The Reagan Administration's Policy Toward Revolutionary Movements

by
Ernest Evans

The Reagan Administration came into office in January 1981 determined to reverse what it saw as the enormous damage that had been done to the national security of the United States by the Carter Administration's foreign policy. To this end it undertook initiatives such as significantly increasing the level of defense spending, trying to improve relations with what it regarded as key regional powers such as Argentina, Brazil and Chile in South America and South Africa in Africa, and attempting to strengthen NATO's tactical nuclear arsenal.

Another aspect of the Reagan Administration's critique of Carter's foreign policy was that the Carter Administration had been at best ineffectual and at worst indifferent toward what the Reagan Administration saw as the threat posed to U.S. national security by certain revolutionary movements. The new administration came in determined to pursue a coherent and comprehensive policy toward such revolutionary movements. Specifically, this policy consisted of four steps. First, the issue of human rights was to be deemphasized, and, instead, emphasis was to be placed on the need to help U.S. allies who were engaged in struggles with Soviet-supported terrorist movements. Second, convinced that its election indicated that the post-Vietnam era in American foreign policy was finally over, the Reagan Administration supported renewed emphasis on American willingness to undertake covert operations and unconventional war. To this end the covert operations branch of the CIA was expanded, and the Administration sought to repeal the Clark Amendment (which banned U.S. aid to any of the groups fighting in Angola). Third, the Reagan Administration felt that, ultimately, nothing effective could be done about revolutionary movements unless the U.S. and its allies were willing to face up to what the Administration saw as 'The Soviet Connection.' It emphasized the fact that such movements were being trained and armed by the Soviet Union and its client states. Therefore, the Administration ordered the intelligence agencies to carefully document Soviet involvement with such groups and enthusiastically praised Claire Sterling's book *The Terror Network* (published in early 1981) which supported many of the U.S. charges concerning Soviet support of terrorist movements.[1] Finally, the Reagan Administration also announced a tough line against those it saw as other sponsors of terrorist movements such as Libya, Nicaragua and Cuba. U.S. citizens were ordered to leave Libya, while Nicaragua and Cuba were given warnings that the U.S. would not tolerate their support of terrorist movements in the Western

Hemisphere. (It should be noted, however, these warnings did not spell out what actions the U.S. would take if its admonitions were ignored; the Administration evidently wanted to keep its options open.)[2]

Having summarized the four measures that the Reagan Administration has taken to deal with the problem of revolutionary movements, it is now appropriate to undertake the central purpose of this article: namely, to assess whether such measures do or do not serve to protect the national security of the United States.

Looking first at the question of the alleged incompatibility between fighting terrorism and promoting human rights, there can be no doubt that quite frequently, *in the short run*, these two goals are incompatible. Specifically, all countries, including democratic countries, have provisions in their constitutions and in their legal codes to suspend ordinary civil liberties in times of serious civil disorders. Canada has the War Measures Act, which was invoked by Prime Minister Trudeau in response to the October 1970 crisis in Quebec. The British Parliament, in 1974, passed a very tough piece of anti-terrorist legislation to deal with the bombing campaign of the Provisional Irish Republican Army in Great Britain. Further, the U.S. Constitution states: "The Privilege of the Writ of Habeas Corpus shall not be suspended, unless when in Cases of Rebellion or Invasion the public Safety may require it,"[3] a clause invoked by Abraham Lincoln during the American Civil War to justify suspension of normal judicial proceedings in certain areas of the country.

However, in the long run, a policy of subordinating the protection of human rights to the need of combatting terrorism would not serve to promote and protect the national security interests of the United States. Such a policy would serve to reinforce one of the persistent delusions of American foreign policy: the belief that the U.S. should support 'strongmen' like Somoza in Nicaragua, the Shah in Iran, and Marcos in the Philippines because such leaders provide stability in their respective societies. As revolutionaries are well aware, such strongmen are not in any sense guarantors of political stability. Rather, they are the ones who lay the groundwork for political revolutions. As Che Guevara stated in *Guerrilla Warfare*:

> People must see clearly the futility of maintaining the fight for social goals within the framework of civil debate. When the forces of oppression come to maintain themselves in power against established law, peace is considered already broken . . . Where a government has come to power through some form of popular vote, fraudulent or not, and maintains at least an appearance of constitutional legality, the guerrilla outbreak cannot be promoted, since the possibilities of peaceful struggle have not yet been exhausted.[4]

Similarly, Brazilian theorist of urban guerrilla warfare Carlos Marighella stated that it was essential for the urban guerrillas to

force the government that they were fighting against to undertake severe repressive measures. Marighella felt the result of such measures would be that "the political situation in the country is transformed into a military situation" and that such a transformation would destroy the government's legitimacy.[5]

The current insurgencies in El Salvador and Guatemala, both of which are serious threats to the national security interests of the United States, provide considerable documentation of the long-term costs to the U.S. of ignoring human rights considerations. The ongoing insurgency in El Salvador first began after the El Salvadorian military refused to allow the reformist Christian Democratic party to take office after this party had won the 1972 presidential election. The insurgency accelerated considerably after the massive vote fraud of the 1977 election again denied the Christian Democrats the presidency to which they clearly were entitled on the basis of an honest vote count. After two such fraudulent elections there was little reason to hope that the system would respond to peaceful change, and hence support for armed insurrection grew. The powerful insurgency in contemporary Guatemala is in large measure due to the fact that since the overthrow of the Arbenz government in 1954 all attempts at even moderate reforms have been met with drastic repressive measures, in turn, leading more and more Guatemalans to endorse violent change. Further, in light of the growing power of several insurgent movements in the Philippines in recent years, it is appropriate to recall an assessment of that country made by Samuel Huntington in 1971 (before Marcos suspended the electoral process in September 1972):

> It [the Philippines] possesses to an extraordinary degree all, save one, of the normal preconditions for revolution: inequitable systems of land tenure; great and apparently increasing disparities of income and wealth; high levels of literacy and education leading to high rates of unemployment; widespread corruption and violence; an increasingly radicalized student body and intelligensia; large American investments and military installations. All these would seem to furnish the basis for both middle class and peasant revolutionary movements. The failure, to date, of the revolution to catch on may perhaps be attributed to the presence of the one institutional factor, whose absence, Guevara said, was essential for revolutionary success: a government which 'has come into power through some form of popular vote, fraudulent or not, and maintains at least an appearance of constitutional legality . . .'[6]

The Reagan Administration's decision to strengthen America's capability of waging unconventional war (counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency) is a positive step. The move reflects the recognition on the part of the Administration that, despite the widespread, post-Vietnam reaction against unconventional warfare

capabilities (seen as tools whose only use was to prop-up tyrannical Third World regimes), counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency have been used to support democratic governments in the past.[7] Such capabilities are essential in the contemporary world if the U.S. is to be able to cooperate with its democratic allies such as Italy, West Germany and Spain in these nations' struggles against urban guerrilla movements.

However, the strengthening of the U.S. capabilities for waging unconventional war could reinforce what appears to be a dangerous tendency in contemporary American attitudes toward revolutionary movements. Specifically, students of American foreign policy have long commented on how American public and elite attitudes toward various foreign policy issues can undergo sudden and drastic changes. For example, after World War I the American people and the American leadership swung quickly and decisively from a mood of interventionism to a mood of isolationism. In the decade of the 1970s, in reaction to Vietnam, there was a widespread tendency among much of U.S. 'informed opinion' to engage in romanticizing revolutionary movements, the same severe distortion, though of a different nature, as that which characterized the strongly anti-communist years 1945-1965. The revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua brought an end to the period of romanticizing revolution, and there is now a *very* great danger that in the 1980s the U.S. will overreact to the distortion that marked the 1970s by pursuing a policy of what could be called 'romantic counter-revolution': that is, a policy of indiscriminate opposition to all revolutionary movements.

There have been two recent instances of this mentality of romantic counter-revolution exhibited in widespread demands for U.S. military intervention in support of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua and the Muzorewa regime in Zimbabwe. Given the almost non-existent domestic support for these governments and given the strength, organizational sophistication and international support of their opponents, for the U.S. to have attempted to save these governments would have been a hopeless undertaking. This is *not* to deny that the U.S. does have serious problems in dealing with the Sandinistas and may, in fact, have problems in the future with Mugabe's government in Zimbabwe; but these problems should not disguise the fact that in the long-run there was no way the U.S. could prevent these governments from coming to power.

The Reagan Administration has placed a great deal of emphasis on the Soviet role in training and arming various revolutionary movements.[8] Up to a point, this emphasis has been a useful corrective to the tendency to deny that the degree of outside support has any impact on the success or failure of a revolutionary movement. (This pattern of denial was characteristic in the romanticizing of revolutionary movements so common during the 1970s. Serious revolutionaries such as the Sandinistas had no time for romantic delusions—while preparing for the final offensive that they launched

in the summer of 1979 they raised funds from whatever foreign sources they had access to and used these funds to buy arms on the international arms market.)[9]

The problem is that while there clearly is extensive support by the Soviet Union of certain revolutionary movements, all too frequently two conclusions have been derived from the fact of such support that, if believed and acted upon, would be disastrous for the national security of the United States. First, the Soviets are *aiding* revolutionary movements, but they are not *creating* such movements. Second, the Soviets do not, in most cases, control the revolutionary movements that they support.

For example, to believe that the Soviet Union created the insurgencies in Central America can only lead to a foreign policy disaster for the United States because such a belief will cause the U.S. to ignore all of the crucial local factors that actually led to these insurgencies. Moreover, simply giving arms and training to a revolutionary movement does not mean that the Soviets will be able to dictate policy to the movement in question. In the contemporary world there are a number of sources of arms and training besides the Soviet Union and its client states. Hence, the Soviets are aware that if they try to totally dominate the movements that they are supporting then these movements might turn elsewhere for assistance. (Certainly, revolutionary movements generally try to diversify their sources of support so as to preserve their independence.) For the U.S. to start thinking that the Soviets can 'turn-off' revolutionary movements would be disastrous for U.S. national security interests. Such a belief serves to reinforce the dangerous 'romantic counter-revolution' tendency noted above, causing American officials to feel that they do not have to worry about being trapped in an unwinnable insurgency situation because, as a last resort, the U.S. can always pressure the Soviet Union into terminating the insurgency.

The final component of the Reagan Administration's response to revolutionary movements is to take a tough line toward what are regarded as the other patrons of such movements: countries such as Libya, Nicaragua and Cuba. Here again, there is considerable merit in the abandonment of the post-Vietnam delusion that any conflicts between the U.S. and a radical Third World government are due to 'misunderstandings' between the two sides. The fact is that certain radical Third World regimes are very hostile toward the United States, hostile enough to support terrorist movements that attack Americans. The United States must accept the reality of such enmity and take the necessary steps to protect itself. To illustrate the point by taking an extreme case, the post-1979 Iranian government's hostility toward the United States, a hostility that went to the point of supporting a terrorist-type hostage incident, is due to many factors, but a 'misunderstanding' of the United States is not one of them.

However, there is a very great danger that this emphasis on the so-called "sponsors of terrorism" could, given the historic American tendency to engage in international crusades, degenerate into an indiscriminate crusade against all radical nationalist governments in the Third World. Such an indiscriminate crusade is totally unnecessary. The fact is that the U.S. has done a much better job of "living with revolution" than is often realized: U.S.—Algerian relations are correct and formal to the point of being rather cool, but this relationship has been mutually beneficial to both parties; Gulf Oil and the MPLA government in Angola have cooperated closely to keep that country's oil wells functioning, and the Mugabe government in Zimbabwe has repeatedly stated that it wants American and European investment and economic aid. Such a crusade would be a foreign policy disaster of staggering proportions for the United States, for in such a campaign the United States would have no support from Western Europe or Japan and would thus be confronting an increasingly assertive, increasingly radical and increasingly determined Third World all by itself. While many Americans will find such a fact hard to accept, there can be no doubt that in the long run the United States would hurt itself quite badly by such a confrontation.

In sum, the Reagan Administration's policy toward revolutionary movements does have some positive achievements to its credit. But it must also be stressed that each of the four steps the Administration has taken to deal with this problem contain certain latent dangers that, were they to become manifest, would lead to disastrous consequences for the national security of the United States. Hence great care must be taken by Reagan Administration officials in implementing their policy toward revolutionary movements.

Footnotes

1. Claire Sterling, *The Terror Network: The Secret War of International Terrorism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981).
2. Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary*, Nov. 1979, pp. 34-55; *New York Times*, 29 Jan. 1981, 7 May 1981, 19 Dec. 1981.
3. U.S. Const. art. I, sec. 9, clause 2.
4. Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 2.
5. Carlos Marighella, "The Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla," appendix in Robert Moss, *Urban Guerrilla Warfare* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1971), p. 40.
6. Samuel P. Huntington, "Civil Violence and the Process of Development," in *Civil Violence and the International System (Part II: Violence and International Security)* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1971), p. 7.

7. Such as the Magsaysay government in the Philippines in its struggle against the communist guerrillas in the early to mid-1950s, and the Betancourt government in Venezula, 1958-1964. For an excellent study of U.S. counter-insurgency policy in the post-World War II era, see Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counter-Insurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1977).
8. See, for example, the State Department White Paper on aid by communist countries to the insurgents in El Salvador: "Communist Interference in El Salvador," *Department of State Bulletin*, Volume 81, Number 2048 (March 1981), pp. 1-11.
9. Thomas W. Walker, *Nicaragua: The Land of Sandino* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1981), pp. 38-39.