U.S. conservatives think that it is the false promises of Marxism-Leninism which ensnare ignorant peasants. This is largely false. More liberal Americans blame it on social injustice and grinding poverty; this is certainly the root of the problem, but it is not what ensures U.S. defeat.

"The most important weapon the communists have, and what makes their victory inevitable, is corruption and the Americans' arrogance and ignorance of Third World societies, which make them not only tolerate corruption, but often indirectly encourage it....

"The Vietnamese told me over and over again that this was the main weapon they had to work with, the weapon with which they converted people — not ideology.... But the American people don't understand this. They don't understand why they lost Vietnam.... This is one of the reasons why they will probably lose El Salvador." ⁵⁰⁸

Sufficient explanations

Of the possible motives reviewed here, those employed by the Reagan administration to justify its aggression are clearly spurious. The Reaganites have demonstrated not the slightest genuine concern for human rights (quite the contrary), have not the remotest cause for anxiety about Nicaragua's military capabilities, and have sabotaged every peace initiative.

More plausible are suspicions that the Reaganite policy is driven by the profit motive and/or a determination to keep Nicaragua economically dependent on the United States. The evidence for such theories is voluminous, but much of it is circumstantial and some of it is contradictory.

The best-documented explanations for the assault on Nicaragua appear to be that:

- It is a manifestation of the anti-communist crusade, which has been conducted with exceptional fervor by the Reagan administration.
- The influence of crusaders has been extended by the limits of Ronald Reagan's simple mind. His ignorance and dogmatism have made it possible for ideologues to apply military "solutions" to Central American problems.
- Nicaragua has served at least three purposes for the Republican party: (a) as a presidential campaign issue on which to "stand tall"; (b) as what was originally thought to be an easy target for a show of Reaganite force and a 'victory for Republicanism'; and (c) as "raw meat" with which to distract the mad dogs of the Republican right from issues of greater interest to White House moderates.
- Once it was defined as a communist project, the Sandinista revolution became intolerable to the crusade. Nicaragua poses the "threat of a good example", with its model of socio-economic development which deviates from the "stabilization" dogma of U.S. foreign policy.

- “The Americans’ arrogance and ignorance of Third World societies”, in combination with the dirty habits of the Cold War, tend to produce U.S. leaders who find it difficult to imagine a Central America that is not totally dependent. This basic attitude is reinforced by the knowledge that the region has been “ours” for nearly all of U.S. history.
- The habit of intervention and the Cold War have given rise to a powerful bureaucracy designed to impose the United States’ will on the nations of Central America, which it does almost as a matter of routine. It is the administrative expression of Yankee arrogance, and the question is: What would all those civil servants do if they didn’t have Nicaragua or a suitable alternative to kick around?

There may be other explanations for which compelling evidence may one day emerge. But for now, the foregoing are more than sufficient to account for the ordeal of Nicaragua during the time of Reagan.

One thing that stands out is the role of anti-communism in all this. Whatever the sincerity of those who yield to its violent embrace, it is a cause which unites a dog’s breakfast of groups and individuals. There are arms merchants trying to turn a fat buck, Israeli and Saudi Arabian leaders currying favor with Washington, frenetic crusaders battling assorted demons, political operators milking a hot issue for maximum effect, bureaucrats seeking to advance their careers, CIA agents going through the customary motions, former spooks and military personnel taking advantage of the manna floating down from right-wing heaven, etc., etc.

The anti-communist crusade is the crucible in which these diverse elements are stirred to concoct the Vietnams and Nicaraguas of this world.

CRUSADE ABATEMENT

Preventing more of the destruction that issues so freely from the minds of the Reaganites and kindred spirits will not be possible unless control of the government — direct and indirect — is taken out of their bloody hands. It is a project that will also require demolition of the ideological edifice that has sheltered them for so long.

It is a difficult problem, due not so much to any special ability of the Reaganites, but to the persistent apathy of those who must oppose them if any significant change is to take place. Few activities arouse less enthusiasm among the majority of U.S. citizens than the exercise of their citizenship, and little wonder:

Much of the time, politics is an empty-headed and joyless pursuit with little to recommend it over such alternative pleasures as bowling or doing the laundry. But to anyone who would truly like to help prevent an endless chain of Nicaraguas, there is no cure for it. Politics may be dirty work; but somebody's got to do it — and somebody always does, as Plato warned over 2000 years ago.

For all their achievements, it is unlikely that solidarity groups will ever be adequate to the task, since their resources can never match those of the federal government. Despite all the costly efforts and good works of the U.S.-Nicaragua solidarity movement, the total effect can only begin to compensate for the havoc unleashed by the White House.

This is due partly to the fact that the cost ratio of construction to destruction is extremely high, at least ten-to-one. A sister city organization can work like beavers for a year scraping together the \$10-20,000 it takes to build a medical clinic in Nicaragua, and spend another \$20,000 sending people there to help build it — only to learn weeks later that it has been blown up by the president's terrorists with a few hundred dollars worth of explosives. It takes only a single bullet or one swipe of a machete to nullify the costly training of a doctor or an engineer.

For the United States, the devastation of a small, conflict-ridden country like Nicaragua is a fiscal trifle. The entire destabilization program — including the care and feeding of the CIA-*contras*, the bribes to disruptive politicians and union leaders, the maintenance of *La Prensa* and Cardinal Obando, all of it — can be bought for what it takes to build and maintain a short stretch of interstate highway. The United States can easily afford to run several such programs at a time, and has been doing so during most of the Cold War.

The solidarity movement against just one of those programs has required the voluntary mobilization of enormous energies and resources, with results that cannot be described as completely satisfactory. Even if the CIA were to pull out of Nicaragua tomorrow (which it won't), the monumental task of reconstruction would remain. What happens when, in addition to helping clean up that mess, the relatively narrow segment of the U.S. population that cares about such things is confronted with the horrors of the next Nicaragua, and the next, and the next? It is far from a hypothetical question: If past experience is any guide, the plans for the next Nicaragua have already been laid.

High intensity suffering

The United States has a plan for the Third World, and it is called “low intensity conflict”. At the start of the Vietnam War it was called “counter-insurgency”, but it amounts to much the same thing — paying and equipping some citizens of a targeted nation to attack the rest. It is what the Reagan administration has been doing in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and there is every reason to expect more such operations in the years to come, no matter who is occupying the White House.

That's because a political consensus has formed around the notion that low intensity conflict (LIC) is the very thing for “protecting our national interests” in the Third World. It is very much a consequence of post-Vietnam syndrome, the idea being that hiring mercenaries carries far fewer political risks than the deployment of U.S. forces; it obviates a military

draft, and produces only a sparse traffic in body bags (mainly for “advisers”). It is also a great deal cheaper, since most Third World countries are so riven with internal strife that it is an inexpensive matter to enlist the hostile energies of disaffected elements with their own grievances to settle. A CIA-*contra* can be kept on the leash for a mere fraction of what it costs to outfit a U.S. soldier, and there are no costly veterans’ benefits to drain the treasury for the remainder of the mercenary’s life. Terribly cost-effective.

Of course, it matters little to a peasant farmer whether the skin is being peeled off his face by a Yankee invader or some guy who used to tend the neighboring rice paddy. The effect is the same, and the intensity of the conflict is “low” only to those — U.S. congressmen, for instance — who are far enough away that their sleep is not disturbed by the screams.

The U.S. capacity for promoting LIC has expanded rapidly under the Reaganites. The budget for Special Operations Forces, the advisers and co-ordinators of the program, has increased from \$441 million in 1981 to \$1.7 billion in 1987. There are plans for an additional \$8 billion to be spent on them over the next three years. The secret portions of the CIA’s budget have been expanded by an estimated 25 percent. A new Center for Low Intensity Conflict was established by the Army and the Air Force in 1986, and the National Security Council now has a special Board for Low Intensity Conflict.

In January of 1988, the Federal Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy, comprising “a virtual Who’s Who of the military-intellectual establishment”, issued its final report.

“The true American goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.... America well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself, beyond the power of extrication, in all wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy and ambition. She might become the dictatress of the world: she would no longer be ruler of her own spirit.”

— John Quincy Adams, 1821

Acknowledging the reduced threat of nuclear war, the commission urged continued vigilance against “Soviet-inspired insurgency” in the Third World, and recommended a rapid build-up of the capacity for “flexible response” to the red peril.

It had a familiar ring to it. “Under John Kennedy, flexible response became the byword at the Department of Defense and counterinsurgency the rallying cry in Vietnam. Before America perceived the risks inherent in these strategies of unlimited intervention, it was stuck in a bloody quagmire in Southeast Asia.”

It thus appears that, in devising their solution to the debilities of the post-Vietnam syndrome, the grand strategists of the military establishment have returned to their roots — in the poisoned, mined and blood-drenched soil of Vietnam....

It also appears that they will be taking much of the country with them: “The commission report is likely to be greeted with considerable approval in Washington, by leaders of both major parties.... Mainstream Democrats have adopted a get-tough military posture.... The need for beefed-up interventionary units has emerged as a theme in the campaign speeches” of leading Democratic candidates for president.⁵⁰⁹

The fourth branch

In the normal course of events, before there are low intensity conflicts there must be “covert operations”. That’s how the country was led into the Korean and Vietnam wars, and it is the recipe that gave rise to the CIA-*contras*.

Until recently, covert operations were conducted almost entirely by the CIA, but public outrage after the Vietnam War made it politic to distribute the tasks among other agencies of the government. According to one recent account more than half of the action has been quietly assigned to the Pentagon, and it would take an army of auditors to trace it to the innumerable nooks and crannies of the Defense Department’s gargantuan budget.⁵¹⁰

Apparently, not even the Pentagon leadership is told about some of these activities, and the “overlook” committees of

Congress are given the mushroom treatment long practiced by the CIA — i.e. “keep them in the dark and cover them with manure”. It all raises the distinct possibility that the next war the United States conducts will be initiated by some anonymous army officer with a personal score to settle, or simply too much time on his hands.

As for the CIA, one lapsed agent feels that it was out of control long before the excesses of the Reagan administration: “My view, backed by 25 years of experience is, quite simply, that the CIA is the covert action arm of the Presidency. Most of its money, manpower, and energy go into covert operations that, as we have seen over the years, include backing dictators and overthrowing democratically elected governments. The CIA is not an intelligence agency. In fact, it acts largely as an anti-intelligence agency....

“It employs the gamut of disinformation techniques, from forging documents to planting and ‘discovering’ communist weapons caches. But the major weapon in its arsenal of disinformation is the ‘intelligence’ it feeds to policymakers.... The CIA often ends up distorting reality, creating out of whole cloth ‘intelligence’ to justify policies that have already been decided upon. Policymakers then ‘leak’ this intelligence to the media to deceive us all and gain our support.”⁵¹¹

When, in addition to these practices the diverse troops of the President’s Private Army (cf. page 108 ff.) are added to the covert action stew, the question arises as to how many cooks are in charge, if any. Many feel that foreign policy is already being determined to a significant and haphazard degree by an informal “fourth branch” of government that has flourished like some deadly bacteria on the detritus of the Cold War:

“The original constitutional design created three branches of government.... The purpose was to produce a system of checks and balances. But this system is now being substantially bypassed or superseded by a fourth branch of government consisting of supersecret agencies that have taken on a new life of their own outside the constitutional process. These agencies have the power to carry out secret actions abroad — actions of which the president may not

aware. Vast machinery can be set in motion which limits presidential options.... The present custom is to inform the president rather than to seek his approval — generally after the fact.... The role of president, especially in the field of foreign affairs, is being shaped less by constitutional definition than by the actions of secret agencies.”⁵¹²

Deadly indifference

Schooled in the terrible lessons of the Cold War, those who toil in the fourth branch of government tend to see the evil hand of the Evil Empire everywhere. Their outlook is professionally xenophobic, and their purpose is “national security” at any cost. Enthusiastically supported by the narrow but ferocious right wing of the electorate, and tolerated by most of the rest, they actively pursue the various interests of the United States in every corner of the world.

Who is going to stop them? Certainly not the majority of U.S. voters, for most of whom foreign nations exist primarily as travel destinations or as grist for the *National Geographic*.

Economic issues are the principal detectable concerns of the voting public. Most folks appear to be more interested in obtaining comfort for themselves than justice for others. This is not complacency peculiar to the USA; it is just that the consequences are more horrendous, given the enormous power of the United States and the eagerness of its government to abuse it.

But the complacency is definitely there, and the tendency of U.S. citizens to “vote their pocketbooks” is so pronounced that it is fair to ask if there is an upper limit on the slaughter they are willing to let their government organize abroad in exchange for promises of economic benefits at home. Is there any point at which the piles of foreign bodies are stacked so high that they might cast a shadow across the limited horizon of the U.S. electorate?

Clearly, that point has not yet been reached in Central America. Miguel D’Escoto, Catholic priest and Nicaragua’s

“Richard Nixon said yesterday that his delay in the bombing and mining of North Vietnam was the biggest mistake of his presidency.... The 75-year-old former president said he was making a public appearance now because he wanted to express his views on foreign affairs. ‘I feel I want to pass on that experience before I’m too old to be able to do so.’”⁵¹⁵

foreign minister, reckons that the acceptable ratio of Third World deaths exceeds 100,000 to one: “If Americans die, then there is a heavy political price to pay back home, because Americans have been educated to believe that the lives of other people really don’t matter all that much. They don’t say it that explicitly, but they really react if it’s an American. It could be a hundred thousand Nicaraguans, and who cares? But if it’s an American”⁵¹³

It would be pleasant to imagine that D’Escoto got his arithmetic wrong and/or that the indifference he discerns is about to give way to a great moral awakening among the U.S. electorate. But it is difficult to detect hopeful signs in voting behavior, public opinion polls, the musings of political candidates or the world view expressed by popular culture .

“We must adopt the habit of thinking as plainly about the sovereign people as we do about the politicians they elect,” urged Walter Lippman nearly a half-century ago. “It will not do to think poorly of the politicians and to talk with bated breath about the voters. No more than the kings before them should the people be hedged with divinity.”⁵¹⁴

The United States is, after all, a democratic nation, more or less; the voters and non-voters get the leaders they deserve. Of course, the rest of the world doesn’t necessarily deserve them; but, if other countries don’t like it, let them become superpowers.

Meanwhile, the fate of the Third World will be determined, to a very significant extent, by the struggle between the “left” and the right of U.S. national politics. It has been an

(Continued on page 481)

The Limitations of Decency

"I admit that there are good white men, but they bear no proportion to the bad. The bad must be the strongest, for they rule. They do what they please.... I know the long knives; they are not to be trusted."

— 18-century Delaware Indian chief ⁵¹⁶

"Even individual whites who like and care for Negroes cannot afford to give them their rights because this would imply equality. In order to understand fully Southern conservative illegality, we have also to remember that the actual trickery, cheating and intimidation necessary for the smooth operation of disenfranchisement need be indulged in by only a small number of persons. Most people can almost avoid it.... In most cases, a resolute registrar can himself take care of the matter."

— Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* ⁵¹⁷

"The political center is frequently characterized, by those who occupy it, as a democratic force fighting a war on two fronts against the extremes of left and right. However, a closer reading of history tells us that the center has been more inclined to make common cause with the right against the left, rather than oppose both with equal fervor...."

"Recall how in 1964 the rightist Goldwater proposed a horrific policy for Vietnam, with massive bombing of the North and defoliation of the South, and how the centrist Johnson implemented these very practices not long after.... It is not the John Birch Society that is bombing Indochina into the Stone Age, nor was it the American Nazi Party that perfected napalm and put thalidomide in the defoliants."

— Michael Parenti, "Creeping Fascism" ⁵¹⁸

(Continued...)

(Continued from page 479)

exceedingly unequal contest thus far. In fact, there is no meaningful left wing. Among other things, a century of red scares and their aftermath has seen to that. The only resistance encountered by the right is tendered by centrist liberals, most of them anxious to avoid being labeled as commie-lovers, dupes or other objects of unease to Richard Nixon's famous "silent majority".

That liberal anxiety is perhaps the key to right-wing dominance of foreign policy. It will probably not be possible to alter the destructive course of that policy until the accusation of commie dupehood becomes more a source of general amusement than a palpable threat. It is long past due for the anti-communist crusade to be put on the defensive for using its fear/hate as an excuse for spreading terror around the globe in the name of Freedom.

That is not a task devoid of pitfalls or discomfort; in fact, it is likely to be very unpleasant, even dangerous. As a congressional vote on CIA-*contra* funding approached in early 1988,

The Limitations of Decency (cont.)

"One of the women who was in this [CIA-run] program for two years, tortured in Brazil for two years... said the most horrible thing about it was, in fact, the people doing the torture were not raving psychopaths. They were very ordinary people. She told about being tortured one day, and she's on this table, naked, in a room with six men, and they're doing these incredibly painful, degrading things to her body; and there's an interruption. The American is called to the telephone, and he's in the next room, and the others take a smoke break, And she's lying on the table listening, and he's saying, 'Oh, hi, honey. Yes, I can wrap it up here in another hour or so, and pick up the kids and meet you at the Ambassador's on the way home.'"

— John Stockwell, former CIA agent⁵¹⁹

Jeane Kirkpatrick, the Reagan administration's Dragon Lady, issued a warning on what is in store for anyone who dares to obstruct the shining path of the crusade: "The next President of the United States is going to face difficult decisions about how — not whether — to retrench the American empire.... Kirkpatrick warned that any such efforts would be bitterly resisted. 'These facts are on the table; the facts about this vote are very clear. If aid is denied to the resistance forces in Nicaragua, and all the consequences which we fear follow and the peace process is abandoned — which I think will happen, personally — then I believe the responsibility for that will be clear and the internal struggle in the United States will be embittered for a very long time. I think we will be in for a terrible political fight.' " ⁵²⁰

Apolitical activists

The question is: Who will the Dragon Lady and her dragoons find to fight? Those active in the peace/solidarity movement are woefully outnumbered, and many of them are reluctant to be caught doing anything that might be construed as politics. Their deliberations tend to be littered with such phrases as, "I'm not into politics.... I feel very uncomfortable with something like that.... Aren't we getting a little too political here?"

The general tendency is to react to disasters created by the government, rather than develop a consistent and persistent strategy for preventing them. Since there are so many disasters to keep up with, this is perfectly understandable. But it almost seems that the overworked machinery of solidarity does not start to groan into action until the body count reaches a certain threshold, or a critical mass of murdered children is achieved by the president's terrorists.

It points up the long-standing need for a comprehensive peace coalition to focus the energies of those opposed to the national warfare state. The Democratic Party has performed that function to a limited extent, but it is a cumbersome agglomeration of diverse interests, many of which are anything but peaceful. Since the triumph of the Reaganites in 1980, the

party leadership has made a distinct shift to the right, which has been accentuated by the mounting influence of wealthy business interests.⁵²¹ According to an unusually extensive and detailed 1987 survey of the U.S. electorate, only 41% of eligible voters identify themselves as Democrats, and only about one fourth of those consider war/peace issues to be of paramount concern.⁵²²

Of the two major parties, the Democratic is the only feasible political home for peace workers, but it can hardly be said to provide an efficient vehicle for their efforts. That is more than amply demonstrated by a an op-ed piece of Dave McCurdy,



A young woman in Seattle submits to the ministrations of the police and the press during a Pledge of Resistance demonstration. Relatively few citizens are prepared to go to such trouble on behalf of mere foreigners.

Oklahoma congressman and leader of the “moderate” Democrats who have been crucial to the success of most White House requests for CIA-*contra* funding:

“The Presidential campaign hits a time warp whenever issues of foreign policy and national defense are discussed. It seems like 1972, with the leading Democrats offering an apparent mixture of neo-isolationism, third world radicalism and defense cuts.... So far, Governor [Michael] Dukakis has been quite explicit about which weapons systems he would cut from our military budget, but he has yet to offer specific defense policies that would enhance our national security.

“Mr. [Jesse] Jackson, who describes himself as ‘a child of the third world’, has occasionally expressed solidarity with Fidel Castro, the Sandinistas and Middle Eastern radicals.... These are hardly winning ideas. The party should look to moderate and conservative Democrats in Congress for help....

“We have voted for funds to build the B-1 and Stealth bombers, to improve our nuclear deterrent forces by building a substantial number of MX missiles.... We have backed the invasion of Grenada and the raid on Libya.”⁵²³

So much for nominally fellow Democrats who do not share Congressman McCurdy’s passion for moderation. As the party’s presidential candidate, he prefers Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, a consistent supporter of the CIA-*contras* whose voting record in favor of Reaganite programs ranged as high as 70 percent. Mind, this was after the Iran/Contragate scandal and everything that went with it.

As McCurdy so thoroughly confirms, peaceniks in the Democratic Party have their work cut out for them; that is a subject for a separate treatise.⁵²⁴ But, assuming that the solidarity/peace movement does eventually develop a coherent national organization of some sort — whether independent of or intersecting with the political party structure — there are several pressing matters to attend to. Probably the most urgent need is to challenge the underlying premises of the Cold War. In that connection, there have been recent developments of an encouraging nature from an unusual source.

Pragmatic reversal

As 1987 came to a close, an odd thing happened at the Reagan White House: The Great Red-Hunter discovered the joys of détente, going so far as to approve the first-ever nuclear arms reduction treaty with the Soviet Union. “Who would have thought that Ronald Reagan, of all people, would be the first U.S. president to sign such a treaty?” was the astonished question of the hour, in Moscow no less than in Washington.

Actually, anyone familiar with the political fallout of the Iran/Contragate scandal, the peculiarities of national politics and with Reagan’s lifelong practice of tailoring his vague notions to suit current fashion might have anticipated this turn of events.

The scandal had two major effects on Reagan, one of which was to drive most of his “mad dog” ideologues out of the White House; they were replaced by Republican moderates. Of the principal conspirators against Nicaragua, only Elliott Abrams remained; his star was in decline, and he actually performed the useful function of political lightning rod, or spittoon. The net result was that, for the first time in his administration, Reagan was surrounded predominately by advisers who were inclined to be, in Mikhail Gorbachev’s terminology, “pragmatic”.

The other major effect of the scandal was to deprive Reagan of his famous popularity with the public. By all accounts, it left him depressed, and prepared to do just about anything to rekindle the affections of his countrymen — even cozying up to the Evil Empire. It was not quite the equivalent of Lincoln haunting the corridors of the White House in despair over Shiloh and McClellan’s immobility; but, for Ronald Reagan, probably nothing could be more distressing than a critical audience.

Another important factor in Reagan’s revisionism, by the nearly unanimous report of the mainstream press, was his influential wife’s desire that he develop a peace-making image: “‘She knew that while anti-communism is popular, peace is more popular,’ says a first-term aide. She also worried about

the judgment of history, telling friends that an arms deal with the Soviets would secure her husband's stature as a great president."⁵²⁵

The more he was encouraged to think about it, the more Reagan liked the idea. And why not? After all, he didn't need the right-wingers anymore. They had served their purpose — their money and influence had made him both president and financially comfortable — but he was President of All the People now.

Times change. The wheel turns. That was then, this is now....

Easily revised thought

It was not as though he had to undergo a drastic revision of his thinking, for the simple reason that there had never been much thought: "Reagan came to office with a few scraps of knowledge about the Soviet Union that had been extracted from clippings and anecdotes, many of them misunderstood or downright wrong. 'He obviously had a series of fixed and strong views,' says a former adviser, 'but he didn't have any knowledge to back them up.... Reagan liked his stories; they reinforced his disinclination to do business with Moscow.... 'He'd say: "I read it someplace." I'd say: "It's not right." He'd say: "Well, it's very effective" '."⁵²⁶

After the Iran/Contragate scandal, however, it was not as effective as playing the peacemaker. Reagan's conversion was apparently completed during his visit to Moscow in May of 1988. Once he got into it, this peace thing was pretty nifty; everyone said so. He got to see and touch real, live Russians, and to give little speeches on behalf of human rights and the American Way. As for Gorbachev, confided Reagan, he really wasn't such a bad guy once you got to know him: "Gorbachev has learned that the most effective way to reach Reagan is to engage him personally and to indulge his fondness for stories."⁵²⁷

Reagan returned from his journey to Moscow full of confidence that he had helped guarantee the future of mankind by

“slaying the dragons” of the Cold War, as he put it. The whole thing was “momentous.... Quite possibly, we are beginning to take down the barriers of the postwar era” and so on.

The majority of U.S. citizens no doubt hoped that he was telling the truth. But, among his old pals in the right wing, there was a bitter sense of betrayal. For them, there could be no negotiating with the still Evil Empire; its talk of peace is nothing more than a ruse. Anyone who believes otherwise is a dangerous fool — even if it turns out to be Ronald Reagan who, after approving the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty in late 1987, was called “a useful idiot of the Soviets” by one of his formerly staunchest supporters. (The treaty, which was ratified by the Senate just prior to Reagan’s visit to Moscow, calls for a three percent reduction of the two superpowers’ stockpiles of nuclear weapons.)

The outraged thunder on the right serves notice that the anti-communist crusade is not about to fold its tents and return to... what, exactly? For a true crusader, a world without the Evil Empire is unthinkable. Consider the implications for all the political careers rooted in it (Ronald Reagan’s, not least), the military-industrial interests profiting so exorbitantly from it, and the millions of troubled minds that have come to depend on it as an existential Nemesis.

Those interests need a visible target for their hostilities and, for that reason, it is premature for citizens of the Third World to take delight in Ronald Reagan’s new role as slayer of the Cold War dragon. He will soon be history. What next?

For one thing, there will almost certainly be more Ronald Reagans, risen from the ashes of right-wing disillusionment. Leaders fall, whether to commie treachery or self-delusion, and the crusade must go on. The preservation of Freedom depends upon it.

Reagan is actually the second professionally anti-communist president to convert to détente in recent years. Richard Nixon had undergone a similar conversion less than twenty years before with respect to “Red” China. The two careers describe a common trajectory in national politics that may be repeated well into the future. It might be called the Peace-

maker Shift — an option which, by definition, is available only to warmongers. That's because only a get-tough kind of guy, who has made a career of standing tall against the Evil Empire has the freedom to deal with it. Any "liberal" or other non-crusader who attempts a peaceful overture can expect to be savaged by the right, and much of the center, for endangering the nation through misguided weakness. That is presumably why foreign policy liberals so frequently indulge in tougher-than-tough posturing, in order to establish their anti-communist credentials.

But even when they do not adopt that posture, why should any Soviet or Chinese government rely on the kindness of liberals? Can they keep the dogs of the crusade at bay? Of course not. Had it been Jimmy Carter listening to Gorbachev's stories in Moscow, Ronald Reagan would have been ripping him apart at home, and any agreements the two leaders arrived at would have received an extremely rude reception in Congress. Thus, it is left to demagogues like Nixon and Reagan to clean up the messes they have themselves labored so very hard to deposit around the globe.

Shortage of evil empires

It's such a splendid scam that someone after Reagan is bound to capitalize on it. The only immediate difficulty is that the world is running out of worthy Evil Empires to subdue. Nixon did China, Reagan did the Soviet Union. That doesn't leave much. So it may be awhile before the Peacemaker Shift can be put into play again.

Perhaps in the not-so-distant future, China may be induced to threaten South Korea or Japan, and thus become eligible for a fresh display of American toughness. With any luck, Gorbachev's efforts to invigorate the Soviet Union will meet with failure and reaction.

In the meantime, the Third World will enjoy increased significance as an arena of superpower conflict. That is the premise of the previously noted Federal Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy: "Improved U.S.-Soviet relations

and progress in nuclear arms control are likely to be accompanied by calls for enhanced U.S. conventional weapons capabilities and for greater forcefulness in responding to 'low-intensity conflicts' in the Third World.... Particular emphasis should be placed on U.S. interests in Latin America, East Asia and the Middle East."⁵²⁸

This emphasis on standing tall in the Third World will be necessary to allay anxieties arising from Reagan's conversion. That applies not only to right-wingers, but to quite a few moderates and liberals, as well. Conflict is clear-cut. Détente is fraught with uncertainty, and if there is anything that most folks abhor, it is ambiguity — particularly where a terrible threat like nuclear war is involved.

In short, recent hints of accommodation between the superpowers offer cold comfort to sacrificial lambs such as Vietnam and Nicaragua, on whose people the awful rituals of the anti-communist crusade are performed. The demand for such involuntary sacrifice actually increases whenever ancient adversaries commence sniffing each other, because paranoids detect in the friendly face of peace the snarling threat of betrayal and destruction.

At the very least, this suggests that countries like Nicaragua will come under sharpened scrutiny from the U.S. right wing in the years ahead for the faintest sign of "exporting revolution"; cultivating it at home is just as bad, of course.

A superpower standoff may well mean that such countries become *more* exposed to the terrors of U.S. "freedom fighters". If, as seems to be the case, the U.S. and the Soviets are moving toward a sort of gentlemen's agreement to stay out of each other's backyards, then where shall the people of El Salvador or Guatemala turn if they should ever be so fortunate as to cast off the murderous elites which the U.S. has appointed to "stabilize" them? It is apparently a question of some concern to Nicaragua; there have already been reports that the Sandinistas have become increasingly nervous about the impact of détente on the reliability of Soviet support.

The tentative embrace of the superpowers, then, is likely to be viewed with tragic irony by the Third World peoples who

may be required to pay with their lives for the anxieties that détente arouses in the Home of the Brave. While Reagan was preparing for his visit to Moscow, he renewed the trade embargo against Nicaragua and Elliott Abrams slithered along with his efforts to sabotage the Sapoa peace initiative. The president's terrorists were still in business.

Anti-communist identity

In short, there is little cause for complacency among peace/solidarity activists, just because Ronald Reagan found it expedient to become pals with Mikhail Gorbachev. The need to challenge the ideological underpinnings of militant anti-communism remains as urgent as ever.

It is a daunting task. A survey of the U.S. electorate which asked respondents to describe themselves in relation to sixteen attributes found that the highest ranked item, by far, was "Anti-communist"; 70% said they "strongly identified" with that label.

Next came "A religious person", with which 49% strongly identified. Other responses: "A supporter of the peace movement", 46%; "A conservative", 27%; "A liberal", 19%.⁵²⁹

U.S. toy stores began selling the "Contra Video Game" in 1987. It was targeted at children from age 6, who could "become freedom fighters and battle for your beliefs" for \$34.⁹⁹

JUST ARRIVED!



CONTRA VIDEO GAME
Works with Nintendo system.
Become a Freedom Fighter and battle for your beliefs. Ages 6-up

"We are today so uncertain and diverse in our opinions as to the origin and destiny of the world and man that we have ceased, in most countries, to punish people for differing from us in their religious beliefs. Our present intolerance is rather for those who question our economic or political principles, and we explain our frightened dogmatism on the ground that any doubt thrown upon these cherished assumptions endangers our national solidarity and survival."

— Will Durant, *The Reformation*

It is not certain what such survey responses mean in terms of actual political choices and behavior. But the unparalleled ranking of "anti-communist" as a self-defining attribute of U.S. voters removes any doubt that the crusade has achieved its primary goal. Many a Catholic potentate would have been delighted with a comparable level of antagonism toward Protestantism during the Reformation.

The analogy is apt: With its cultural chaos, multitudinous conflicts, high rate of social and geographical mobility, tenuous family and community bonds, etc., the U.S. population appears to be one of the most emotionally insecure in the world. As one of the few fundamental beliefs shared by a clear majority, anti-communism is the closest thing there is to a national ideology; for many, it has all the intense allure of a deeply held religious belief.

Nevertheless, there are some indications that U.S. attitudes toward communism have recently begun to soften. Reagan's Peacemaker Shift and the unusually effective — for a Soviet leader — public relations campaign of Chairman Gorbachev seem to have invited a reassessment of the Evil Empire. A survey taken in the spring of 1988 found that 59% of respondents felt that "economic competitors like Japan pose more of a threat to our national security than our traditional military adversaries like the Soviets". Another poll taken about the same time disclosed that 76% of the sample held a favorable opinion of Gorbachev, at least in comparison with his grim predecessors. Only 38% agreed that the Soviet Union was an "evil empire", down from 56% in 1984.⁵³⁰

That's the good news. The bad news is that it could just as quickly shift back again. The right wing will be working very hard to make sure it does, and it is very likely that a new Ronald Reagan or two will emerge to lead the charge.

Confronting the crusade

Influencing public opinion is a large and complex undertaking, and this is not the place to discuss it in any great detail. By way of general introduction to the problem, it is perhaps useful to conceive of anti-communism as a product that has been marketed for so long, in so many different ways and contexts, and so persistently, that it has become a "household word", rather like Ivory Soap or Jell-O.

The key to its continued success as a self-defining attribute of U.S. citizens lies in repetition and its taken-for-granted quality. Any attempt to challenge its "market share" will have to approximate it in persistency, while raising questions about its reputation.

Because they are so casually accepted as a fact of daily life, and so frequently voiced by people with a tenuous grasp on reality, routine advertisements for militant anti-communism tend to go unchallenged. Even among those who strongly disagree, there is a tendency to dismiss such utterances as unworthy of response. That is a mistake. If it is ever to be consigned to the unpleasant history to which it belongs, the crusade must be confronted at every possible opportunity.

That confrontation can take the relatively gentle form of simple questions: "How does one go about 'exporting revolution', exactly? Was the American Revolution exported from somewhere? Don't the people of El Salvador have the right to rise up against oppression? What have we ever done for them? Are you saying that, just because I object to the slaughter that the U.S. is underwriting in Central America, I must be a communist or a dupe? How many times has Nicaragua occupied the United States, or hired some of us to attack the rest?", etc., etc., etc....

Where and when to raise such questions? Everywhere, and constantly. At work, church, the PTA meeting, on the bus, at the Chamber of Commerce — everywhere and every time the subject comes up. Again and again and again, repetition is the essential ingredient of any marketing campaign. The anti-communist crusade learned that lesson long ago; as one consequence, harmless Nicaraguans are being slaughtered by the president's terrorists today.

Newspapers, and especially local newspapers, offer ample opportunity for public challenges to the crusade. The letters section is usually one of the most popular, and many editors are open to suggestions for op-ed pieces by anyone with something reasonable and articulate to say — the more to the point of current events, the better. Most journalists are also amenable to a little education now and then, if it is presented politely and with due respect to their professional pride. If their writings often appear to be overly steeped in the basic world view of the Cold War, that is presumably because they have grown up within its somewhat narrow confines, like just about everyone else.

Questioning taboos

One of the most tenacious critics of mainstream reporting on Central America argues that, "The press has done a terrific job as one of the few thin lines we have, to protect the public against the 'national security state' and, if we didn't have the press, we would be in terrible trouble. So, for all I'm saying about its inadequacies and deficiencies, thank God for Raymond Bonner [cf. page 191, however]. We have to, on the one hand, applaud the press when it protects our interests — which it often does — and at the same time kick 'em hard to have more courage to do their job.... It also needs a support group to question the 'national security' taboos."⁵³¹

A useful example is provided by a group of activists who have formed the Seattle Central America Media Project, which brings alternative information and perspectives to the attention of local editors. Knowledgeable participants also

prepare guest articles and co-ordinate letter-writing campaigns.⁵³² Such efforts may not always be greeted warmly by the journalists to whom they are directed, but they do present a well-documented alternative to the news from the White House and the wire services.

A final suggestion: Assuming that the necessary financing and organization can be developed, it may be worth considering a series of national public information advertisements on the past sins and present dangers of mindless anti-communism.

Effort required

None of this can be accomplished without effort, and it may often be rewarded with various forms of abuse. In most communities and workplaces, anyone who dares to challenge the wisdom of the anti-communist crusade can expect a lot of trouble. It's the kind of thing that can easily lead to strained friendships and family relations, to a reputation as a local crackpot, even to job dismissals and missed promotions (usually justified on other grounds, of course). The pressure of social and economic sanctions is a seldom mentioned, but very real force in the suppression of political discourse in the Land of the Free. It tends to operate at the subconscious level and is all the more powerful for doing so.

There is always the possibility of physical violence, as well. People have been roughed up and had their tires slashed for lesser offenses. On Christmas Eve, 1985, a young Seattle family of four was bludgeoned to death, because their attacker had snapped up a rumor that the father was the son of a communist.

"I considered myself a soldier, and sometimes soldiers have to kill," explained the crazed freedom fighter. "The kids weren't supposed to be there.... From the reports I have got [subsequently, the father] probably wasn't a communist. So now I am starting to feel bad about him, too.... I have a great concern for human life. One of the things I hoped to achieve was to save a lot of lives at the expense of a few others. To sacrifice a few for the greater number.... We are in a war against communism."⁵³³

Congressional action

For those who do not recoil at the thought of being “into politics”, the most immediate priority is to stiffen the spine of Congress, so that it will be less inclined to bend in the fiery wind of every White House military adventure and propaganda campaign. It would be nice to have a decent president, as well. But even a saint can go mad, and U.S. presidents tend more to sanctimony than sanctity.

No less a proponent of a strong executive than Alexander Hamilton foresaw the dangers of an unfettered presidency: “The history of human conduct does not warrant that exalted opinion of human virtue which would make it wise in a nation to commit interests of so delicate and momentous a kind, as those which concern its intercourse with the rest of the world, to the sole disposal of... a president of the United States.”⁵³⁴

When asked by visitors from the United States, “What can we do to help?”, the first response of Nicaraguans is invariably: persuade your government to get off our backs. “Just let us have our own country, our freedom to do with it as we think best,” is a typical formulation. That might have been possible, at least with respect to funding the CIA-*contras*, had there been just five or ten more liberal Democrats in the House of Representatives during the Reagan administration. Such a display of legislative resistance would have also had a salutary effect on the general level of debate. It follows that there is no more important single task for the solidarity movement than to alter the composition of the House.

The Third World desperately needs the wisdom of congressmen such as Mike Lowry of Seattle, one of the few politicians in the entire country who has been willing to educate the public about the perils of mindless anti-communism. “For 40 years, right-wing politicians and columnists have poisoned the foreign policy debate in the U.S.,” Lowry has explained. “Their paranoid view of the world has prevented intelligent discussion of our options for shaping a foreign policy that is in America’s best interest.

"The present U.S. policy overrates communism. It underrates our many strengths, especially the force of our ideals. I have confidence that the world's developing nations will adopt our political and economic principles if only we give them the chance....

"The U.S. must come to recognize that revolution would be occurring in Latin America whether or not the Soviets or Cubans existed.... Does anyone really believe that our foreign policy is strengthened when we announce that we will ignore the World Court's jurisdiction over our actions in Central America?....

"In the 1950s, the right wing told us that China was nothing but a colony of the Soviets.... The Soviet Union must now devote a large portion of its military budget against Communist China....

"Instead of propping up the Somozas and the Pinochets, the U.S. should identify with social and economic improvement for the millions of poor people in Latin America.... We can have positive relations with the nations of the Third World if we embrace a foreign policy that identifies America with change and progress instead of repression and poverty."⁵³⁵

Lowry provides an instructive contrast to Rep. McCurdy (cf. pages 483-484), and the implication is clear: The most effective way to help Nicaragua and other Third World nations is to work for a Congress with fewer McCurdys and more Lowrys. It is well within the realm of the possible, if those already active in the solidarity movement would but divert half of their efforts to political campaigning.

Firey fundamentalists

Of course, there are competing interests with very different plans for Congress. One of the most powerful political movements looming on the horizon is the religious right. It started to jump out of the pulpit during the sanctimonious presidential campaigns for Ronald Reagan, and has now generated its own momentum. The basic uplifting message is conveyed by these ravings of a fundamentalist preacher: "I'm

sick and tired of hearing about all the radicals, and the perverts, and the liberals, and the leftists, and the communists coming out of the closets! It's time for GOD's people to come out of the closets, out of the churches, and change America!"⁵³⁶

The religious right is very determined to stamp out communism and liberation theology in Central America, and has infested the region with missions for that purpose. Among the largest contributors to the cause are millionaire televangelists such as Jimmy Swaggart and Pat Robertson. Their fundamentalist project has been post-coitally interrupted in recent years by multiple sex scandals. But in the well-established cycle of such events, memories of the scandals will fade and crusading passions are fairly certain to become aroused again.

It all makes for an interesting moment in the history of religion and politics in the United States. Much of the public debate over Central America policy in the years ahead may be conducted between the religious right and the solidarity movement in which the mainline churches play such a prominent role. As suggested previously, however, the contest may turn out to be very one-sided, since politics strikes so many peace-workers as, well, not very peaceful.

According to Richard Healey: "In some ways they are more radical, ironically, but they are more rooted in concrete things... focused more on the sanctuary movement rather than on strictly electoral or foreign policy issues, because sanctuary is rooted in flesh-and-blood human beings. [Mainline] church people are hard to mobilize on electoral issues.... The church activists are purists and visionaries, sometimes even anti-political, but... it is the only institutional constituency where you can find the moral basis for an alternative, and in the end politics rests on a moral vision of the world."⁵³⁷

There are moral visions and moral visions, however. Any clash between the rabid religious right and the apolitical mainline churches is likely to confirm the bitter conclusion of that long-ago Delaware Indian chief (cf. page 480): "I admit that there are good white men, but they bear no proportion to the bad. The bad must be strongest, for they rule."

“What has become of patriotism? I am very incensed with the media’s lack of respect for our beloved country and its leader: the crude caricatures in your paper, the constant putting down of President Reagan, the blame laid on him for the rotten things Congress does....

“Bashing the president seems to be the ‘in’ thing. It is treason and sedition. It is making our country look bad in the eyes of the world. If we love our country, we should support our president. It is our job to make him look good, not tear him down.... The media are so far left they deride everything this country once stood for. When did America cease to be ‘One Nation Under God’ and become a shambles under the ACLU?”

— Letter to the editor of Seattle daily newspaper, May 1988

It remains to be seen if the good will ever outnumber the bad by a large enough margin in Congress to put an end to public funding of covert operations, presidential terrorists and other tendencies of the national security state.

Unpresidential eyebrows

Prospects for electing a sensible president are, if anything, even more remote. Presidential campaigns have less and less to do with issues that might be subject to debate, which has in any event been replaced by advertising. “Such is the power of advertising in the United States,” notes FSLN co-founder Tomas Borge with only mild exaggeration, “that the people could just as easily elect Coca Cola as president.”⁵³⁸

That is essentially what they have done in the case of Ronald Reagan. Ever since the telegenic career of John F. Kennedy, “charisma” has come to be accepted as the most desirable attribute of a presidential candidate, and Reagan’s performance has institutionalized that notion. During the Democratic primary ordeal in the winter of 1987-1988, the endless lamentation of pundits and persons-in-the-street was that most of the candidates “lacked charisma”. One poor soul

was even subjected to a barrage of nasty cartoons and other abuse because his hair was so fine and light-colored that his eyebrows did not display well under the glare of TV lights. (This is no joke; you could look it up.)

As more than one observer has pointed out, George Washington with his sour and imperious demeanor, and Abraham Lincoln with his reedy voice and gangly frame, would never have survived the primary elections in the era of the TV presidency. It is an especially ironic development, since the prevailing sentiment is a longing for an appropriate symbol of mighty nationhood — someone who “looks presidential”. That was the key to Reagan’s appeal, and it explains why the majority of voters didn’t care whether or not the presidential cranium housed any information or ideas of value.

“We didn’t want to know”

“We didn’t know because we didn’t want to know.... Sure, sure, we always knew he was no rocket scientist. We hired him in 1980 to make us feel better about ourselves and our prospects, after the hostages and 21 percent inflation. He was the same bozo then, talking about killer trees and welfare queens in Cadillacs, and people on the dole buying vodka instead of milk. He talked our fantasy language, after real life proved too tough for us.”⁵³⁹

Nothing has occurred during the 1988 presidential campaign thus far to suggest that much has changed. If anyone with half a brain ends up in the Oval Office, it will probably be an accident. Just such an accident may be about to occur. The likely Democratic candidate, Michael Dukakis, has expressed strong opposition to the Reaganites’ Central America policy. Like House Speaker Jim Wright, he is moderately fluent in Spanish, and has spent some time in Latin America.

As of May 1988, Dukakis enjoyed a sizable lead in the polls over George Bush, his Republican opponent. But that had little to do with Central American or any other foreign policy; it was based mainly on the perceptions that Dukakis would do a better job of managing the economy, and that Bush was

sort of a jerk. Another plus: The eyebrows of Dukakis, who is of Greek descent, are dark and bushy.

Should he make it to the White House, Dukakis will have to watch his back if he tries anything funny in Central America. Since the first duty of presidents is to act as symbols and custodians of superpower majesty, they are left pretty much alone — by exemplary moderates such as Oklahoma's Rep. McCurdy, for example — to spread terror around the globe in the name of Freedom.

But restraint and a nice appreciation of other nations' integrity can provoke an entirely different sort of response from all but the most liberal segment of the political spectrum. The only president in recent memory to adopt restraint as a key component of his foreign policy was Jimmy Carter, and look what it got him — contempt, ridicule, and Ronald Reagan.

There is no harm in hoping for a president who will apply the sort of perspective urged by liberal congressmen such as Mike Lowry to the problems of the Third World. If such a one were to use the bully pulpit of his office to promulgate a conceptual challenge to the Cold War, it would certainly be a welcome development. But, for the reasons noted above, it is probably not prudent to base a long-term strategy on such hopes.

Thus, the first order of business is to strengthen Congress. Apart from the checks-and-balances considerations already mentioned, there is a distinct practical advantage in focusing on House of Representatives campaigns: They are still conducted on a scale that allows for much more direct and meaningful voter participation. The peace movement may not be able to afford a Ronald Reagan; but it should be able to help put a few more liberal Democrats in office.

There are two other types of action that may bear fruit. One is for the U.S. solidarity movement to forge ongoing links with its counterparts in Europe, and with the Socialist International. Their support of Nicaragua and other victims of U.S. aggression needs to be encouraged. To the extent that such contacts are reported by the mainstream press, they could help

to educate the general public about the diplomatic wilderness into which the Reaganites have led the country. It is an important message, one seldom heard.

Another potential source of allies is, believe it or not, the corporate world. It is not correct to assume that all of Big Business is solidly behind the sort of aggressive foreign policy pursued by the Reagan administration. Some elements of it are; other elements are not (cf. pages 454-455). There are some reasonable and humane people doing business around the world; peace/solidarity movements may be missing a valuable opportunity by neglecting to seek them out. It certainly can't hurt to try.

Future of a good example

The United States could terminate its Nicaragua destabilization program tomorrow and not have to worry about the threat of its good example for some time to come. The economy is a mess. The pressures of the CIA-*contra* terror campaign and the treasonous disposition of its internal front have polarized the political arena, with few signs of reconciliation in sight.

There has been a lot of silly talk about Sandinista "mismanagement" causing the nation's economic difficulties, but even the head of COSEP (cf. page 143) can't bring himself to endorse that dubious analysis.

"From 1979 to 1983," notes a U.S. Jesuit economist, "the very same policies of the Nicaraguan government that people want to criticize today brought growth rates that were the highest in the hemisphere."⁵⁴⁰

Nothing could be more obvious than that the Nicaraguan economy is a mess because the Reaganites want it that way. "The U.S. doctrine of low-intensity conflict," concludes a Latin American diplomat in Managua, "is having the exact results it's supposed to have. It's causing a diversion of human, medical, energy and other resources to the war fronts."⁵⁴¹

(Continued on page 504)

A Future of Economic Suffering

Peter Marchetti, Jesuit economist

It is absolutely hypocritical for any U.S. congressperson to talk about the Sandinistas being responsible for destroying the Nicaraguan economy, when Congress is responsible for funding and legitimizing a war whose central purpose has been to make Nicaragua's economy scream. Media people who say that the Sandinistas are responsible may not be hypocritical, but they're either frightened about what their editors are going to say or they are blind....

Enrique Bolaños, leading opponent of the Sandinistas and head of [COSEP, the Higher Council of Economic Enterprise], agreed with Father Xabier Gorostiaga's allocation of responsibility for the destruction of the Nicaraguan economy. Bolaños said that 60% of the economic problem was due to the war, 10% to the variation in international market prices against Nicaragua, another 10% to the breakdown of the Central American Common Market, which is of course another result of U.S. military policy in the region, and the remaining 20% to internal factors....

You can go back all the way to 1984 to hear Washington's first prophecies about the imminent collapse of the Nicaraguan economy and political insurrection against the government.... Congress should understand that the U.S. government is waging a war on one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere, against an economy so simple and so poor that pressure against it doesn't mean it's going to disappear.... I don't know how the Congress or the U.S. media could ever understand what I'm saying.

A Future of Economic Suffering (cont.)

Their concept of economic protest comes from the super-sophisticated economy of the U.S. where, if there's a slight decline in consumer power, people protest that the god of consumption has a cold.... But in an economy in which the vast majority of the people have never been connected to sophisticated consumer channels, there is no base for the type of economic protest that the Congress and media are awaiting....

Nicaragua has enough solidarity from Latin America, Western Europe, the Soviet Union, and the other socialist countries to reproduce this very simple economy.... The Reagan policy... has created a unified Latin American movement against that policy. Over these eight years, it has brought hundreds of millions of dollars in credit from Europe that never came before....

We did in-depth research on the survival strategies among poor families, and we discovered that even though people were highly critical of the economic problems, they were also convinced of one basic truth: They were in economic straits, they were suffering economically because of Ronald Reagan and his war against this people....

What's in store for the Nicaraguan people, no matter what their government does, is more economic suffering....

The dignity of the Nicaraguan people, along with their frustration and rejection of the Reagan administration, is the real motor that will allow the government to attempt putting through a very austere package of economic measures, and call on its people to make yet another sacrifice.⁵⁴²

(Continued from page 501)

If and when the Sandinistas are granted the opportunity to manage or mismanage the economy unmolested, they will have to cope with all the problems created by the destabilization campaign, in addition to those inherited from Somoza and those associated with its location in the Third World.

Inevitably, there will be an increase in the level of general dissatisfaction once the unifying threat of Yankee aggression subsides. From the standpoint of public morale, surviving the peace could well turn out to be a much more delicate problem than mobilizing for war. That has been the fate of other revolutions.

The question is: How much longer can the people subsist on hope and revolutionary fervor? One answer is provided by a Managua taxi driver: "The Sandinistas started it, and they organized and led it. But we all rose up behind them, the whole country together. The revolution was the best moment any of us will ever live through.... It gave us a sense of might, of *potencia*, of holding together, like nothing you can dream of. We thought that changing our society would be quick and easy afterward, but that was another matter. If I felt this way about the revolution, imagine what the *commandantes* felt who came down from the mountains or out of the jails. But they can't let it go. And we're divided from the Sandinistas now. We're not against them.... We realize they need more time. But they are still cleaving to that moment of being one, and we have gone back to thinking about ourselves as individuals, and wanting things for ourselves and our children."⁵⁴³

There are doubtless many who do **not** yet feel themselves "divided from the Sandinistas". But once the shooting stops, it will become much more difficult to cope with everyone's expectations and demands.

It is not inconceivable that the Sandinistas will be tempted to answer their critics by arguing that U.S. aggression and promotion of internal dissent have robbed them of the opportunity to fulfill the promise of the revolution. That temptation may arise because it happens to be true.

Given the likelihood of continued sabotage of the revolutionary process by Cardinal Obando, *La Prensa* and other elements of the pro-*contra* opposition, the Sandinistas might even be provoked into fresh restraints on civil liberties. They may as well, as far as the good opinion of the U.S. government is concerned; for, they will be accused of dictatorial transgressions in any event.

Limited opposition

From a practical standpoint, however, the issue of democratic pluralism is almost irrelevant, because no other political force has emerged — or is likely to do so in the foreseeable future — which can offer an effective challenge. The reason is simple: The Sandinista revolution is a genuine response to the very real needs of the overriding majority, and none of the fourteen opposition parties which attract so much interest in the United States has begun to address those needs as directly and comprehensively as the Sandinistas.

Those “Marxist-Leninists” may even be acting as a moderating influence to some degree, suggests a U.S. priest: “It should not be assumed that if Nicaragua were more democratic it would be more ‘moderate’. The Sandinistas may be restraining their own peasant and working-class followers as much as the business and upper-class groups. A more democratic process might enable peasants to pressure for the expropriation of large estates, or workers to pressure for lower salary differentials.... If the Sandinistas were more ‘democratic’ the results might be even more radical.”⁵⁴⁴

Of course, that kind of thinking would never get past the front door of *La Prensa* or the *Coordinadora Democratica*. The pro-*contra* opposition will continue its fight, with or without the contribution of terrorists, at the expense of the U.S. taxpayer. Elliott Abrams has already petitioned Congress for more cash to be distributed to his friends in Nicaragua.

“Abrams spoke of Nicaragua’s transition from an armed struggle to an unarmed political struggle. In Abrams’ view, the U.S. has the political activists it needs in Nicaragua for this

fight.... But Abrams worries that his Nicaraguan friends don't have the money to do the job.... Included in Abrams' wish list of deserving opposition groups were the Committee of Mothers, the newspaper *La Prensa*, the 'free' labor unions, and the opposition political parties.... Abrams declared that the whole spectrum of opposition groups needs U.S. help."⁵⁴⁵

Co-ordinating its efforts with the U.S. embassy, the antics of the pro-*contra* opposition will be of interest to the majority of Nicaraguans primarily for its influence on the Yankees. Its chief function is to provide the U.S. right wing with tragic examples of Sandinista oppression for the "Who lost Central America?" blame game to be played in the years ahead. It may be assumed that the game will be reported by the mainstream press in such a fashion as to leave no doubt about the outcome.

Preview of news to come

Events in the spring of 1988 offered a preview of mainstream tales of post-war Managua, with the "January 22 Mothers" being stoned, and the Miranda hoax worming its way through the body politic (see pages 415, 429). Another good one was the "labor unrest" involving a small elite of workers who already enjoyed the highest wages in the country:

"A construction worker could easily bring in three or four times more than a government minister. Auto mechanics were in a similar position.... In mid-February, the monetary [revaluation] changes were accompanied by an attempt to rationalize salaries and rein in some of the most out-of-hand areas of the economy. For the elite strata of construction workers and mechanics, it was a significant blow, and they responded by calling a strike.... At the end of the month, some upped the ante by going on a hunger strike. The strike has garnered almost no support from other workers, many of whom long resented the privileged position enjoyed by construction workers and mechanics."⁵⁴⁶

Needless to say, what the U.S. public learned from the mainstream press was that the workers were oppressed and

that the government stubbornly refused to grant their reasonable demands, along with details about their poignant hunger strike and the sympathetic concern of “the political opposition”.

It was evidently not necessary for U.S. news consumers to learn that most Nicaraguan workers opposed the strike, that the pangs of hunger were alleviated by food smuggled in under cover of darkness, that the “fourteen opposition parties”

Undermining Life in Both Countries

In July 1979, supported by practically all the Nicaraguan people, the Sandinista Front defeated Somoza and installed the Sandinista Revolution. For two years, the new government dedicated its efforts to rebuilding the country, teaching the people how to read and write, building schools, clinics, hospitals, streets, recreation centers, etc., besides building up a conscience of human dignity, sovereignty and the human values of justice, peace, honesty, efficiency, and respect for all, including women and children.

As soon as the Reagan administration took power in the United States in 1980, serious problems started for Nicaragua.... As Christians we ask ourselves: What right does the most powerful and rich nation of the world have to impose misery, pain and death on a poor and weak people like Nicaragua? What right does the Reagan administration have to decide the destiny of Nicaragua?

Our preoccupation, nevertheless, beloved brothers and sisters, does not end just with the pain, death and desperation of our suffering people. Rather, we suffer and are worried for you, because we consider the Reagan administration is undermining life not only in Nicaragua, but also in your own nation.

— *Open letter from Baptist convention of Nicaragua to the U.S. Christian community, 4 July 1986*

have yet to attract a crowd of greater than 3000 people, or that the injured parties earned more than government ministers.⁵⁴⁷ It may be assumed that there will be many more such Nicaraguan media events in the years to come, no matter who is occupying the White House, with whatever foreign policy.

However it plays out in the Land of the Free, the people of Nicaragua will be struggling to salvage what they can from the unkind legacy of Somoza and the Reaganites. That the Sandinista revolution has survived this long is something of a miracle, testifying to the patience, skill and tenacity of the Sandinista leadership. Were the circumstances not so grim, it would be amusing to speculate on how long Ronald Reagan would have been able to juggle the predicament of Daniel Ortega were their positions reversed — a few days, perhaps.

Above all, the revolution's survival testifies to the determination of the Nicaraguan majority to wrest their country's independence from the United States and its surrogate elites. But the price has been terribly high.

* * * *

EPILOGUE

*The Sandinista process is interrupted
by an "electoral coup d'état".*

THE FIRST EDITION of this book covered the period from 1909 to early 1988 and concluded with the preceding page. In the years that followed, the United States continued to plague Nicaragua with various forms of political, economic and military aggression.

Worst of all, the U.S. refused to disband its CIA-*contra* terrorists, as stipulated by the Central American peace agreement signed in August of 1987.⁵⁴⁸ The Nicaraguan government was thus forced to maintain a large military defense and all that it entailed, including crippling expenditures, painful economic decisions and a program of national conscription that was unfamiliar and unpopular among much of the population.

Even a greatly reduced force of terrorists would suffice to produce the desired effect, as a Pentagon official explained in 1989: "2000 hard-core guys could keep the pressure on the Nicaraguan government, force them to use their military, and prevent them from solving their economic problems."⁵⁴⁹ The actual number of terrorists who remained active in violation of the peace accord was around 20,000.

It has been estimated that by 1990 the terrorist campaign had resulted in damages exceeding \$12 billion — to a country with a population of 3.5 million and a Gross National Product of only \$2 billion. In relative terms, that would be roughly equivalent to \$25 trillion in economic losses to the United States (1988 dollars).

As for the number of killed and wounded, "Nicaragua has suffered proportionately more victims in this brief period than the United States did in the 60 years covering World Wars I and II, Korea and Vietnam. And that does not even include those who died to bring down the Somoza dictatorship, which easily doubles the figure."⁵⁵⁰

"The CIA created, armed and financed the contras. My father backed them with everything he had. It was my father's war, and almost everyone in Nicaragua has lost someone as a result of it."

— Patti Reagan Davis⁵⁵¹

Direct economic damage was inflicted by the U.S. embargo imposed from 1985 onward, another gross violation of international law (cf. page 135). No other country joined the embargo; but it was devastating nonetheless, given that Nicaragua's tiny economy had previously been woven into that of the United States. As one of many consequences, sugar producers were left scrambling to find alternative markets for over 50,000 tons of Nicaragua's largest export commodity.

The U.S. also hindered allies and international agencies from granting credits to Nicaragua, and in various other ways labored to inflict maximum economic harm. Collaborating in that effort was COSEP, the Higher Council of Private Enterprise, whose members were evidently willing to accept any amount of damage to their country and its people in order to defeat the Sandinistas.

As an inevitable and intended consequence of all this, support for the Sandinistas had begun to weaken as the 1990 election approached. The problem for the U.S. was that no viable political opposition had formed within Nicaragua, partly because the disparate enemies of the Sandinistas had placed their hopes on a military victory by the CIA-*contras* and/or a full-scale U.S. invasion. When neither materialized, for the reasons discussed in the preceding pages, there was no Plan B to activate.

Communists welcome

The United States therefore set about to assemble a political opposition, while at the same time intensifying the pressure on the Nicaraguan government with the considerable means at its disposal. What followed was a demonstration of just how undemocratic a "democratic" election can be.

With millions of dollars and a series of meetings, the U.S. created an opposition by gathering fourteen *very* different parties into a coalition dubbed the Nicaraguan Opposition Union (“UNO”). Among the fourteen was the Communist Party — an odd choice, given that the assault on Nicaragua had been justified as necessary to stop the spread of communism in Latin America. But its well-paid inclusion clearly reflected the coalition’s purpose and integrity

Also included was the Moscow-oriented Socialist Party which was previously “so poverty-stricken it could not publish a newspaper or even a mimeographed weekly. But in September 1988 it came into enough money to hire the posh Ruben Dario Salon of Managua’s Intercontinental Hotel for a lavishly catered press conference.”⁵⁵²

In order to improve UNO’s chances, the U.S. used the threat of unrelenting aggression to force changes in the election rules. The most important concession was to permit funding of the coalition from external sources, i.e. primarily the United States. Such foreign interference in elections is forbidden in the U.S. and all other countries; but the San-dinistas accepted this and other departures from the rules in hopes of ensuring UNO’s participation in the election and the USA’s acceptance of the outcome.

The finance rule change made it possible for the United States to openly invest roughly \$30 million in the UNO campaign. That amounted to some \$20 per voter, which may be compared with the \$4 per voter spent on the successful 1988 presidential campaign of George Bush, the former CIA director who served as Ronald Reagan’s vice-president.⁵⁵³

“We are going into this election process [spending] \$1 billion dollars. We funded the contras, we have destroyed [Nicaragua’s] economy. We have taken Mrs. Chamorro and we pay for her newspaper to run. We funded her entire operation, and now we are going to provide her with the very best election that American can buy.”

— Democratic Congressman George Miller⁵⁵⁴

Chosen to front the coalition was Violeta Chamorro, the widowed matriarch of the publishing dynasty which owned the CIA-financed *La Prensa* and other influential media. Mrs. Chamorro possessed no apparent experience of or aptitude for political leadership, but her function was largely symbolic. Much like Ronald Reagan in the United States, her words and actions were carefully scripted to suit her assigned role, that of a benevolent maternal figure who would bring peace and prosperity to Nicaragua if elected president.

As one of her coalition associates explained: "She is an icon, like the Virgin of Fatima. She doesn't need to talk, she can just lead the procession."⁵⁵⁵

The religious connection was central to the coalition's campaign. Consistent with their past behavior, Cardinal Obando and his reactionary colleagues in the Catholic hierarchy openly allied themselves with UNO while chastising the



Wikimedia Commons

Violeta Chamorro performing her assigned task during the 1990 presidential campaign. The uplifting pose and the white costume were scripted components of her electoral image.

Sandinistas. The U.S. gave them over four million dollars to support their activities, which included public appearances in the same arenas as UNO candidates. Obando performed in UNO's television ads; and shortly before the election, *La Prensa's* front page featured a large photo of the well-fed cardinal bestowing his blessing upon the saintly Chamorro.

Election terror

CIA-*contras* continued to terrorize the countryside throughout the campaign, serving as the armed wing of UNO. Four months prior to the election, terrorist headquarters issued a communiqué which explained: "We want to express all our backing and unconditional support for UNO candidates.... We are going to prevent Sandinista accomplices and collaborators from registering. We are going to assure the triumph of UNO."⁵⁵⁶

Among other things, that meant killing dozens of Sandinista campaign workers and threatening defenseless voters. "An attack in January against the farming community of Las Tijeras in Jinotega was typical. Armed troops had infiltrated and kidnapped a young girl at gunpoint. They marched her from house to house [and] at each house the *contras* repeated the same message: 'If you don't vote for UNO, we are going to shoot you after February 25'.... These incidents were repeated hundreds of times throughout the Nicaraguan countryside.... Approximately 25 percent of the electorate was directly affected by contra military activity."⁵⁵⁷

Additional pressure was applied with numerous cross-border incursions by Honduran troops, repeated violations of Nicaragua's defenseless airspace, and menacing coastal patrols by U.S. Navy ships — all reminders that invasion by the U.S. remained an option. Just three weeks before the election, the United States invaded Panama for no good reason and murdered some 4000 defenseless citizens in a *blitzkrieg* attack. "I hope the people of Nicaragua are paying attention," clucked President Bush.⁵⁵⁸

Despite all this and much more, it was widely believed that the Sandinistas would win the election. Their rallies continued to attract large crowds, especially compared with the modest turnouts for UNO events, and the most reliable opinion polls predicted a crushing defeat for the U.S. coalition.

So certain was the United States of that outcome that, months in advance it had begun orchestrating an international propaganda campaign to discredit the election. It was said to be hopelessly biased in order to ensure a Sandinista victory — despite all the concessions noted above and praise for the arrangements from several credible sources including the U.S. Library of Congress Research Service. Plans were also drawn up to increase military and economic aggression in anticipation of a Sandinista victory.

Nation in mourning

It therefore came as a shock to just about everyone when UNO won by a margin of roughly 55 to 41 percent. And with that, the election suddenly became a model of democratic probity in the eyes of the U.S. government.

For most analysts of the unexpected outcome, there was little doubt about the principal cause — the threat of continued military and economic aggression by the United States and its Nicaraguan proxies.

It was certainly not due to any sudden enthusiasm for UNO, whose victory failed to elicit the general rejoicing which greeted that of the Sandinistas in 1984. “On February 26, all of Nicaragua, not just the 41% that voted for the FSLN, was in mourning. UNO supporters did not pour into the streets to celebrate — there was almost no celebrating to be found.”⁵⁵⁹

A frequent post-election lament was remorse at having voted for UNO merely to express some sort of protest, on the assumption that the FSLN was bound to win anyway.

“Several municipal candidates in towns where UNO won, now do not want to take office. After the results were in, Maria

(continued on page 516)

“An electoral coup d’état”

The Sandinistas entered the electoral process in a situation of major disadvantage. Throughout the 1980s, Nicaragua was under relentless external pressures — military, economic, political, diplomatic — that took a heavy toll on the incumbent party. In the final years of their rule, the Sandinistas presided over a desperate economic crisis marked by hyperinflation and a tumultuous drop in living standards. Nicaragua faced increasing international isolation and, given the breakup of the socialist bloc, dim prospects for international assistance without a reconciliation of relations with the United States....

What is remarkable is not that the Sandinistas were voted out of power but that, given the enormous international mobilization of resources by the United States following on the heels of a decade of U.S. warfare, the FSLN received 42 percent of the vote....

The [election was] a contest, not between the Sandinistas and their domestic political opposition, but between the Nicaragua revolution and the United States....

At the heart of U.S. warfare was a simple dichotomous message that hung over the head of each and every Nicaraguan. A vote for the Sandinistas meant a continuation of hostility from the United States, and thus continued poverty, hardship, war and isolation. A vote for UNO would mean an immediate end to the U.S. aggression, a definitive cessation of military hostilities, and millions of dollars in U.S. economic aid. Nicaraguans voted on February 25 with this gun placed at their heads. U.S. involvement turned the vote into an electoral coup d’état.

— *William I Robinson*⁵⁶⁰

(continued from page 514)

Luisa, who voted for UNO, ran to greet a friend sobbing, 'We lost!'.... Some mothers of fallen combatants, many of whom are part of one of the most patriotic and revolutionary organizations in the country, have sent letters to the Women's Association office in León expressing regret at having voted for UNO, explaining that they feared losing another draft-age son."⁵⁶¹

A man named Joaquin confided to a Swedish reporter that, "I voted for UNO, but I never thought that they would win. I am actually a Sandinista, but I voted for UNO because I want peace as soon as possible. We cannot continue to live like this. If there is peace, the economy will improve and our lives will improve."

The reporter noted that, "There is no victory smile on Joaquin's face — on the contrary. He is not certain that Violeta Chamorro and the others will be able to govern the country. He does not want the United States to come and rule over Nicaragua, and he fears that the *contras*... will take revenge."⁵⁶²

Although some FSLN members urged rejection of the election outcome due to the massive interference of the United States, the party leadership chose to accept the defeat and regard it as a temporary setback.

Alejandro Bendaña, a member of the national campaign committee, later explained: "In reality, entering into a political-electoral contest was a no-win *and* a no-lose proposition for both the Sandinistas and the Bush administration. On the Sandinista side, the contest was necessary to complement and reinforce the military routing of the *contras* and the collapse of the political will in Congress to sustain the war.

"That the election could be lost did not change the reality that the war had basically been won; the *contras* had been forced to dismantle (which might not have been the case had the FSLN won), peace was being attained, and the Sandinista front still remained the strongest and most influential political organization in Nicaragua...."⁵⁶³

“The revolutionary process was simply entering a second phase.... The Sandinista loss at the polls may prove to be a temporary reversal that unfolds into a new strategic opportunity.”

Bendaña’s hopeful prophecy would eventually be fulfilled; but it would take 17 years for the “new strategic opportunity” to ripen. In the meantime, a succession of three right-wing governments would demonstrate the baleful effects of neo-liberal economics⁵⁶⁴ and subservience to the United States.

* * * * *

APPENDIX

Information and Solidarity Resources

Among the thousands of local, state and national organizations providing support to Nicaragua are the following:

Nicaragua Network

2025 I Street N.W., Suite 212, Washington, D.C. 20006

Information clearing house, with over 250 affiliated local committees. Organizes public education programs, work brigades, and tours between Nicaragua and the U.S. Its "Let Nicaragua Live" campaign of material aid is the U.S. component of the international "Nicaragua Must Survive" project.

Quest for Peace, c/o The Quixote Center

P.O. Box 5206, Hyattsville, MD 20782

Co-ordinates national network of material assistance and tabulates total value of contributions.

TecNica

2727 College Avenue, Berkeley, California 94705

Provides training and technical assistance by computer experts, craftsmen and other skilled volunteers.

Witness for Peace

P.O. Box 567, Durham, NC 27702

Places delegations of volunteers in areas of CIA-*contra* activity, with the intent of discouraging terrorist attacks; documents attacks that do occur.

Ben Linder Memorial Fund

P.O. Box 6443, Portland, Oregon 97228

Continues Linder's work of hydroelectric development.

Pledge of Resistance

P.O. Box 29272, Washington, D.C. 20017

Promotes and co-ordinates opposition to CIA-*contras* within the U.S. through public education, mass demonstrations, etc. Thousands have been arrested.

Bikes not Bombs

P.O. Box 5595, Friendship Station, WA, D.C. 20016

As one solution to problems of mass transportation and oil imports, sends bike mechanics to teach repair and assembly. Donates and ships bicycles from the U.S.

Committee of U.S. Citizens Living in Nicaragua

P.O. Box 4403, Austin, Texas 78765

Publishes newsletter, *Nicaragua Through Our Eyes*, with first-hand accounts and commentary from Nicaragua.

American Friends Service Committee

1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102

Long-standing programs of assistance to Third World countries. In Nicaragua, has concentrated on school supplies and pesticide safety for farm workers.

Architects and Planners in Support of Nicaragua

P.O. Box 1151, Topanga, CA 90290

Provides financing, expertise and volunteer labor for construction projects. Trains Nicaraguans in architecture, planning and construction techniques.

Wisconsin Co-ordinating Council on Nicaragua

P.O. Box 1534, Madison, WI 53701

Co-ordinates U.S.-Nicaragua sister organizations. Offers guidance on establishing sister relationships between cities and towns, churches, unions, medical clinics, etc.

OxFam America

115 Broadway, Boston, MA 02116

Similar to American Friends Service Committee; emphasis on medical and farm supplies.

Veterans Peace Action Team

P.O. Box 586, Santa Cruz, California 95061

Sends observer teams into areas with CIA-*contra* activity. Educates U.S. politicians and military personnel. Sponsors numerous aid projects.

Labor Network on Central America

P.O. Box 28014, Oakland, CA 94604

Offers alternative to cold warriors of the "AFL-CIA". Organizes frequent contacts between U.S. and Nicaraguan unionists. Lobbies Congress, conducts information campaigns, etc.

Science for the People

897 Main Street, Cambridge, MA 02139

Sends experts in agriculture, animal husbandry, computers, medicine, physics, mathematics, etc.

National Central America Health Rights Network

Suite 1105, 853 Broadway, New York, NY 10003

Sends volunteer doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers to train and assist.

Ventana

339 Lafayette Street, New York, NY 10012

Exchanges musicians, painters, dancers, writers, etc.

*Information compiled March 1988; subject to change.
Contact Nicaragua Network for current addresses, etc.*

ENDNOTES

Wherever possible, the U.S. mainstream press has been used as the preferred source, for three reasons: to demonstrate how much useful information can be gleaned from establishment sources, despite their limitations and imperfections; to demonstrate how different the world can be made to look when the same information is selected and highlighted from a perspective undistorted by the White House; and to reassure possibly sceptical readers that this account is not based solely on esoteric or “radical” sources.

Much of the information has been taken from the two daily Seattle newspapers, but originated elsewhere. In such cases, the original source is listed in parentheses, usually in abbreviated form. For example: “*Seattle Times* (NYT)” means that the item appeared in the *Seattle Times* on the date noted, but originated in the *New York Times*, most likely on the same or preceding day. The abbreviations are:

AP	Associated Press
BG	Boston Globe
BT	Baltimore Sun
CSM	Christian Science Monitor
DMN	Dallas Morning News
KR	Knight-Ridder Newspapers
LAT	Los Angeles Times
NYT	New York Times
ND	Newsday
Phi	Philadelphia Inquirer
WP	Washington Post
UPI	United Press International

In order to conserve space, not every quotation and fact has been cited according to strict academic practice. In such cases, the relevant source can usually be found in the reference cited immediately preceding or following it.

Also to save space, some lengthy names have been abbreviated. They are: "Seattle P-I" for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* daily newspaper; "CAHI" for Central American Historical Institute; and "NACLA", for North American Congress on Latin America.

For publishing details on books cited in these notes, see References on page 549.

Finally, *op. cit.* references separated by some distance from the original citations are referred back to them in square brackets; e.g. "[cf. #191]" means that the full citation can be found at note 191.

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- Abrams, Elliott
- Adams, John Quincy
- AFL-CIO
- AIFLD, American Institute
for Free Labor Development
- Allende, Salvador
- alphabetizers
- American Protective League
- Americares
- Americas Watch
- amnesty
 - CIA-*contras*
 - Miskitos
- Amnesty International
- AMNLAE, Luisa Amanda Espi-
noza Women’s Association
- anti-communism
- anti-Semitism
- Anti-Somocista Tribunals
- appropriate technology
- Arbenz, Jacobo
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- Association of Farm Workers
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- Barnes, Michael
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- beef cattle
- Bellecourt, Vernon
- Bernardo
- Berryman, Phillip
- Blessed Virgin
- Betancur, President of Colombia
- Big Lie campaign
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Brunei – Colombia

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|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Brunei | Central America |
| Bryan-Chamorro Treaty | Central America Court |
| Buchanan, Patrick J. | Central America peace initiative |
| Bush, George | CEPAD, Evangelical Committee |
| business community | for Aid & Development |
| Butler, Smedley | Cerezo, President of Guatemala |
| Calero, Adolfo | Chamorro family |
| campesino | – Carlos |
| Canada | – Edgar |
| canal | – Pedro Joaquin |
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| capitalism | – Allende |
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| Carrion, Luis | – evangelical |
| Carter, Jimmy | – fundamentalist |
| Carter administration | – mainline |
| – CIA | – Protestant |
| – Somoza | CIA, Central Intelligence Agency |
| – Sandinistas | – covert operations |
| Casey, William | – destabilization |
| casualties | – media |
| Catholic Church | CIA-contras |
| – hierarchy | – funding |
| – Pope | – Guardia |
| – Somoza | – human rights |
| CAUSA | – political front |
| copyright | – video game |
| – La Prensa | Cisneros, Henry |
| | Colombia |

CISPES – Federal Commission

- CISPES, Committee in Solidarity
 with the People of El Salvador
 communism
 – political parties
 Congress
 – moderates
 conscription
 Constitution
 – Nicaraguan
 – U.S.
 Contadora peace initiative
 Contragate
 Coolidge administration
 co-operatives
 Coordinadora Democratica
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 FAO, Broad Opposition Front
 Fast for Life
 Federal Commission on Inte-
 grated Long-Term Strategy

Ferch – labor unions

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Ferch, John | Hunthausen, Bishop Raymond |
| FMLN, Farabundo Marti | imperialism |
| Forces of National Liberation | Inouye, Senator Daniel |
| folk culture | International Court of Justice |
| Fonseca, Carlos | (World Court) |
| foreign policy elite | International Institute |
| forest resources | for Strategic Studies |
| fourth branch of U.S. govt. | International League |
| freedom of expression | for Human Rights |
| – Nicaragua | international trade |
| – U.S. client states | invasion, threat |
| FSLN, Frente Sandinista | Iran/Contragate scandal |
| de Liberacion Nacional | IRENA, Nicaraguan Institute |
| Corinto | of Natural Resources |
| Fuentes, Carlos | Israel |
| Garcia, Alan | Jacobsen Report |
| Garwood, Ellen | Japan |
| genocide of American Indians | January 22 Mothers |
| Goering, Herman | Jesuits |
| Gorbachev, Mikhael | Jews, Managua |
| Grand Area theory | Johnson, Lyndon, |
| Grenada | Kassenbaum, Nancy |
| Group of Twelve, Los Doce | Kellogg, Frank B |
| Guardia Nacional | Kennan, George |
| Guatemala | KGB |
| Gumbleton, Bishop Thomas | King, Rev. Martin Luther, Jr. |
| Habib, Phillip | Kirkland, Lane |
| Hamilton, Lee | Kirkpatrick, Jeanne |
| Hart, Gary | KISAN |
| health care | Kissinger, Henry |
| Heritage Foundation | Kissinger Commission |
| Honduras | Knox, Philander |
| Hoover administration | labor unions |
| House of the Vampires | – AFL-CIA |
| human rights | – Nicaraguan |

land reform – natural resources

- land reform
 - Agrarian Reform Act
 - landowners
- Landau, Saul
- Lane, Arthur
- La Prensa
 - censorship
 - CIA
- LASA, Latin American Studies Association
- Latin America
- Leiken, Robert
- LeoGrande, William
- Lewis, Anthony
- Liberation theology
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- Lippman, Walter
- Literacy Crusade
- Loison, Rev. Jean
- Los Doce/Group of Twelve
- low intensity conflict (LIC)
- Lowery, Rev. Joseph
- Lowry, Mike
- Loyalists, American Revolution
- Lusinchi, President of Venezuela
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- mining of roads and harbors
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- mixed economy
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- Moravian Church
- Murray, Emmett
- Murton, Thomas
- Myrdal, Gunnar
- National Council of Churches
- National Guard
- national security
- National Security Council
- National Union
 - of Farmers and Ranchers
- natural resources

Neutrality Act – Sandinista

Neutrality Act	political prisoners
New York Times	pollution
Newsweek	popular church
Nixon administration	post-Vietnam syndrome
Noriega, Manuel	president's private army
North, Oliver	prisons
Oakes, John B.	– sexual slavery
Obando, Cardinal Miguel	private sector
O'Neill, Tip	pro-contra opposition
OAS, Organization of American States	propaganda
Ortega, Daniel	– Europe
Ortega, Humberto	– United States
Outreach Working Group on Central America	proxy government
Palme, Olof	Puebla Institute
Palmer, A. Mitchell	radio
Panama Canal	– Radio Catolica
Parajon, Gustavo	Rama Indians
Parry, Robert	Ramirez, Sergio
peacemaker shift	Reagan, Ronald
peasants	– anti-communism
Pena, Fr. Luis	– crimes
Perez, Carlos Andres	– ignorance
Perez, Rigoberto Lopez	– corruption
CPDH, Permanent Human Rights Commission	– popularity
Peru	Regan, Donald
pesticides	regional autonomy
Pezzullo, Lawrence	Reich, Otto
Philippines	religious right
Physicians for Social Responsibility	Republican Party
Pinochet, General	Romero, Archbishop Oscar
political parties	Roosevelt, Theodore
	St. Louis Post-Dispatch
	sanetuary movement
	Sandinista Defense Committees
	Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)

Sandinista process – Zelaya

- Sandinista process
- Sandino, Augusto
- SELA, Latin American Economic System
- Shea, Nina
- Shelton, Turner
- Shirley, Mayor Brent
- Shoup, David M.
- Singh, Umendra
- Singlaub, John K.
- socialism
- Socialist International
- solidarity
- Soviet Union
- Spear, Joseph C.
- State, U.S. Dept. of
- state of emergency
- Stockman, David
- Stockwell, John
- Sumu Indians
- Tellez, Dora Maria
- terceristas
- terrorism
- Tocqueville, Alexis de
- United Federation of Honduran Workers (FUTH)
- United Fruit Company
- UNO, United Nicaraguan Opposition
- U.S. Information Agency (USIA)
- Vanderbilt, Cornelius
- Vietnam
- Vietnam Vets against the War
- Voice of America
- Wald, George
- Walker, William
- Wall Street Journal
- Washington Times
- Webster, William
- Weinberger, Cap
- Wheeler, Burton K.
- Whelan, Thomas E.
- Wicker, Tom
- Willson, Brian
- Wisconsin Co-ordinating Committee on Nicaragua
- women's rights
- World Anti-Communist League
- World Court
- World Health Organization
- Wright, Jim
- Zelaya, Santos,

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