

Toward a New, Effective Central America Policy: The De-emphasis of Nicaragua

by
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The summer of 1989 marked the completion of a decade of Sandinista rule in Nicaragua. The passing of this milestone, coupled with the growing acknowledgement of the demise of the Contras as a credible force, underscores the necessity of reassessing American foreign policy toward Central America during the last nine years.

Two arguments are frequently set forth for why the Bush Administration would be wise to formulate a new foreign policy toward Central America and to reject the obsession with the Sandinista government that dominated American foreign policy toward the region under Ronald Reagan's leadership. The first argument is simply that the Sandinistas' tenacity and the Contras' inefficacy and disappearing support from neighboring countries make clear the futility of the Reagan approach. The second argument is that numerous problems apart from the Sandinistas (violent militaries and leftist opposition fronts, weak or crumbling democratic governments, widespread anti-Americanism, foreign debt difficulties, and endemic poverty) plague the nations of Central America. These problems are potentially as threatening to American interests as are the Sandinistas, and they may be easier for the United States to address given America's greater influence in the other Central American nations.

As valid as these two arguments may be, they fail to address the concerns that motivated the focus on Nicaragua in the first place, namely: how can the United States turn attention away from the Sandinistas as long as Marxism-Leninism and Soviet influence continue to threaten the people of Nicaragua and neighboring countries? To address these concerns and to further support the formulation of a new Central America policy, this article advances a third argument: at least five internal and external constraints, other than those imposed by the United States through the Contras, restrict Sandinista actions and sufficiently guarantee American interests in the region.¹

INTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

Sandinista power is far from absolute. Internal constraints on their authority can be divided into religious, economic, and political forces. The Church, the private sector, and the opposition parties all wield significant influence over the course of development Nicaragua is following. Whether or not Nicaragua eventually becomes a repressive, totalitarian society depends not only on Sandinista intentions but also on their ability to usurp the power of these three groups.

1. The Church

No institution—not even the FSLN—is more firmly entrenched in Nicaraguan society than the Church. ("FSLN" is the Spanish acronym for the Sandinista National Liberation Front—the Sandinista party's full name.) To argue that the FSLN may someday stamp out the Church borders on the absurd.

Almost everyone in Nicaragua is religious. According to a poll that appeared in *La Prensa* in 1981, 80% of the population considered itself to be Catholic, and only 6.9% claimed to be atheists or not members of a religion. Also, 38% considered Archbishop (subsequently Cardinal) Miguel Obando y Bravo to be the most popular Nicaraguan, as compared with 13.5% who favored president Daniel Ortega.² Religion permeates Nicaraguan society—from statues of the Virgin Mary in factories and stores to pictures of Jesus Christ that hang in public schools next to portraits of revolutionary heroes Sandino and Carlos Fonesca, from traditional Catholic masses in nineteenth-century churches to radical "popular" services in modern buildings decorated with murals of crucified peasants.

On whether to support the Sandinistas or not, religious leaders are divided. Political views cover a wide spectrum of thought. No longer does the Church present a united conservative political front as it did a few short decades ago. This broadening of political thought is not unique to the Church in Nicaragua, but, rather, reflects a trend in the Latin American Catholic Church that reaches back to changes resulting from the Second Ecumenical Council, or Vatican II, held from 1962 through 1965.

On the moderately conservative end of the Church's political spectrum are people like Cardinal Obando y Bravo, who supported the 1979 revolution but did not support the Sandinistas. Perhaps the clearest indication of the power wielded by this large faction of the Church comes from the Church's victory in the struggle against political education in the privately-owned Catholic schools. About 25% of secondary students in Nicaragua attend privately-owned Catholic schools, many of which receive money from the government. The FSLN wanted to send special teachers into these Catholic schools to provide the students with political education—a plan that the Church adamantly opposed.³ After a long struggle, the Sandinistas have been forced to recognize the autonomy of the Catholic schools and the significant power of the traditional Catholic Church.

At the leftist end of the political spectrum are the radical members of the clergy (adherents to the growing Liberation Theology movement), several of whom became central members of the Sandinistas before the revolution and now hold top-level government positions. These leftist religious leaders have their own agenda that mixes Christianity with a peculiar brand of Latin American Marxism, which is a watered-down version of what most Americans associate with the Marxist label. Limits on Sandinista power come not just from the religious opposition but also from these religious supporters.

Members of the radical Church consider themselves first and foremost to be devout Christians. Although they form an important part of the Sandinista

power base, they clearly will only support or tolerate the revolutionary government as long as they believe the FSLN promotes their interests. Leftist religious leaders are a formidable check on the power of the more traditionally Marxist, anti-religious members of the Sandinista leadership.

2. The Private Sector

Shortly after the revolution, the FSLN nationalized much of the economy, including: the property of the Somozas (the ousted dictators) and their accomplices (roughly 25% of industrial plants and 25% of cultivated land), natural resources (mines, fisheries, and forests), and the banking and insurance systems. To acquire a monopoly over foreign exchange, the FSLN wrested control of exports from the private sector.⁴

In 1981, the Council of State legislated a new agrarian reform law, which authorized expropriation of underutilized or abandoned lands and large landholdings that were rented or share-cropped. Unlike many other Latin American land reform laws, the Nicaraguan law placed no ceiling on the amount of land that could be privately owned, and it protected most landholdings under certain sizes. Much of the expropriated land was to be titled to cooperatives, individual farmers, and state farms under the restriction that it could not be sold, rented, or subdivided.⁵

Between 1981 and 1986, only 523,403 *manzanas* were expropriated, most of which were taken between 1981 and 1983. (One *manzana* equals 1.75 acres.) That is, the pace of expropriation decelerated over time until 1986. In January, 1986, Daniel Ortega amended the agrarian reform law with changes that, in theory, would increase the Sandinistas' ability to control the private sector with the threat of confiscation. In fact, according to David Stanfield at the University of Wisconsin's Land Tenure Center, there has been very little expropriation of land since 1986.⁶

The FSLN placed expropriated land that was not immediately redistributed to cooperatives and private owners into the Area of People's Property (APP), which was based on state-owned farms.⁷ Due to the large initial acquisition of property from the ousted Somoza family, the size of the APP peaked shortly after the revolution, in 1982, when it included 24.0% of the total land. Because the rate of redistribution from the APP to cooperatives and small private owners has exceeded the rate of expropriation from wealthy landholders into the APP, the amount of land in the APP has declined dramatically. By 1985, the percentage of total land in the APP had dropped to 16.8%. According to land tenure expert David Stanfield, since 1986 when policy changes increased the emphasis on collectively and individually controlled land, the size of the APP has fallen even more.⁸

Government control of the land has decreased steadily since the early 1980s as private control has increased—a fact that continues to be ignored by many ardent opponents of the Sandinistas both inside Nicaragua and inside Washington.

Since coming to power, the Sandinistas have had to contend with the recalcitrance of this large private sector. As Latin America specialist Forrest

Colburn argues, economic constraints have forced the Sandinistas to abandon some revolutionary ideals and to make concessions to certain private sector groups, particularly those who generate essential foreign currency.⁹

On the one hand, the Sandinistas harbor intense dislike for the wealthy landholders, who are viewed as the very core of the old agro-export capitalist system of exploitation. On the other hand, the Sandinistas desperately need foreign exchange, which has come primarily from cotton exports. Due to the high degree of technical skills needed to grow cotton efficiently, the FSLN has been unable (or unwilling) to take over much production from the private owners.¹⁰

Instead, the FSLN has used financial incentives and the threat of confiscation to induce growers to continue production. Although the producers resent the government's tactics and are unsure about their own future, they continue to produce because there are still some profits to be made. Were they to stop, they might lose their primary source of wealth—their land.¹¹ As long as the need for foreign exchange continues, the large cotton-growing landholders will continue to exist and to play a significant, but limited, role in the Nicaraguan economy.

At the other end of the economic spectrum, the poor peasants have also carved out a niche in contemporary Nicaraguan society for individual control of land and limited property rights. In spite of what Marxist ideology might say, the Sandinistas have been forced to recognize that Nicaraguan peasants do not like to work on communal lands. Rather, peasants strongly prefer to work their family-owned plots, as they have for generations.¹² In general, the Sandinistas have demonstrated pragmatism and flexibility in searching for effective models of production, as they have shifted from production cooperatives to state farms, then back to production cooperatives, and more recently to the individual small farm.¹³

Also, regardless of what contemporary Marxist theory may teach, reality has shown that a highly centralized economy leads only to cumbersome inefficiency. This lesson, which has become increasingly clear to Soviet, East European, Chinese, and many African leaders, has not been lost on the Sandinistas. To combat inefficiency, the Sandinistas have increased the autonomy of the regional offices of the Ministry of Agriculture over time, giving more decision-making power to local officials. They have also granted the state farms in the APP fiscal autonomy and their own individual divisions for planning, legal activities, training, administration, and finance.¹⁴

In sum, economic power (and the political power that comes from it) is not concentrated entirely in the hands of the FSLN leadership. Regional government offices and Sandinista labor organizations have considerable economic control. Annihilation does not loom in the future of the private sector—most likely not even for the large landowners. Regardless of what ideology might dictate, the trend since 1979 has been toward decentralization and toward greater control of land by those who work it (either individuals or cooperatives) instead of state ownership.

Of course it is physically possible that the Sandinistas will reverse these trends. But recentralization and shifting to state farms would lead to the same cumbersome inefficiency the Sandinistas seek to avoid, and confiscating large landholdings would result in losses of foreign exchange. Given the dire state of the Nicaraguan economy and the desperate shortage of foreign exchange, these are actions the FSLN can ill afford. Even without the Contra threat and obsessive attention from the United States, the incentives to the FSLN for not monopolizing economic power and for allowing the continued existence of the private sector are great.

3. The Political Opposition Parties

Since the revolution, a number of civil opposition parties (almost completely unrelated to the military Contra forces) have struggled with the FSLN for a share of power. These opposition parties encompass all political persuasions, most of which are to the right of the Sandinistas but a few of which are even more radical than the Sandinistas. In spite of their great political differences, the opposition parties often work together as a united political front against Sandinista rule. The result of their power struggle has been an authoritarian society in which the FSLN is by far the dominant force, but in which the opposition parties have a significant ability to influence Sandinista rule.

The opposition parties have been unable to gain a central role in Nicaraguan political life since the revolution. Nevertheless, many opposition party leaders believe that the Sandinistas will not be able to stamp out the opposition parties in the foreseeable future. Although the FSLN may have the physical ability to eradicate their political opposition, to do so would require an escalation of internal violence to a level unprecedented in the decade of Sandinista rule.

Given the Sandinistas' human rights record so far, such an event seems unlikely. Isolated cases of physical human rights violations clearly have occurred (as have frequent violations of political and legal rights). However, allegations of widespread, systematic physical abuses simply are not justified.¹⁵ The Sandinistas have not engaged in systematic torture or summary execution to the same extent as the leftist opposition fronts and rightist governments in neighboring Guatemala and El Salvador. Even most opposition party leaders acknowledge the rarity of physical torture in Nicaragua.

Such violence would only further isolate Nicaragua from the world community and, more importantly, would alienate important sectors of moderate domestic supporters. These moderate supporters form a crucial part of the Sandinista power base, and understanding who they are helps clarify why they act as a check on Sandinista actions. They are perhaps best typified by Xavier Chamorro, editor of the pro-Sandinista, quasi-independent newspaper, *El Nuevo Diario*.

Shortly after the revolution, Chamorro, who had edited the better-known *La Prensa* since his brother Pedro Joaquin Chamorro's 1978 assassination, left

that paper to form a new daily, *El Nuevo Diario*, which would actively support the Sandinistas. With him came approximately 80% of the old *La Prensa* staff—those who sought to change their country's oppressive social conditions and disagreed with the political ideas of the staff members who remained at *La Prensa*.

Both papers have numerous portraits of the martyred Pedro Joaquin Chamorro in their offices, and both believe they are the true heirs of the old *La Prensa* legacy of vigilantly representing the Nicaraguan people.

El Nuevo Diario's readership includes members of the Nicaraguan intellectual and professional community who believe the FSLN serves the nation's best interests. This community, which gets little attention in the United States, still comprises an important part of the Sandinista power base, even though more and more of these Nicaraguans are turning against the FSLN or are fleeing the country because of the growing economic malaise. Many more in this informed, moderate constituency who still support the Sandinistas would end their support if they believed the FSLN were leading Nicaragua down a path to repressive communism and the eradication of the private sector.

Many critics of the FSLN cite the Sandinistas' inflammatory speeches and writings as "proof" that the Sandinistas will lead the country toward communism unless checked by American military might. These critics fail to recognize the diversity of the Sandinista power base and the significant constraints the many moderate Sandinista supporters impose on FSLN actions. Since coming to power, Sandinista leaders have had to recognize and to grudgingly accept internal and external constraints on what is possible in Nicaragua today. This recognition has moderated the thinking of the top *commandantes* and is an essential part of their current ideology.

It is interesting to note that of the three factions which developed in the Sandinista guerrilla movement during the 1970s, it is the most moderate faction—led by President Daniel Ortega and his brother Defense Minister Humberto Ortega—that has consistently held the upper hand in shaping Sandinista policy. It was this faction that rejected the more orthodox Marxist strategies of the other factions in favor of working with all sectors of society to bring down the Somoza regime. It is also this faction that was most willing to negotiate with the Contras and internal opposition forces and, in general, has been the most willing to abandon dogmatic ideology in favor of pragmatism and flexibility.

Three illustrations of the impact of these constraints can be noted. First, a reasonably legitimate presidential election was held in 1984 partially because of pressure from the opposition. Second, the 1987 Constitution incorporated many democratic principles and provisions for civil rights deemed important to the opposition parties but had been resisted by the Sandinistas. Third, in response to uprisings along Nicaragua's eastern coast, the Sandinistas granted much political autonomy to the peoples of the Atlantic Coast region who share a culture, language, and history that is alien to the Hispanic mainstream of the Nicaraguan population.

In sum, completely free religious, economic, and political pluralism has proven illusory so far under Sandinista rule. Yet, the Sandinistas, restricted by very real internal constraints, do not have absolute power. Nor do the Sandinistas—struggling to maintain their evaporating popular support—seem likely in the future to usurp economic or religious power or to circumvent the limited democratic precedents established during the last ten years. In short, the evidence on Nicaragua seems to refute Jeane Kirkpatrick's theory (however popular among certain policy makers it may be) that "violent insurgency headed by Marxist revolutionaries is unlikely to lead to anything but totalitarian tyranny."¹⁶ As we shall see, external forces constraining and shaping Sandinista actions further support the thesis that—even without pressure from the Contras and obsessive attention from the Bush Administration—Nicaragua will not itself become a totalitarian, communist country, nor will it cause other Central American dominoes to tumble.

EXTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

Although Nicaraguan foreign trade with communist bloc countries has risen sharply since the 1979 revolution, non-communist industrialized countries and other Latin American nations still receive the lion's share of Nicaragua's foreign trade. What has changed significantly since the revolution is the source of the economic and military aid Nicaragua receives. As foreign assistance that once came from the United States and various multilateral organizations gradually ended after the 1979 revolution, aid from the communist bloc took its place.

This aid from communist bloc nations has provided the Sandinistas with the military strength and economic resources essential to maintaining their power. Nicaragua's failing economy has intensified this dependency. Nicaragua now is almost totally dependent on Soviet donations of oil and basic foods. Total economic aid for 1987 reached close to \$500 million.¹⁷ Also, Soviet military aid has been essential to the FSLN's campaign against the Contras.

It is perhaps pertinent to note here that military assistance has been primarily in the form of materiel, and not in the form of personnel. According to Roger Miranda, a senior level advisor to Defense Minister Humberto Ortega who defected to the United States in December 1987 and who was portrayed as a reliable source by the Reagan Administration, at the end of 1987 there were no more than 12 Soviet military advisors and approximately 500 Cuban military advisors in Nicaragua.¹⁸ In this respect, the Soviet and Cuban military presence in Nicaragua in no way resembles the circumstances in Afghanistan or Angola during the last decade, where large numbers of foreign troops have played central roles.

Nicaraguan dependency on this economic and military aid guarantees the Soviets (and the Cubans) significant influence over the FSLN. Exactly how much influence they have is difficult to determine since it is impossible to know to what degree a particular Sandinista action is caused by internal forces and desires, and to what extent the causes are external. Nevertheless,

determining the *directions* in which Cuba and the U.S.S.R. urge the Sandinistas is possible.

Ironic as it may be, the vanguard of the socialist bloc—the Soviet Union—and the prototypical Latin American revolutionary state that inspired the young Sandinistas and other Latin American leftists in the 1960s—Cuba—both have been preaching moderation and restraint to their Nicaraguan disciples. Despite their Marxist-Leninist ideologies, both the Soviets and the Cubans have been telling the Nicaraguans not to break economic links with the West, not to eradicate the private sector, and not to openly fan the flames of revolutionary movements in neighboring countries. Two factors, one economic and the other political and military, have led the Soviet Union and Cuba to this paradoxical position.

4. Scarce Soviet Resources

The well from which the Soviet-bloc aid flows is not bottomless. The Soviets eschew the long-term economic commitment they might have to make should the Sandinistas embark on a failed socialist path that permanently alienates Nicaragua from Western economic powers and replaces privately-owned productive farms and plantations with disastrous, inefficient, centrally-planned establishments. As the Soviets show an increasing reluctance to pour resources into the Cuban economy,¹⁹ it becomes more and more clear that responsibility for supporting one "economic basket case" in the region is already more than the Soviets desire.

Of the Soviets' reluctance to commit scarce resources to Nicaragua there can be no doubt. A visit to Nicaragua reveals chronic shortages of almost everything. In particular, the shortage of Soviet oil shipments, on which the country has become desperately dependent, is evident from rationed fuel, electrical, telephone, and water service (which all depend on oil); and from idle factories unable to operate without electricity.

Shortages also plague the military. An internal Sandinista document released by the Nicaraguan defector Roger Miranda (which was not intended for publication) reveals a consistent failure by the Soviet Union to provide the Sandinista army with much-needed supplies. For instance, one passage notes: "It is vital to secure a supplemental order of arms, technical support, materiel and logistics not furnished in 1985." Other passages record the erratic nature of Soviet supplies.²⁰

As Gorbachev tries to integrate the Soviet Union into the world economy and utilize opportunities available from capitalist countries to revamp the failing Soviet economy, it should surprise no one that he is reluctant to send scarce economic resources to a country that promises no economic returns—only worthless ideological victories.²¹

5. American Political and Military Power

American political and military power constrain Sandinista actions in at least two ways. First, the Sandinistas fear the threat of direct American

aggression against Nicaragua. Regardless of whether the threat is real or imagined, the fear of the threat is very real and will still persist even if the Contras disappear. Various Nicaraguan, Cuban, and Soviet speeches and articles indicate that the Cubans and the Soviets share the FSLN's misgivings about U.S. aggression. Both have counseled the Sandinistas not to provoke the United States, and both have warned that, should the United States intervene militarily, there is little either Cuba or the Soviet Union can do about it. So ubiquitous is this obsessive insecurity that an end to the Contra war is unlikely to drastically diminish it. Fear of American military might will continue to check Sandinista actions long after the Contras have dissipated.

The second constraint stemming from America's political and military strength results from the Soviets' desire to promote superpower relations in order to reap the benefits of a thaw in the Cold War. Although the Soviets probably seek to increase their military presence in Latin America, they are not willing to bear any burden nor risk a confrontation with the United States to further their interests.

The affair that best illustrates Soviet reluctance to provoke the United States is the much-publicized MiG controversy. In 1982, the Sandinistas began constructing an airfield at Punta Huete that would have a 10,000-foot runway—long enough to accommodate even the largest of Soviet military aircraft.²² Since 1981, the Reagan Administration had worried that the Nicaraguans might obtain Soviet MiGs—supersonic military aircraft. Daniel Ortega acknowledged in 1984 that the FSLN sought MiGs and that Nicaraguan pilots were learning to fly MiGs in Bulgaria and Cuba. Nicaraguan defectors claimed that a group of MiGs were in Cuba awaiting delivery to Nicaragua. The Reagan Administration asserted that the introduction of MiGs or any aircraft with air-to-air or air-to-ground missile capabilities would not be tolerated and pledged to take up the matter with the Soviets. Although Humberto Ortega continued to defend Nicaragua's right to acquire any aircraft necessary to defend itself, the Soviets decided not to provoke Washington, and the MiGs never arrived.²³

The MiG incident shows that, as long as the United States clearly delineates reasonable lines the Soviets cannot cross without incurring repercussions, the Soviets are unlikely to risk confronting the United States for the minimal gains certain Soviet military activity might yield (even without the threat of the Contra war).

An observation worth making is that U.S. pressure against militarization has been more effective on the Soviets and Cubans than on the Nicaraguans. Although threatening Nicaragua may ease Sandinista domestic repression slightly, it is not likely to mitigate their attempts to build a credible military force. Instead, pressure on the Soviets is more likely to be effective. It is significant that it was the Soviets who seem to have capitulated on the MiG issue; the Sandinistas still would like to add MiGs to their arsenal.

In summary, even without U.S. pressure on the Sandinistas through the Contras, the five internal and external constraints discussed in this article

sufficiently guarantee that Nicaragua is not traveling down the path to totalitarian rule and the annihilation of religious, economic, and political opposition forces. But do these five constraints sufficiently guarantee that Nicaragua will not cause other Central American dominoes to tumble? Before answering this question, a careful clarification of the nature of Nicaragua's threat to its neighbors is in order.

NICARAGUA'S THREAT TO NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES

Many of the concerns about Nicaragua's military threat to neighboring countries that have motivated America's Central America policy for the last eight years are justifiable. Nevertheless, some of these are unwarranted. Before addressing the justifiable concerns it is important to expose the unjustifiable ones.

Perhaps no distortion of Nicaraguan reality has been greater than the accusation that the Sandinista military buildup has been primarily offensively oriented. As "evidence" of the offensive origins of Sandinista militarism, one often encounters the following argument:

This [Sandinista] military machine certainly was not built in reaction to threats from neighbors, or from ex-Somoza National Guardsmen . . . [T]he Sandinistas led the way in militarizing Central America. The Sandinistas had the largest military more than a year before serious armed opposition to the regime commenced. This intense buildup, resulting from Soviet-bloc assistance, started while the United States was giving the Sandinistas millions of dollars in economic aid.²⁴

It is certainly true that the Sandinistas have built the most powerful military forces in the region. Nevertheless, much of the FSLN's weaponry strongly points to a defensive military posture: the extensive air defense system that protects military, economic, and political targets with Soviet anti-aircraft guns, surface-to-air missiles, and other anti-aircraft artillery; a technologically advanced radar system; and numerous Soviet- and Polish-built mine-sweeping boats.²⁵

More importantly, the shallow, underlying premise of this argument that the Sandinista buildup has been offensive presupposes that legitimate defensive militarization could only have occurred *after* forces hostile to the FSLN had developed. Such an argument unfairly precludes the possibility that the Sandinistas foresaw future aggression and took action to prepare for it. In fact, substantial evidence confirms that the Sandinistas have been obsessed with the threat from the United States almost since their inception. As early as 1969, the Sandinistas pledged that a future revolutionary government

will establish obligatory military service and will arm the students, workers and farmers, who—organized into people's militias—will defend the rights won against *the inevitable*

*attack by the reactionary forces of the country and Yankee imperialism.*²⁶

And, as already noted, the Sandinistas have known that they cannot count on help from their allies against such aggression.

It is difficult to convey to Americans unfamiliar with the Sandinista worldview the extent to which this fear of American intervention pervades everything the Sandinistas say and write. Everywhere there are ominous references to past American military intervention in Grenada in the 1980s, Guatemala in the 1950s, Cuba in the 1960s, and Nicaragua itself during the early part of this century. Virtually every move the Sandinistas make is preceded by consideration of the likely American response.

Even President Reagan's Undersecretary of Defense Fred Ikle and some officials at the U.S. Embassy in Managua have agreed that the primary purpose of Soviet military supplies has been to help in the fight against the Contras. The aid was not meant primarily for confrontation with Nicaragua's neighbors.²⁷

According to documents released by Nicaraguan defector Roger Miranda, the Sandinistas still fear a possible invasion by the United States sometime after the end of the Contra war. When Contra military aggression ceases, the Sandinistas plan to reduce the size of "unconventional warfare units," designed to fight Contra guerrilla units, and build an armed force that "will more convincingly avert the possibility of a direct invasion by American troops and assure their defeat should the invasion occur."²⁸

The case for the argument that the Sandinista military buildup has been defensive is strong. What about the argument that the buildup has been offensive? In all the "secret speeches" and acquired internal documents that are often cited as evidence of the Sandinistas' hidden intentions, are there any statements that the Sandinistas ever plan to use troops in offensive attacks on neighboring countries? No, there are none. *The Historic Program of the FSLN of 1969, The General Political-Military Platform of 1977, The 72-Hour Document*, Miranda's accounts, and extensive remarks made by the Sandinista *commandantes* since the movement's founding in the 1960s until the present, including Bayardo Arc's "secret speech"—all the sources Sandinista critics turn to for "proof" of Sandinista hidden intentions—all are completely devoid of references to the use of regular Sandinista forces *offensively* in other countries.

The only basis for concluding that the Sandinista buildup has been offensively oriented is a specious argument that the sole conceivable reason (to Sandinista critics) for such a large military is for expansionistic purposes; therefore the Sandinistas must harbor aggressive intentions. Also, aficionados of this line of reasoning maintain that because all communists are expansionistic and since the Sandinistas are communists, then the Sandinistas must intend to use their military troops against their neighbors.

Of course, these suspicions could possibly prove to be true, but they are not based on any solid evidence. They are not the foundations on which sound foreign policy is made.

However, other concerns about potential threats to American interests in the region—concerns grounded in solid evidence and rational thinking—have been justified. The United States cut off all aid to Nicaragua in 1981 on the grounds that Nicaragua was aiding the revolutionary guerrilla movement in El Salvador.²⁹ Based on classified intelligence, the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence reported in 1983 that "[a] major portion of the arms and other material sent by Cuba and other Communist countries to the Salvadoran insurgents transits Nicaragua with permission and assistance of the Sandinistas."³⁰ The Committee also concluded that the El Salvadoran rebels were using sites in Nicaragua "for communications, command-and-control, and for the logistics to conduct their financial, material and propaganda activities."³¹ In July, 1984 Congress reaffirmed that Nicaragua was still "providing military support (including arms, training, and logistical, command and control, and communications facilities) to groups seeking to overthrow the Government of El Salvador and other Central American governments"³²

Many have questioned the validity of the assessment that the Sandinistas send the El Salvadoran revolutionaries large amounts of arms. These critics point to the paucity of arms shipments captured by American-backed forces. Given the number of ships patrolling the Gulf of Fonseca and soldiers patrolling the Honduran region between Nicaragua and El Salvador, it does seem improbable that a significant number of shipments to the FMLN (the El Salvadoran leftist guerrillas) could slip through undetected.³³

Although ties between the FSLN and the FMLN have been less visible since the Grenada invasion and especially since the signing of the Arias peace accords, they apparently have not dissolved. According to the defector Roger Miranda, aid to the FMLN continues, but the Sandinistas have asked the Salvadorans to reduce their activities inside Nicaragua, including radio transmissions to units in El Salvador. Miranda contended that recent discussions have included the possibility of giving the FMLN Soviet portable anti-aircraft weapons.³⁴ Daniel Ortega, responding to Miranda's disclosures, admitted that the Sandinistas were training Salvadoran rebels to use anti-aircraft guns and acknowledged that the FSLN does have political ties with various guerrilla organizations.³⁵

On the one hand, given the Sandinistas' revolutionary ideology, at least limited contact with revolutionary movements will probably continue regardless of the threat of aggression from Contra forces or more directly from the United States. On the other hand, Nicaragua's economic resources are painfully restricted, and the probability of sending large quantities of arms past the ever-watchful eyes of the United States are slim. At most, Nicaragua could serve as a conduit for small amounts of Soviet aid and as a sanctuary for small numbers of Central American revolutionaries. As the Soviets seem to grow less interested in aiding Third World revolutionary movements and more interested in preventing such movements from disturbing their superpower negotiations, it becomes more and more doubtful that the Sandinistas will ever play a decisive role in the political and military struggles in the rest of the region.

CONCLUSION

Given the five constraints on Sandinista actions and an unexaggerated appraisal of Nicaragua's threat to its neighbors, it seems clear that—even without the Contras and the obsession with the Sandinistas that has guided American policy toward the region for so long—the United States can sufficiently protect its interests from threats the Sandinistas pose inside Nicaragua and beyond its borders.

In place of a narrow focus on Nicaragua, the U.S. should develop a new Central America policy that not only aims at checking the Sandinistas, but that also addresses other important problems in the region—problems such as violent militaries and leftist opposition fronts, weak or crumbling democratic governments, widespread anti-Americanism, foreign debt difficulties, and endemic poverty. Improving conditions in the rest of the region would have the added benefit of making the other Central American nations more immune to what little detrimental effects the Sandinistas may have there.

For developing a new Central America policy that actively and effectively promotes American interests, this writer offers the following suggestions for consideration:

- a. Pressure on the Soviets to limit military aid has been more effective than pressuring the FSLN. Bilateral agreements with the Soviets to reduce overall levels of military aid to the region might contribute to a general reduction in the area's horrific level of violence. Increasing America's emphasis on human rights and civilian, democratic rule would help also.
- b. Pressing for a reduction in the level of violence committed by government and military forces, and clearly disassociating the United States from perpetrators of violent acts would go a long way toward reducing the feelings of anti-Americanism that have always been a primary cause of leftist groups' popularity.
- c. As the nations of Central America slip further and further into impoverishment and indebtedness, economic considerations can no longer be avoided. Some kind of economic assistance must play a larger role in America's Central America policy. Two ideas worth consideration, in addition to direct U.S. economic aid, are: at least partial debt forgiveness, and a "Marshall Plan" for the area (and other Third World nations) sponsored mainly by today's economic surplus powers—in particular, Japan.
- d. If it no longer makes sense to classify Nicaragua as "an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States," then lifting the economic boycott that has been in place since 1985 would allow trade between Nicaragua and the United States, which might strengthen Nicaragua's private sector and provide some economic relief to the Nicaraguan people.
- e. American noninterference in the upcoming Nicaraguan presidential elections could possibly allow an opposition party candidate to win a legitimate victory over the unpopular Sandinistas, or it might lead to

international teams of election monitors exposing FSLN fraud if the elections were unfair. Little could be worse than to give the Sandinistas justification for not abiding by election results because of U.S. intervention.

- f. Lastly, U.S. foreign policy needs to recognize that Central Americans must play a leading role in shaping their countries' destinies and negotiating their peace agreements. It is almost a truism that creating strong, democratic societies must include, as a cornerstone, the people of Central America.

Some proposals for how to build a new Central America policy will work, others won't. Only by trying new ideas, refining effective ones, and rejecting ineffective ones can any comprehensive foreign policy adequately meet the challenges of a complex, changing world. Replacing the antiquated Reagan approach with such a new, effective foreign policy is, to borrow one of Mr. Bush's favorite metaphors, the President's "mission" in Central America.

Endnotes

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- 1 This article is partially based on a thesis written at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs in 1988 and on the author's interviews in Nicaragua in 1988 with Sandinista supporters and opponents in political organizations, education, business, journalism, and the Church.
- 2 Cited in Jiri Valenta and Duran Esperanza, eds., *Conflict in Nicaragua: A Multidimensional Perspective* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), p. 22.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 4 Forrest Colburn, *Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua: State, Class, and the Dilemmas of Agrarian Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 123.
- 5 David Kaimowitz and David Stanfield, "The Organization of Production Units in the Nicaraguan Agrarian Reform," *Inter-American Economic Affairs* 39 (Summer 1985), p. 57.
- 6 Telephone interview, August, 1989.
- 7 Kaimowitz and Stanfield, p. 52.
- 8 See also Iija Luciak, "National Unity and Popular Hegemony: the Dialectics of Sandinista Agrarian Reform Policies, 1979-1986," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 19 (May 1987), pp. 113-140.
- 9 Colburn, p. 1.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 45-51.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 55-61.
- 12 Telephone interviews with David Stanfield at the University of Wisconsin's Land Tenure Center, April 1988 and August 1989. See also note 36 in Luciak, p. 124.
- 13 Kaimowitz and Stanfield, pp. 52 and 75.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.
- 15 For an extensive list of reports from independent international human rights organizations that confirm this claim, see note 9 in Valenta and Esperanza, pp. 101-102.

- 16 Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary* 68 (November 1979), p. 45.
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- 21 Marlise Simons, "Soviet Courts South America With an Eye for Trade," *New York Times*, October 4 1987, p. E3; Augusto Varas, ed., *Soviet-Latin American Relations in the 1980s* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), p. 170, note 62; and Eusebio Mujal-Leon, ed., *The USSR and Latin America: A Developing Relationship* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 39-41, 74, 77-78, and 284-285.
- 22 *The Sandinista Military Buildup: An Update*, U.S. Departments of State and Defense, October, 1987, Publication 9432, pp. 9-10; Mujal-Leon, pp. 282-283; and Harold Sims, "Nicaragua's Relations with the Communist Party States During 1984," *Conflict Quarterly* 5 (Fall 1985), p. 56.
- 23 For accounts of the MiG controversy, see Sims, pp. 65-68; Shirley Christian, *Nicaragua: Revolution in the Family* (New York: Random House, 1985), p. 298; Varas, pp. 113-114; Mujal-Leon, pp. 16 and 282-283; and Theodore Schwab and Harold Sims, "Revolutionary Nicaragua's Relations with the European Communist States, 1979-1983," *Conflict Quarterly* 5 (Winter 1985), p. 7.
- 24 *The Challenge to Democracy in Central America*, U.S. Departments of State and Defense, June, 1986, pp. 19-20.
- 25 *The Sandinista Military Build-Up*, pp. 10-13. See also Varas, p. 160; and Halloran.
- 26 *Historic Program of the FSLN*, in *Conflict in Nicaragua*, p. 329. Emphasis added.
- 27 Varas, pp. 110-111.
- 28 Halloran. Given the difficulty the Sandinistas now have convincing young citizens to serve their obligatory time and given recent decreases in funding levels for troops and promises to halt mandatory conscription until after this year's elections, it seems unlikely that, without the obvious threat of Contras, the Sandinistas could coerce as large a sector of the society to serve as they have proposed.
- 29 Jiri Valenta and Virginia Valenta, "Sandinistas in Power," *Problems in Communism* 34 (September-October 1985), p. 19.
- 30 Quoted in *The Challenge to Democracy in Central America*, p. 24.
- 31 *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.
- 32 Public Law 98-215, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 33 John Gerassi, "Pluralism Vs. Centralism in Nicaragua: the Sandinistas under Attack," *Scandinavian Journal of Development Alternatives* 5 (March 1986), p. 77; and Mary Vanderlaan, *Revolution and Foreign Policy in Nicaragua* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986), pp. 327-329.
- 34 Kinzer; and "Tales of a Sandinista Defector: An explosive saga of Soviet MiGs and Swiss bank accounts," *Time*, 130 December 21 1987, p. 47.
- 35 James LeMoynes, "Nicaragua to Keep Big Military Force, Its Leader Declares," *New York Times*, December 16 1987, p. A1.