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The New Opportunity for Peace in Nicaragua

PREPARED STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE LANGHORNE A. MOTLEY
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTER-AMERICAN AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON WESTERN HEMISPHERE AFFAIRS
OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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Mr. Chairman, President Reagan's April 4 initiative offers an important opportunity for Nicaragua to move toward peace -- with its own people, with its neighbors, and therefore with the United States.

The President's proposal, to link U.S. policy to an internal dialogue mediated by the Roman Catholic Church, creates a particularly hopeful and realistic opportunity for two reasons. First, it builds on a continuing and impressively broad regional consensus on the actions required for a sustainable resolution of the Central American crisis. Second, the President has identified an alternative to the two extremes which the American people want any Administration to avoid: a second Cuba, this time on the Central American mainland; and a second Vietnam, with American troops mired combat.

This is thus an opportunity for us as well as for the Sandinistas. But only Congress can give the President the means to make it work, the leverage which the experience of the past six years has shown to be necessary to induce changes in Sandinista behavior.

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I. The Central American Problem

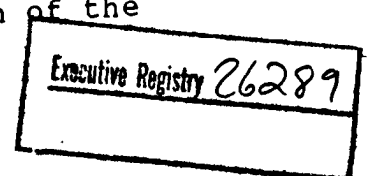
The President's peace initiative is set against what nearly everyone now agrees to be the outline of Central America's crisis.

The Central American countries are in various stages of political development, beset for the most part by decades of social, economic and political inequities, and driven more recently to the edge of economic disaster by worsening terms of trade, world recession, and unproductive national economic policies. Taken together, these are the infamous 'root causes' of rebellion and violence.

But -- as the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America detailed so well -- Cuba and the Soviet Union are exploiting historical poverty and repression to advance their own strategic interests in the hemisphere. Those interests are inexorably hostile to the United States. And experience over six long years of crisis has amply demonstrated that the goals of the Cubans, the Soviets, and to date the Sandinistas, are also contrary to the national interests of democratic nations in the region.

II. U.S. Policy

The four continuing goals of U.S. policy in Central America were outlined by President Reagan to a Joint Session of the Congress in April, 1983:



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-- In response to decades of inequity and indifference, we will support democracy, reform and human freedom....

-- In response to the challenge of world recession and, in the case of El Salvador, to the unrelenting campaign of economic sabotage by the guerrillas, we will support economic development....

-- In response to the military challenge from Cuba and Nicaragua -- to their deliberate use of force to spread tyranny -- we will support the security of the region's threatened nations.... [and]

-- We will support dialogue and negotiations -- both among the countries of the region and within each country.

The most central reform is a change in political attitudes and systems. Some time ago, Secretary Shultz said that the United States seeks a Central America more like Costa Rica than Cuba. That remains a good summary of our basic attitude. Costa Rica has never repressed its own people or sought to subvert its neighbors; the various sectors of Costa Rican society rely on dialogue rather than confrontation, whether in national elections or in the Legislative Assembly or when dealing with foreign problems. But Costa Rica's primary concern about the United States today is not that we are 'interfering' in Central America; it is that we appear capable of withdrawing from our responsibilities. Costa Rica is in the forefront of that large and growing number of nations

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calling upon Nicaragua to support and not oppose the democratizing trend in the hemisphere.

At the same time, the Bipartisan Commission, the Administration and the Congress have recognized that reform alone is not enough. Only a comprehensive and sustained approach which deals simultaneously with all of the interlocking problems of the region can succeed. Economic aid is necessary to deal with the ravages of depression and civil war and to help provide the bases for longer-term growth with equity. Security assistance and other demonstrations of U.S. national will, backed by military power have provided an effective shield behind which the rest of our policy has been able to unfold.

On April 12, Secretary Shultz forwarded to the President a report assessing the situation in Central America and our programs and policies there since the Bipartisan Commission submitted its report in January 1984. I ask that the Secretary's report be included in the record and considered an integral part of this statement. The basic conclusion is threefold: first, events have shown that the Commission was right in its judgments and recommendations; second, we have since made important progress in implementing the comprehensive policy advocated; and third, we -- the Administration, the Congress and the Central Americans themselves -- have much more to do before the task is completed.

One aspect of the Secretary's report is worth underscoring -- the dramatic progress in El Salvador since early 1984.

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has recognized and applauded the benchmarks: last year's presidential elections followed by legislative and municipal elections less than three weeks ago; the triumphant assertion of the democratic, reformist center against the violent extremes of left and right; the continued decline in politically-motivated killings; the public confidence in President Duarte which enabled him to make his historic offer of dialogue with the guerrillas; and the practical recognition from Tokyo to Paris to Mexico City that democracy is the future of El Salvador.

But less than two years ago there was no consensus. As recently as the beginning of 1984, many honest observers saw little hope for what was called the 'elusive' democratic center. They doubted that the repressive political culture of the old El Salvador was really doomed. They believed polarization so complete that no amount of U.S. aid would provide relief and that the United States was being drawn into direct military involvement on the side of dictators and unpopular governments.

The critics and the skeptics were wrong. Duarte and a million and a half voters made believers of most of them. Today, few who hear the phrase 'military intervention' think of any possible application in El Salvador. There was and will be no second Vietnam in that country. But neither will it become a second Cuba.

The Salvadoran experience speaks directly to where we stand today in Nicaragua. Alternatives to civil war and foreign entanglement exist in Nicaragua as well.

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III. Nicaragua in the Balance.

Sandinista Nicaragua today is the 'odd-man out'. Nicaragua is the major exception in a Central America moving toward democracy. It is also the major obstacle within the Contadora process. The Sandinista leaders are profoundly at odds with the Nicaraguan people, with the Nicaraguan Catholic Church and with democratic leaders throughout the world.

The record of the past six years provides the critical background. All of us know the facts about Sandinista rejection of normal relations with its neighbors in favor of the Soviet Bloc, despite extraordinary U.S. economic assistance during the first 18 months after Somoza fell. There is little disagreement today about Sandinista internal repression, about the falsity of the 'election' facade set against 'divine mobs' and a censored press, or the unprecedented build-up of the military forces, the presence of thousands of Cuban, Soviet and other Bloc military personnel, or about the continuing support for guerrillas and terrorists in neighboring Central American countries.

United States policy is aimed directly at bringing about a change in this behavior. So is the policy of all of Nicaragua's neighbors, as well as the specific, agreed objectives of the Contadora process itself.

One aspect of the record, however, may not be adequately understood, and it is one of direct relevance to this hearing.

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That is the history surrounding the attempts at internal dialogue on the part of the Nicaraguan democratic opposition. As another integral part of this statement, I would offer a special documentary report, which places the current calls for dialogue -- including President Reagan's peace initiative -- into the context of the Contadora process, the appeals of the Nicaraguan Bishops, and the calls of hemispheric leaders for dialogue within Nicaragua.

The documents speak for themselves. But it is worth noting, again, how starkly the record contrasts the recent histories of Nicaragua and El Salvador and how uniformly the Latin Americans themselves support internal dialogue in Nicaragua. If the United States is somehow 'imposing' democracy, dialogue and reconciliation on Sandinista Nicaragua, that would come as news indeed to the Central and South Americans.

IV. The President's Proposal

President Reagan's April 4 initiative grew out of this historical context. As illustrated in the documentary record, the immediate precursor of the President's proposal was the Nicaraguan Bishops' acceptance March 22 of the mediation role proposed in the February 22 and March 1 calls by the internal and external democratic opposition for Church-sponsored dialogue and a cease fire in place. The opposition's offer was characterized as fair and promising by a wide spectrum of observers; But the Sandinistas rejected the entire idea, just as they had excoriated the Bishops for their Easter Pastoral letter in 1984, which had

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called for the same kind of dialogue. President Reagan has asked the Sandinistas to reconsider and has asked you to help provide the incentive.

The Salvadoran government has crossed the psychological threshold for dialogue with armed guerrillas. Are the Sandinistas exempt from any obligation to engage in a dialogue with their opposition? President Reagan's offer is a pragmatic incentive to the Sandinistas -- and a commitment to them -- to facilitate the difficult decision the nine Comandantes face to cross that threshold. With the help of Congress, that incentive will be clear: the one aspect of our behavior which the Sandinistas have sought to change in every available forum -- U.S. funds to support democratic resistance forces -- is theirs in exchange for a genuine effort toward reconciliation among Nicaraguans.

The President has made clear that we have a moral obligation and a national interest not to abandon Nicaragua's democrats in exchange for empty promises or sham elections. Only real dialogue and genuine democracy will allow the opposition -- which took up arms only because the democratic route was unavailable -- to lay them down once again. The President's offer is designed to help the Sandinistas recognize that their acceptance would not be a zero-sum outcome. Nor would it be for us. But an ally abandoned -- whether Costa Rica, or Honduras or the Nicaraguan people -- would by definition be a losing proposition for the United States.

Can we realistically expect the Sandinistas to accept now what

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they have steadfastly rejected in the past? Can we expect 'realism' or 'pragmatism' from 'ideologues' or 'fanatics'? The record of recent years suggests we can. While the United States was trying 'constructive engagement' with the new Sandinista regime in 1979-81, including economic aid, they militarized and subverted. But when pressure was applied by the armed resistance, the comandantes began to hedge, at least rhetorically. To use a favorite term from the Marxist lexicon, they began to respond to changes in the 'objective conditions' they faced. And there is no 'objective condition' so sobering as the growing resistance of their own people. Even ideologues recognize that kind of reality.

It is important to read the President's proposal carefully within the framework of what has already happened in and out of Nicaragua. What the President has not done is provide a 'final outcome' for the dialogue. That is for the Nicaraguans themselves to work out. What he has done is to facilitate the self-determination of Nicaragua's future by Nicaraguans, something the Sandinistas have heretofore prevented. And he has not provided the basis for an invasion of Nicaragua. In fact an invasion is an avoidable outcome in Nicaragua, as it had been avoided in El Salvador, if the United States acts resolutely.

Finally, President Reagan has not unilaterally injected the United States into the internal affairs of a sovereign nation. Again, the historical context makes this clear. Nicaragua is being asked no more than what was demanded of El Salvador by the Congress and many others around the world, including the

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Sandinistas themselves. The Sandinistas are called on to do no more than what they themselves promised in 1979 to their own people and to the OAS (including the United States) or underook in the 1983 Contadora Document of Objectives -- which recognized that regional peace was impossible unless, in each country affected by violence, a dialogue is undertaken between the government and opposition. And the United States has been called on by Nicaragua's Central American neighbors to do no more than help defend them against an aggressive garrison state armed and supported by Cuba and the Soviet Union.

The documents of current history establish the legitimacy of the President's offer. Looking just at the Latin American region, and quoting only from the public record, the immediate reaction has been significantly positive: Duarte of El Salvador saw the mirror image of his own experience; Betancur of Colombia emphasized the perfect fit "within the philosophy and within the reach of the Document of Objectives which the countries of Central America freely signed"; Mexico's De la Madrid underscored the cease-fire aspect; Lusinchi of Venezuela noted that "the Nicaraguan Government would not lose anything by entering into conversation with the opposition"; Ecuador's Febres Cordero cited El Salvador and Guatemala as favorable precedents; Costa Rica's Monge gave his "enthusiastic support"; and more encouragement came from Suazo of Honduras, Barletta of Panama, and Alfonsin of Argentina.

The democratic resistance has accepted the President's request

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to extend their cease-fire offer until June 1. It is now up to the Sandinistas to respond to the many voices -- and, I stress again, it is not just our own -- calling on them to make peace with their own citizens.

V. The Choice Facing the Congress

A critical element of the President's proposal to the Sandinistas is the incentive to be provided by Congressional approval of the immediate release -- under the formula carefully defined on April 4 -- of the \$14 million already appropriated.

What exactly is implied in Congress' choice? First, a vote in favor is a demonstration of continued national commitment to a policy in Central America that has worked well thus far. It would also provide the President with the authority he needs to deal with a complex negotiating situation -- with the capability to increase pressure, but in the hope that Congressional support will help make its use unnecessary.

Some say that a vote against would be a vote for peace, because the democratic resistance would then give up, and, like it or not, we would then learn to live with the Sandinistas. First of all, although we as a nation have often not learned well from history, there are certain lessons so recent and so painful that we have paid attention. One of these is the lesson of Cuba: Despite Castro's enforced mastery of his island, we have not 'learned to live' with a nation still intent on acting as a Soviet proxy against U.S. interests at every available opportunity.

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Nicaragua, moreover, is not an island, and the anti-Sandinistas are not 'mercenaries'; the vast majority of them would continue to fight with or without support from the United States. More would die, Nicaragua would suffer as a whole, but peace would not come. The only prospect would be unabated irregular warfare and destruction -- for years to come.

The situation today in Nicaragua is perilous precisely because both sides are ready to settle in for the long term: On one side, the Sandinista Comandantes entrenched along the same repressive, ideological, and subversive lines staked out by Fidel Castro in his reconstruction of Cuba twenty years before. And on the other, the anti-Sandinista opposition, growing in popular support, digging in on the classic model of prolonged civil war. The outlook is also ominous: a drawn out conflict, bloody, debilitating, and exacting a heavy toll of innocent lives.

That is why the opportunity for internal reconciliation through dialogue is so important -- now. And that is why we Americans have a special responsibility to profit by the experience of the past six years in Central America and act, now, to seize that opportunity. We have learned from El Salvador that dialogue within the framework of democratic and constitutional order is politically possible when a government possesses the self-confidence that results from being democratically elected.

And we have also learned that the Sandinistas will not change without powerful reasons to do so. Such a reason is at hand. It

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is up to the Congress to help the President make it happen. A 'yes' vote could provide the breakthrough incentive. A 'no' vote would remove the incentive and guarantee the prolongation of the conflict. A 'yes' vote is a catalyst, not for an overthrow, but toward peaceful resolution.

We are not saying that a 'no' vote would result in an instant disaster. But it would surely leave the territory open to steady erosion, with far less hope for meaningful change. We would not see an immediate effect of that 'no', either in the field, or at the next Contadora meeting, but the impact would come in the not distant future.

No one wants to see more suffering and more bloodshed in Central America. No one wants to see relations between Nicaragua and the United States frozen into the kind of hostile and confrontational stalemate that has characterized US-Cuban relations since Castro turned his island into a Soviet proxy.

We have before us an opportunity to prevent a tragic repetition of history. We must grasp it by demonstrating to Nicaraguans -- both the comandantes and the democratic opposition -- and to the rest of the world that we are united in our principles and our goals. The President's proposal offers the opportunity for the American people, through their elected representatives, to demonstrate their resolve in support of people struggling for democracy.

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VI. Conclusion -- the Unanswered Questions

Mr. Chairman, ten weeks ago I appeared before this Subcommittee to review the broad principles which have guided our policy in Latin America and the Caribbean. We discussed, as was inevitable, the particular problem of Nicaragua. At that time, I asked one question, "Will Nicaragua Change?" I asked it in several ways -- and at least one of these was repeated by a member of this committee to other witnesses:

-- "Why negotiate unless the agenda has something in it for each side?"

-- "If the Nicaraguans in the armed resistance are abandoned, why should the Sandinistas negotiate with them?"

And, a rhetorical question:

-- "If anyone knows of a more effective way to create a bargaining situation with the Sandinistas, let us know."

To my knowledge, Mr. Chairman, no one has developed any better answer to those questions than what has formed the basis of our policy. It has had its clearest, most hopeful articulation in the President's offer of April 4. And I believe it to be the responsibility of the Congress to give the President what he needs to help Central Americans -- and Nicaraguans in particular -- to achieve peace.

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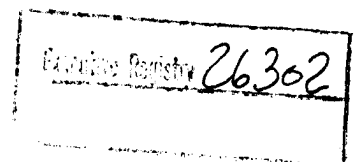
QUESTION: Exactly what will you be supplying to the resistance forces between now and June and during the period of negotiations, should the Sandinistas accept this proposal?

ANSWER:

The President has pledged that no U.S. funds would be spent on "arms and munitions" for the armed Nicaraguan resistance while its cease-fire offer is on the table or, if the offer is accepted, while talks were underway.

As we have not held detailed discussions with resistance leadership on this issue, it is difficult to respond with specifics. In general, we plan to provide food, clothing and medical supplies, and to facilitate transportation and communications as needed to ensure the well being and survival of the resistance forces during the interim period and should the Sandinistas accept the President's peace plan during the period of negotiations. All of this activity will be carried out in the spirit of the President's proposal and in consultation with the appropriate committees of Congress.

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