

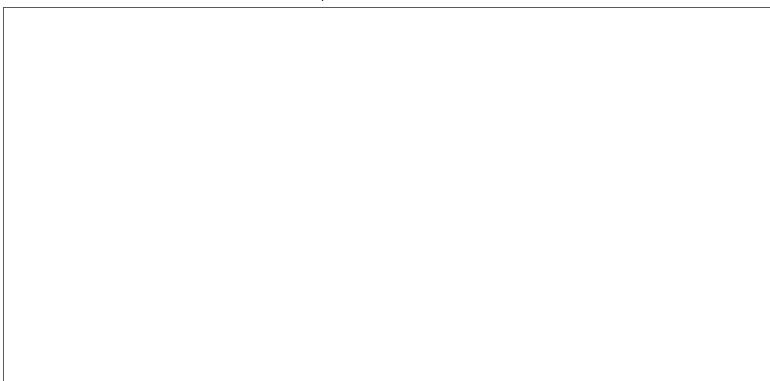
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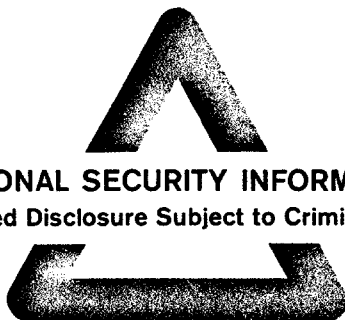
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[Redacted]

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

14 June 1984

A Hot Fall in Central America?

Summary

[Redacted] Nicaraguans, Cubans, and Soviets may be preparing to undertake various military initiatives in Nicaragua and El Salvador this fall.

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On the basis of the tenuous evidence currently available we cannot say with confidence what, if anything, the Soviets and their allies now intend to do in the fall. Instead, this memorandum postulates and examines several scenarios, considers their congruence with current information, and explores their advantages and drawbacks from the Soviet perspective.

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This memorandum was prepared in the Third World Activities Division, SOVA. Questions or comments should be directed to [Redacted] The memorandum has not been coordinated outside SOVA and is intended only to stimulate discussion.

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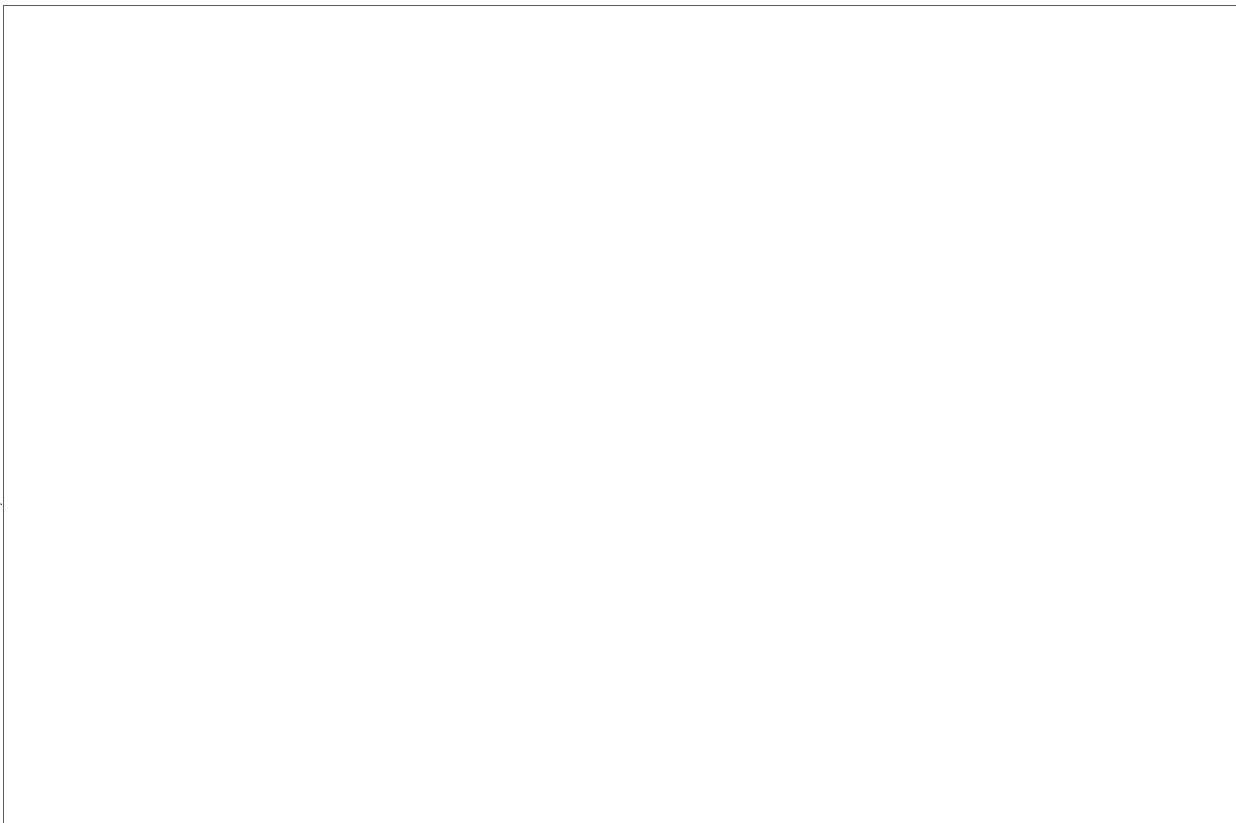
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The Evidence

The evidence consists of the following:



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-- [redacted]

[redacted] stated in June 1984 that he had confirmed information that Nicaragua had negotiated with South Yemen to purchase 10 MIG-17s.

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[redacted]

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-- A Nicaraguan newspaper editorial on 12 June stated that the National Directorate of the FSLN "had resolved" to employ high performance combat aircraft to "repel the aggressors." [redacted]

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-- [redacted] states that Nicaraguan and Bulgarian construction officials say that the Caribbean port of El Bluff has to be ready to

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[redacted]

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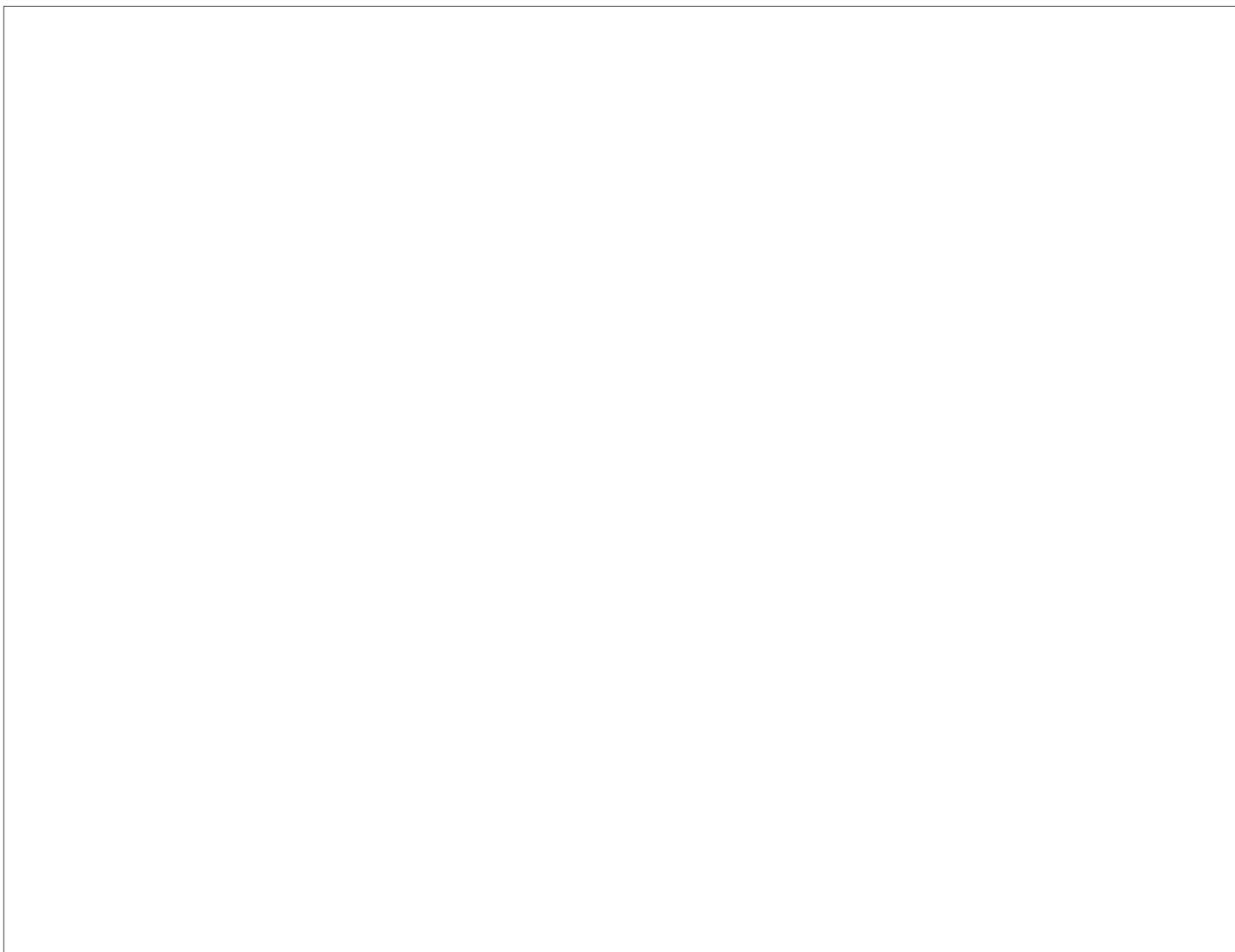
receive Soviet shipping by October. Soviet vessels previously have delivered military support equipment to Nicaragua's Pacific ports. Bulgarian ships have unloaded tanks and other heavy arms offshore from El Bluff for transshipment to Rama, where port facilities have been improved.

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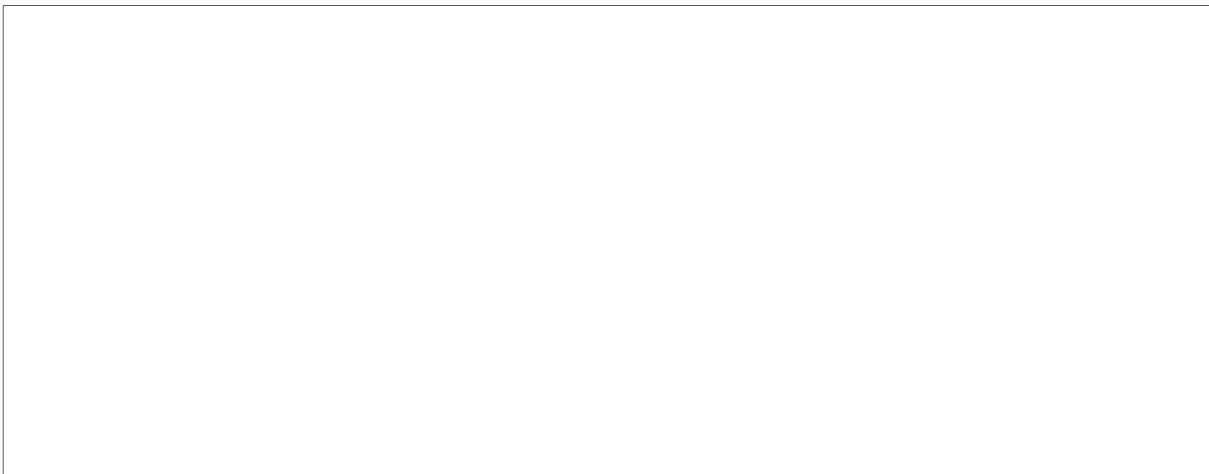
-- Since January, Soviet ships have delivered to Nicaragua about 2000 metric tons of communist military equipment. This represents a two-thirds increase over deliveries during the same period last year.

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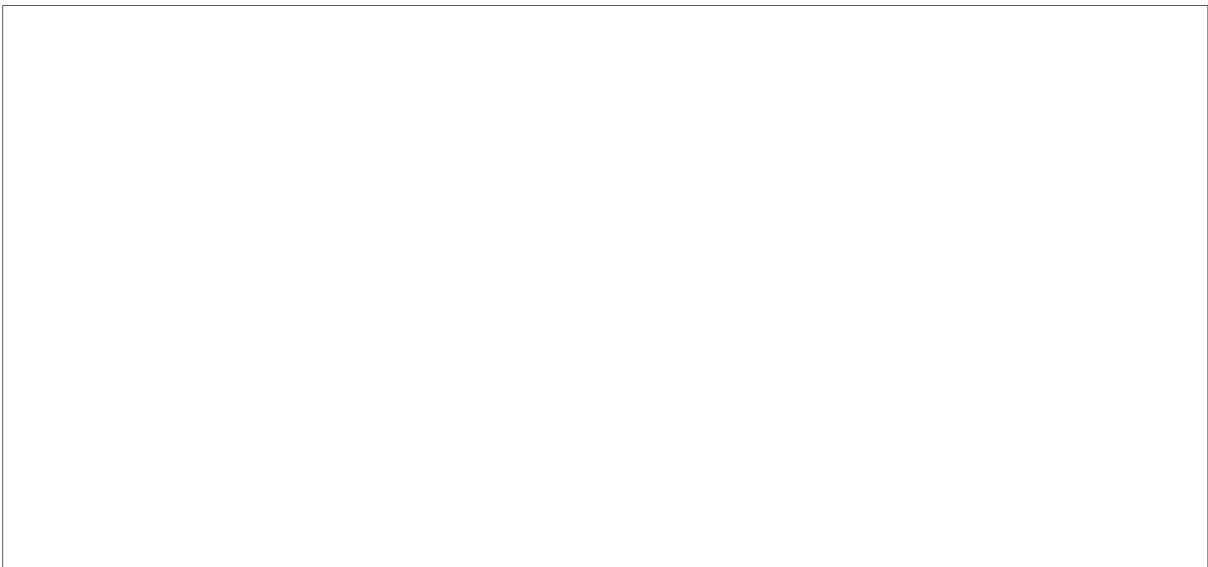
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However, there is some ambiguous evidence:

-- The US Interests Section (USINT) in Havana has been told by a third party that the Cuban leadership recognizes that the insurgents in El Salvador are not winning. (USINT speculates that this could be a Cuban ploy to delay military aid to the government of El Salvador and buy time for Cuban resupply and support of the insurgents' reported fall offensive.)



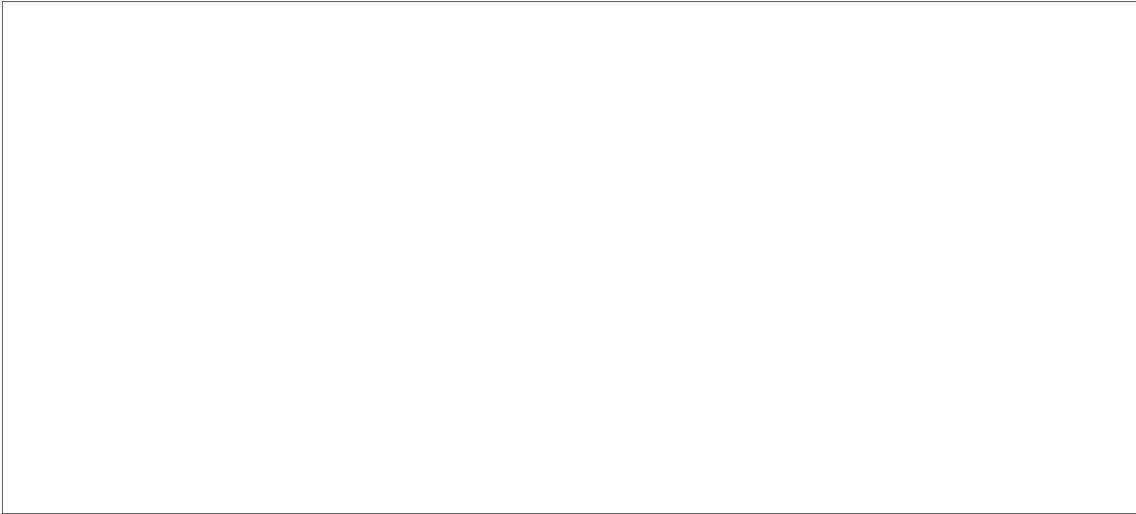
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-- Open [] reporting indicates considerable disarray and lack of coordination in the Salvadoran rebel ranks, raising doubts about the feasibility of concerted military action any time soon and suggesting that a rumored offensive planned for June or July will be postponed at least until August. []

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"Window of Opportunity" Scenarios

The feature common to [] reports suggesting future actions in Nicaragua or El Salvador appears to be a desire to exploit the US election campaign in one way or another. The campaign, of course, could in principle be viewed as either (1) a "window of opportunity" to do things that might be perceived as more likely to evoke US counteraction following the election, or (2) a chance to politically weaken or unseat President Reagan. The two are not mutually exclusive, but they could have different practical implications. Our first two scenarios fall into the former category, our second two into the latter. []

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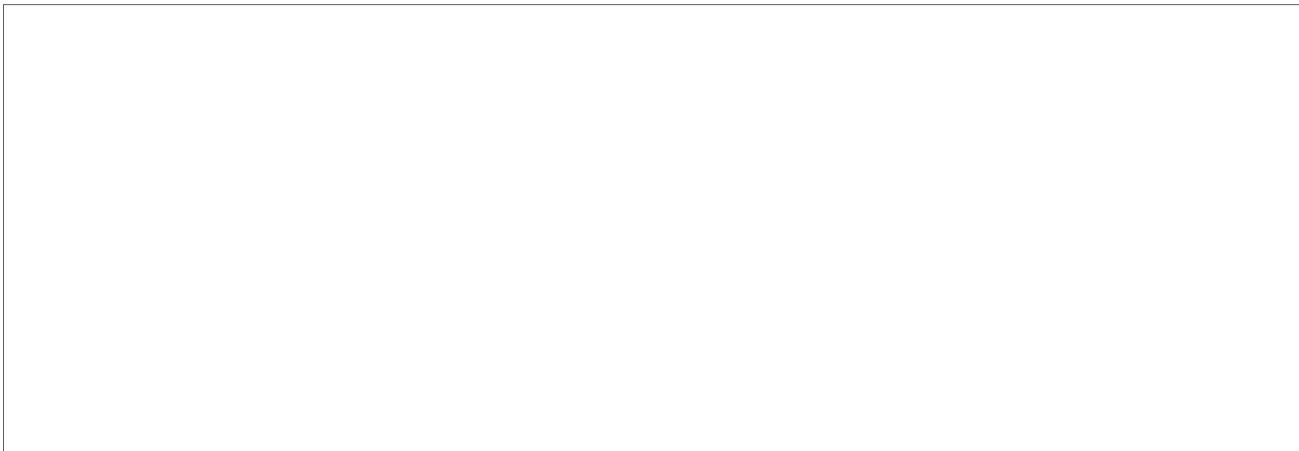
Scenario I: Consolidation of the Sandinista Regime

Top priority in this scenario would be assigned to defeating the "contras" and consolidating a pro-Soviet Marxist regime in Nicaragua.

Tactics urged by Moscow would include:

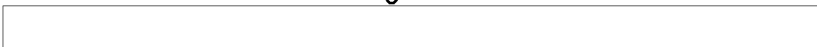
- Rapid but unprovocative buildup of Sandinista military power.
- Avoidance of actions toward El Salvador that could weaken US Congressional pressure on the Executive to terminate support for the rebels in Nicaragua.
- Adoption by the Sandinista leadership of a relatively conciliatory public diplomatic posture combined with a limited display of moderation internally designed to buy time for dealing with economic problems and coping with political opposition.
- Public support for the Contadora process.

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From the Soviet perspective, the Scenario I approach would have a number of advantages. It would:



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- Help guarantee an expanded base for exercising Soviet influence in the Western Hemisphere with minimal risk.
- Make dealing with either a Republican or Democratic administration following the election less difficult than under other scenarios.
- Avoid jeopardizing Soviet standing among moderate elements in Latin America, and for that matter, in Europe.

But it would also have little potential for inflicting near-term political damage on the Reagan administration at home or abroad, although it might cause certain problems in Western Alliance.

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Scenario II: Steady Pursuit of Defeat of the Insurgency in Nicaraguan and Victory for the Insurgency in El Salvador.

The main Soviet objective in this scenario would be simultaneous consolidation of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua and overthrow of the US-backed government in El Salvador. Here, the "window of opportunity" would be utilized to promote:

- Rapid buildup of Sandinista military power.
- An accelerated but still covert strengthening of guerilla forces in El Salvador.

In this scenario, the Sandinista leadership would be encouraged to adopt a flexible public diplomatic posture intended to limit damage from greater support of the insurgency in El Salvador. The key feature of the scenario would be that the timing and tactics of the offensive in

El Salvador would be constrained by prudential calculation of realistic military possibilities; if the chances for success of an offensive launched before the US election appeared unpromising, the Soviets would discourage it.

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From Moscow's perspective, Scenario II would:

- Accelerate the pace of revolutionary change in Central America.
- Enhance the impact of the Soviet-Cuban presence in the region on moderate governments, without driving them into the arms of Washington.
- Keep the risk of direct confrontation between the United States and the USSR or Cuba rather low.
- Not foreclose the possibility of administering a heavy pre-electoral blow to the Reagan administration.

Moscow might calculate that this strategy could weaken resistance in the United States to forceful US counteraction, but it would probably also calculate that the adoption of stronger measures by Washington would be compensated for by intensified West European alienation over US policy in Central America.

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Political Provocation Scenarios

While our first two scenarios are driven by the primary goal of victory on the ground in the Central American military-political theater, our second two are motivated more immediately by reaction to the Reagan administration. Here, we postulate that Moscow's primary aim is to

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manipulate conflict in Central America in a manner calculated to:

- Keep the United States tied down and reduce its ability to exploit current Soviet vulnerabilities, reinvigorate the "peace" movement, increase strains in the Western Alliance, weaken European commitment to INF deployment, and strengthen pressures for US concessions to the USSR on arms control issues.
- Fuel anti-Americanism throughout the Third World.
- Revive the "Vietnam syndrome" in the United States.
- Promote President Reagan's electoral defeat and a weakening of Republican representation in the Senate.

The strategy in both scenarios is--by possibly exposing allies to higher risks of near-term military setbacks--to place Washington in a "non-win" situation in which US failure to respond to provocation would ensure Moscow of large bonus gains on the ground in Central America.

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Scenario III: The MIG-21 Lure

Washington has privately warned Moscow that introduction of MIG-21s into Nicaragua would have serious consequences. The aim in this scenario would be to exploit the warning by inducing the White House to engage in an "act of war" against Nicaragua or accept the delivery and risk harsh domestic political attack for weakness rather than belligerence. The tactic pursued would be to have Nicaraguan pilots fly the MIG-21s from Cuba to Punta Huete or another airfield in Nicaragua. If this move elicited a US strike, the Soviets would reap a major propaganda victory. If it did

not, the USSR would not only have improved the Sandinista's chances of success as well as the climate for insurgency elsewhere in the region, but also demonstrated for US and international audiences the ineffectiveness of US policies in constraining Soviet intervention in the US sphere of influence.

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The key hoped-for gain from this maneuver--one that would compensate for all its risks--would be the defeat of Ronald Reagan by an electorate fed up with either "trigger happy" use of US military power or the demonstrated failure of foreign policy. But the risks would be high:

- To induce Managua to accept the MIGs under conditions of likely US attack, Moscow might have to give security guarantees that it has been loathe to offer to clients far more important to the USSR than Nicaragua, and that it probably could not honor in the event of imminent armed confrontation with the United States in the latter's back yard.
- Destruction of the MIGs, if not followed by electoral defeat of the Reagan administration, could impair Soviet credibility among leftist elements throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, and serve as a tonic to friends of the United States.
- Predicting that this maneuver would evoke public outrage directed at the White House, rather than backfire in a patriotic rallying around the President (who, Moscow would assume, would ~~boldly~~ assert Soviet-Cuban orchestration of the action), would probably be viewed by informed Soviet advisers as a big political gamble indeed.

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-- Regardless of how the White House chose to deal with this provocation, the maneuver could be seen likely to severely undercut congressional resistance in the future to demands for a more militant US policy in both Nicaragua and El Salvador.

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To complicate the US reaction and opportunity to assure the availability of MIGs to Managua for actual combat purposes, the MIGs could be delivered a few at a time in crates to the newly dredged port of El Bluff or to the west coast. Such crates could be shipped from and delivered by a Third World Soviet arms recipient (for example, South Yemen) to further distance Moscow and Havana from the action. Once in Nicaragua, crated aircraft could be stored or dispersed for later assembly.

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Such a piecemeal introduction would have several advantages over flying aircraft in directly from Cuba, which would publicly tie the Cubans only slightly less than the Soviets to the action and leave open the question of whether the squadron was really "Nicaraguan." With piecemeal insertion:

- It would be easier for Managua to portray the aircraft as arms purchases no different in principle than the deliveries of land armaments that have been taking place recently.
- Aircraft crates could be initially dispersed and perhaps held in crowded civilian areas, putting off the possibility of a "surgical strike." Such a strike would of course still be a threat once all the aircraft were assembled and deployed at an airfield. But

delaying their assembly and introducing them into service slowly would give the Sandinistas time to make their possession of the fighters a fact of life, and to build up international pressure against a US military response. The US would be forced to choose between making repeated strikes as each few aircraft became operational, or wait out the process until the target reached full squadron size. Managua would probably believe that time worked in its favor.

-- Seaborne deliveries of crates--perhaps on a Bulgarian carrier--would make it easier for Moscow and Havana to deny "foreign intervention" charges, and also take them off the hook for some response in the event the United States did take military action.

Simultaneously, the new port capacity at El Bluff would be used to expedite deliveries of other arms.

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Scenario IV: A "Tet" Offensive in El Salvador

The objective of this final scenario would be to administer a sudden shock to Washington in the runup to the US election that would force the White House to choose between the large-scale military intervention it had heretofore disavowed, or acceptance of possible--even likely--collapse of the Salvadoran government. To minimize the appearance of Soviet-Cuban involvement, MIGs would not be demonstratively introduced in Nicaragua, although a high level of Sandinista military activity would be in order and more risks would have to be run in funneling arms to El Salvador.

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The advantages Moscow might see in such a strategy, compared with those anticipated in the MIG-21 Lure, would probably include:

- Less overt Soviet-Cuban exposure, less likelihood of military confrontation with the United States, and less loss of credibility in the event of a successful Salvadoran-US response.
- Greater certainty of polarization of the American body politic.
- Reduced likelihood that President Reagan could turn the strategy to his own electoral advantage.
- Greater likelihood--barring a total collapse of the insurgency in El Salvador--of deeper embroilment of America in the Central American struggle, of a polarization and intensification of political strife in the United States, and of widening cracks in the Atlantic Alliance regardless of the success of the offensive.

There would, of course, be risks:

- "Political" determination of the timing of the offensive could lead to premature action, a major ("Tet") setback for the insurgency, and recriminations against their comradely advisers by the Salvadoran guerrillas.
- Failure of the offensive would inevitably have some effect on Moscow's credibility in the region.
- Whether successful or not, the offensive could only be seen as certain to impair the prospects for improvement in the bilateral US-USSR relationship and US flexibility in arms negotiations.

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Further Contingencies

This paper does not attempt to predict what strategy the Soviets will support over the next six months, nor even whether--in the crunch--they would back even the lowest-risk "October surprise." Our scenario analysis ignores the question of the degree to which Moscow can influence the choices of its allies in the region (or the extent to which the latter might trigger the scenarios on their own), and it implicitly postulates a "rational actor" model of Soviet and Cuban decisionmaking that could--for example--underestimate Castro's desire for revenge for Cuba's humiliation in Grenada or a Soviet desire to retaliate for difficulties in pacifying Afghanistan. It could be argued that Soviet support for a bold military move in Central American would run counter to Moscow's past advice to the Nicaraguan leadership to avoid antagonizing the United States unnecessarily, and would be inconsistent with Soviet strategy elsewhere in the Third World aimed at consolidating leftist regimes without attracting a Western military response. But it could also be argued that upping the ante in Central America would nicely complement Moscow's current strategy of fostering a sense of East-West crisis and imminent danger of war.

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A basic reason why we eschew prediction this far in advance is that Soviet choices will probably be affected by contingencies that have yet to occur. These would presumably include at least:

- What the polls say about the likely outcome of the US Presidential and Congressional elections.
- Possible US diplomatic and military initiatives between now and the fall.

- Developments in the Western Alliance.
- The strength of the insurgencies in both Nicaragua and El Salvador.
- Other developments in the Central American-Caribbean region.
- Whether the trend of leadership politics in the Politburo encouraged or discouraged risk-taking and escalation of conflict with Washington.

A Politburo decision to proceed with one of the more provocative strategies discussed above, in the context of full Soviet awareness of US sensitivity to the Soviet hand in Central America and the backlash effect of Soviet expansionism of the 1970s, would probably mean that Moscow had discounted the likelihood or desirability of any significant improvement in US-USSR relations for at least some years ahead.

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