

My fellow Americans:

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I want to speak frankly to you tonight about the fundamental questions facing us now in foreign policy. We are in the closing decades of the 20th century -- one of the most turbulent centuries in human history. And we Americans face some very profound challenges.

The Congress is now in recess. Usually, Congressmen and Senators spend this time back in their home districts talking with their constituents. It is a time for dialogue between the American people and their legislative representatives. Therefore, this is just the right time for me to raise these basic issues, because it is a time when the American people must make some basic decisions.

The Nature of the World We Live In

As President, my duty is to lead. It is my constitutional responsibility to look to our nation's security, and to our vital interests, and to do what is necessary to defend them. Others have the luxury of illusions; my job is to view the world as it is. Others have the luxury of second-guessing; my duty is to anticipate problems, to warn of dangers, and to act, as necessary, to keep harm away from our shores.

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All Americans yearn for a world at peace, a world of freedom and progress. So, indeed, do all other peoples. Sadly, the world in which these noble aims are so widely shared is a very troubled world. While we and our democratic allies enjoy peace, prosperity, and freedom, most other people do not. Many parts of the world are torn by conflict -- in Central America, in southern Africa, in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, in Southeast Asia. All around the globe, terrorists threaten innocent people and civilized values. In the developing world, hopes for progress are too often lost to revolutionary violence or dictatorship.

Thus it should be clear that peace and freedom do not come about merely by wishing for them. It is a harsh world out there, and advancing our goals requires realism, strength, and no little courage. It is a harsh world, and there is great temptation to shy away from it and to take refuge in escapism:

-- There are those who will tell you that the world will be a safer place if we spend less on maintaining our defenses. That is escapism.

-- There are those who will tell you that our diplomatic objectives can be achieved through goodwill and noble aspirations, without American power to back them up. That is escapism.

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-- There are those who will tell you that resources, markets, and seaports that are vital to the West's survival can be secure without vigilance and effort on the part of the United States. That is escapism.

In the last 15 years, the growth of Soviet military power has meant a radical change in the nature of the world we live in. No, it does not mean that we are in imminent danger of nuclear war. That is the least likely danger we face. If we maintain the strategic balance, then we can count on the basic prudence of the Soviet leaders to steer clear of that kind of suicidal challenge to us. But with nuclear aggression foreclosed, the Soviets and their allies have embarked -- with new self-confidence -- on a different kind of challenge that is much more difficult for us to cope with.

Three-quarters of the population of this planet lives in the developing world. In Asia, Africa, and Latin America, there are over a hundred nations -- some brand-new, some very old -- struggling for political stability, for modern institutions, for economic progress, or for basic security. Most of these countries are our friends, and look to us for help in various forms. Many of these countries are vulnerable to subversion by ruthless forces that are driven by ideology, power, and ambition to try to impose their system by force.

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Not too long ago, there were some who thought that, with growing military and economic strength, the Soviet Union would mature and mellow. It would feel less threatened, the theory ran, and therefore it would have less need to threaten others; it would become an ordinary country. This theory has proved disappointingly false.

In the last 10 years we have seen the brutal Communist conquest of Indochina; blatant Soviet/Cuban intervention in Angola, Ethiopia, and South Yemen; the outright Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; and now the Soviet/Cuban/Nicaraguan aggression in Central America.

The Soviets and their allies have shown themselves masters of new techniques of aggression -- Cuban proxy armies, East German secret police contingents, chemical and toxin weapons against innocent civilians, state sponsorship of terrorism and the clandestine shipment of weapons for purposes of subversion. These are gross violations of all the norms of international law and international morality. We have seen these means of violence produce refugees on a massive scale -- in Indochina, and potentially in Central America. We have seen them shoot down an unarmed civilian airliner with the loss of 269 innocent lives. And, most ominously, we have seen the wave of Communist-sponsored violence move ever closer to vital Western interests like the Persian Gulf, and ever closer to our own shores.

This did not all happen by accident. For years the Soviets have proudly proclaimed their right -- indeed their "revolutionary duty" -- to aid and abet so-called "wars of national liberation" on every continent of the developing world. This doctrine is all too convenient a way to spread their system by force, to achieve an eventual stranglehold on the free world's economic lifelines, and to weaken, and undermine, the democratic nations.

Yes, there are deep economic and social causes to most of the world's turmoil. But where the United States seeks to respond with economic assistance and support for democracy, the Soviet Union seeks to exploit instability for its own aggressive and violent ambitions.

The Challenge to the United States

If this is the nature of the challenge we face in the remaining years of this century -- which I believe it is -- then we Americans must ask ourselves a fundamental question: Are we prepared to do something about it? Or are we so fearful that we will seek refuge in pacifist or isolationist illusions?

Most likely in this nuclear age we will never see a state of total war or a state of total peace. The main challenge will always take the form of a determined, persistent effort by the Soviet Union and its allies to undermine our friends and our interests, using indirect forms of aggression that push and push until they meet firm resistance.

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The only question is when we will wake up to this danger, while the tightening circle of hostile influence comes ever closer to our own borders.

President John F. Kennedy understood this challenge, and he was willing to stand up to it, as in the Cuban missile crisis. He would be appalled at the weak-kneed utterances of those who today invoke his name.

The Challenge in Central America

This is the issue we face in Central America.

The issue in Central America is not mining, or procedures of consultation with the Congress. The issue is Cuban and Nicaraguan aggression, aided and abetted by the Soviet Union.

When the Nicaraguan revolution overthrew the dictator Somoza in 1979, many in the United States and Latin America looked on hopefully, taking at face value the revolutionaries' promises of democracy and social progress. But the democratic and progressive slogans of the Communist rulers of Nicaragua were a fraud:

- They set about building a massive army of over 50,000 men, bigger than the military forces of all their neighbors combined, and far in excess of any conceivable defensive needs. With Cuban, Soviet, and Soviet-bloc support, Nicaragua became an armed camp, a militaristic menace to all neighboring countries.

- With the prodding, advice, and guidance of Fidel Castro, a Communist insurgency was organized in neighboring El Salvador. The operational headquarters of the Communist warrmaking apparatus in El Salvador is located on the outskirts of Managua, the capital of Communist Nicaragua.

- The people of El Salvador went to the polls two years ago to elect a Parliament, and they went to the polls a few weeks ago to elect a President -- testifying eloquently to their desire for democracy. This yearning for democracy was answered by guerrilla guns and bullets, by a vicious four-year campaign of Communist warfare against bridges, roads, power stations, trucks, buses, and other vital elements of the Salvadoran economy. The Communists not only do not believe in democracy; they fear a legitimate democratic process because they know they have meager popular support.

The bipartisan Kissinger Commission that I appointed to examine the issues in Central America gave, in its report, an accurate summation of the importance of Nicaraguan support for the Salvadoran guerrillas:

"Whatever the social and economic conditions that invited insurgency in the region, outside intervention is what gives the conflict its present character. ... Propaganda support, money, sanctuary, arms, supplies, training, communications, intelligence, logistics, all are important in both morale and operational terms. Without such support from Cuba, Nicaragua and the Soviet Union, neither in El Salvador nor elsewhere in Central America would such an insurgency pose so severe a threat to the government. ... Therefore [the Kissinger Commission concluded], curbing the insurgents' violence in El Salvador requires, in part, cutting them off from their sources of foreign support."

The policy of the United States in Central America has three positive elements:

- to help friendly countries build, strengthen, and safeguard democratic institutions,
- to help them reach the path of stable economic growth and social justice, and

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-- to help them resolve disputes through diplomacy.

But to achieve these three objectives, there must be a fourth component of our policy:

-- to help these friendly countries defend themselves against Cuban/Nicaraguan aggression.

The role of the United States in this effort is supportive and indirect. Solutions can be reached only by the efforts of Central Americans themselves. The United States is not at war -- but we are helping our friends defend themselves against those who choose to make war on peaceful, democratic societies.

The flow of weapons into Nicaragua, for purposes of clandestine transfer to the Communist guerrillas in El Salvador, is one of the principal threats to regional peace. The threat to peace in Central America is necessarily a strategic concern of the United States. Any President who ignored this danger would deserve to be impeached. The future of the entire region south of our borders hangs in the balance.

Therefore the United States has been supporting -- and proudly supporting -- not only the elected government of El Salvador but also those many thousands of Nicaraguans who are resisting Communist tyranny in their homeland.

The Nicaraguan regime is a regime of totalitarian, militaristic bullies who see it as their divine mission to destabilize all their neighbors. As long as I am President, I will do whatever I can to help all those who are prepared to oppose such tyrants. If the Communists can make open war against the economy of democratic El Salvador, then the opponents of Nicaragua would be fully entitled to block the flow of arms or take other measures to deny Nicaragua the means to make war on its neighbors. If the Soviet Union can proclaim its intention to aid subversion, then the United States can proudly proclaim its intention to help resist it. This is not only in our strategic interest; it is morally right. It would be profoundly immoral to let peace-loving friends who depend on us be overwhelmed by brute force if we have any capacity to prevent it.

We should not be misled by Nicaragua's cynicism, which knows no bounds. Last week it tried to misuse the International Court of Justice for propaganda purposes. Well, when a Communist regime starts professing a sudden devotion to international law, hang onto your wallets. We did not fall for that maneuver.

I am getting a little tired of people in this country who give the Communists the benefit of every doubt. I am frankly amazed by those who seem determined to grant Nicaragua a kind of Congressional immunity:

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so that no one dare lift a hand against "poor misunderstood Nicaragua" while it wages war on its weaker neighbors. Of all the countries in the Western Hemisphere, only Communist Nicaragua seems to have the benefit of this Congressional protection. Why?

I can tell you that as long as I am President, the United States will support those in Central America who fight for democracy and resist tyranny. We will do so in full compliance with established constitutional and Congressional procedures -- as we have been doing all along. The Congressional intelligence committees were set up in recent years precisely to handle such consultations -- which we scrupulously followed. It's a little unseemly for members of Congress to run for cover, repudiating the procedures they themselves established, just because the controversy was too hot.

I am not afraid to come before you and explain my policy and my objectives. I believe that what we are doing in Central America is right, and necessary. I believe I was elected to conduct an effective foreign policy -- to use the vast power of the United States for good and worthy ends, not to run and hide when the going gets tough. The American people will have the chance in November to decide whether they share this philosophy, or whether they prefer a foreign policy of escapism, weakness, and helplessness.

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I am prepared to fight the election on this issue, if that is the choice of my opponents. I am not afraid of the American people's basic good sense and intestinal fortitude.

In the meantime, I will do my duty to defend the national interest as I see it, with God's help to guide me and your support to sustain me.

Thank you and God bless you.

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