

*President Reagan*

# U.S. Interests in Central America

May 9, 1984



United States Department of State  
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*Following is President Reagan's televised address to the nation, Washington, D.C., May 9, 1984*

My fellow Americans, last week I was in Beijing and Shanghai—3 weeks from now I'll be preparing to leave for Dublin, Normandy, and the annual economic summit in London.

I'm pleased that our trip to China was a success. I had long and thoughtful meetings with the Chinese leadership. Though our two countries are very different, we are building a strong relationship in a genuine spirit of cooperation; and that's good for the cause of peace.

This was our second trip to Asia in the last 6 months. It demonstrates our awareness of America's responsibility for leadership in the Pacific Basin—an area of tremendous economic vitality. I believe our relations with our Asian allies and friends have never been better.

## **The Fate of Central America**

But that isn't what I want to talk to you about. I asked for this time to tell you of some basic decisions which are yours to make. I believe it is my constitutional responsibility to place these matters before you. They have to do with your national security, and that security is the single most important function of the Federal Government. In that context, it's my duty to anticipate problems, warn of dangers, and act so as to keep harm away from our shores.

Our diplomatic objectives will not be attained by good will and noble aspirations alone. 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. This does not mean, as some would have us believe, that we're in imminent danger of nuclear war. We're not.

As long as we maintain the strategic balance and make it more stable by reducing the level of weapons on both sides, then we can count on the basic prudence of the Soviet leaders to avoid that kind of challenge to us. They are presently challenging us with a different kind of weapon: subversion and the use of surrogate forces—Cubans, for example. We've seen it intensifying during the last 10 years as the Soviet Union and its surrogates moved to establish control over Vietnam, Laos, Kampuchea, Argentina, Ethiopia, South Yemen, Afghanistan, and recently, closer to home in Nicaragua and now El Salvador. It's the fate of this region, Central America, that I want to talk to you about tonight.

The issue is our effort to promote democracy and economic well-being in the face of Cuban and Nicaraguan aggression, aided and abetted by the Soviet Union. It is definitely not about plans to send American troops into combat in Central America. Each year, the Soviet Union provides Cuba with \$4 billion in assistance; and it sends tons of weapons to foment revolution here in our hemisphere.

The defense policy of the United States is based on a simple premise: we do not start wars. We will never be the aggressor. We maintain our strength in order to deter and defend against aggression—to preserve freedom and peace. We help our friends defend themselves.

Central America is a region of great importance to the United States. And it is so close—San Salvador is closer to Houston, Texas, than Houston is to Washington, D.C. Central America is America; it's at our doorstep. And it has become the stage for a bold attempt by the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Nicaragua to install communism by force throughout the hemisphere.

When half of our shipping tonnage and imported oil passes through Caribbean shipping lanes, and nearly half of all our foreign trade passes through the Panama Canal and Caribbean waters, America's economy and well-being are at stake.

Right now in El Salvador, Cuban-supported aggression has forced more than 400,000 men, women, and children to flee their homes. And in all of Central America, more than 800,000 have fled, many, if not most, living in unbelievable hardship. Concerns about the prospect of hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing communist oppression to seek entry into our country are well founded.

What we see in El Salvador is an attempt to destabilize the entire region and eventually move chaos and anarchy toward the American border.

As the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, chaired by Henry Kissinger, agreed, if we do nothing or if we continue to provide too little help, our choice will be a communist Central America with additional communist military bases on the mainland of this hemisphere and communist subversion spreading southward and northward. This communist subversion poses the threat that 100 million people from Panama to the open border on our south could come under the control of pro-Soviet regimes.

If we come to our senses too late, when our vital interests are even more directly threatened, and after a lack of American support causes our friends to lose the ability to defend themselves, then the risks to our security and our way of life will be infinitely greater.

But there is a way to avoid these risks, recommended by the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America. It requires long-term American support for democratic development, economic and security assistance, and strong-willed diplomacy.

There have been a number of high-level bilateral meetings with the Nicaraguan Government where we've presented specific proposals for peace. I have appointed two special ambassadors who have made more than 10 trips to the region in pursuit of peace during the last year. And Central America's democratic neighbors—Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia,

and Panama—have launched a comprehensive initiative for peace through what is known as the Contadora process. The United States fully supports the objectives of that process.

We can and must help Central America. It's in our national interest to do so; and, morally, it's the only right thing to do. But, helping means doing *enough*—enough to protect our security and enough to protect the lives of our neighbors so that they may live in peace and democracy without the threat of communist aggression and subversion. This has been the policy of our Administration for more than 3 years.

But making this choice requires a commitment from all of us, our Administration, the American people, and the Congress. So far, we have not yet made that commitment. We've provided just enough aid to avoid outright disaster but not enough to resolve the crisis; so El Salvador is being left to slowly bleed to death.

Part of the problem, I suspect, is not that Central America isn't important, but that some people think our Administration may be exaggerating the threat we face. Well, if that's true, let me put that issue to rest.

#### The Real Nature of the Sandinista Regime

I want to tell you a few things tonight about the real nature of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua.

The Sandinistas who rule Nicaragua are communists whose relationship and ties to Fidel Castro of Cuba go back a quarter of a century. A number of the Sandinistas were trained in camps supported by Cuba, the Soviet bloc, and the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization]. It is important to note that Cuba, the Sandinistas, the Salvadoran communist guerrillas, and the PLO have all worked together for many years. In 1978, the Sandinistas and elements of the PLO joined in a "declaration of war" against Israel.

The Cuban-backed Sandinistas made a major attempt to topple the Somoza regime in Nicaragua in the fall of 1978. They failed. They were then called to Havana, where Castro cynically instructed them in the ways of successful communist insurrection. He told them to tell the world they were fighting for political democracy, not communism. But most important, he instructed them to form a broad alliance with the genuinely democratic opposition to the Somoza regime. Castro explained this would deceive Western public opinion, confuse potential critics, and make it difficult for

Western democracies to oppose the Nicaraguan revolution without causing great dissent at home.

You see, that's how Castro managed his revolution. And we have to confess he fooled a lot of people here in our own country—or don't you remember when he was referred to in some of our press as the George Washington of Cuba?

The Sandinistas listened and learned. They returned to Nicaragua and promised to establish democracy. The Organization of American States (OAS), on June 23, 1979, passed a resolution stating that the solution for peace in Nicaragua required that Somoza step down and that free elections be held as soon as possible to establish a truly democratic government that would guarantee peace, freedom, and justice. The Sandinistas then promised the OAS in writing that they would do these things. Somoza left, and the Sandinistas came to power. This was a negotiated settlement based on power sharing between communists and genuine democrats like the one some have proposed for El Salvador today. Because of these promises, the previous U.S. Administration and other Western governments tried, in a hopeful way, to encourage Sandinista success.

It took some time to realize what was actually taking place; that almost from the moment the Sandinistas and their cadre of 50 Cuban covert advisers took power in Managua in July of 1979, the internal repression of democratic groups, trade unions, and civic groups began. Right to dissent was denied. Freedom of the press and freedom of assembly became virtually nonexistent. There was an outright refusal to hold genuine elections coupled with the continued promise to do so. Their latest promise is for elections by November 1984. In the meantime, there has been an attempt to wipe out an entire culture, the Miskito Indians, thousands of whom have been slaughtered or herded into detention camps where they have been starved and abused. Their villages, churches, and crops have been burned.

The Sandinistas engaged in anti-Semitic acts against the Jewish community. And they persecuted the Catholic Church and publicly humiliated individual priests. When Pope John Paul II visited Nicaragua last year, the Sandinistas organized public demonstrations, hurling insults at him and his message of peace. On this last Good Friday, some 100,000 Catholic faithful staged a demonstration of defiance. You may be hearing about that demonstration for the first time right now. It wasn't widely reported. Nicaraguan Bishop Pablo Antonio Vega recently said: "We are living with a totalitarian ideology that no one wants in

this country"—this country being Nicaragua.

The Sandinista rule is a communist reign of terror. Many of those who fought alongside the Sandinistas saw their revolution betrayed; they were denied power in the new government; some were imprisoned, others exiled. Thousands who fought with the Sandinistas have taken up arms against them and are now called the *contras*. They are freedom fighters.

What the Sandinistas have done to Nicaragua is a tragedy. But we Americans must understand and come to grips with the fact that the Sandinistas are not content to brutalize their own land. They seek to export their terror to every other country in the region.

I ask you to listen closely to the following quotation: "We have the brilliant revolutionary example of Nicaragua. . . . The struggle in El Salvador is very advanced: the same in Guatemala, and Honduras is developing quickly. . . . Very soon Central America will be one revolutionary entity. . . ." That statement was made by a Salvadoran guerrilla leader in March of 1981.

Shortly after taking power, the Sandinistas—in partnership with Cuba and the Soviet Union—began supporting aggression and terrorism against El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Guatemala. They opened training camps for guerrillas from El Salvador so they could return to their country and attack its government. Those camps still operate. Nicaragua is still the headquarters for communist guerrilla movements. And Nicaraguan agents and diplomats have been caught in Costa Rica and Honduras supervising attacks carried out by communist terrorists.

The role that Cuba has long performed for the Soviet Union is now also being played by the Sandinistas. They have become Cuba's Cubans. Weapons, supplies, and funds are shipped from the Soviet bloc to Cuba, from Cuba to Nicaragua, from Nicaragua to the Salvadoran guerrillas. These facts were confirmed last year by the House Intelligence Committee.

The Sandinista regime has been waging war against its neighbors since August of 1979. This has included military raids into Honduras and Costa Rica which still continue today.

### Cuban Presence in Nicaragua



And they're getting a great deal of help from their friends. There were 165 Cuban personnel in Nicaragua in 1979. Today that force has grown to 10,000. And we're being criticized for having 55 military trainers in El Salvador. Manpower support is also coming from other parts of the terror network: the PLO has sent men, and so has Libya's dictator Qadhafi. Communist countries are providing new military assistance, including tanks, artillery, rocket launchers, and help in the construction of military bases and support facilities.

Just last week a Soviet ship began unloading heavy-duty military trucks in Nicaragua's Corinto harbor. Another Soviet ship is on its way with more trucks and 155 Soviet jeeps.

Nicaragua's own military forces have grown enormously. Since 1979, their trained forces have increased from 10,000 to over 100,000. Why does Nicaragua need all this power? Why did this country of only 2.8 million people build this large military force?

They claim the buildup is the result of the anti-Sandinista forces. That's a lie. The Sandinista military buildup began 2½ years before the anti-Sandinista freedom fighters had taken up arms.

They claim the buildup is because they are threatened by their neighbors. That, too, is a lie. Nicaragua's next door neighbor, Costa Rica, doesn't even have an army. Another neighbor, Honduras, has armed forces of only 16,000.

The Sandinistas claim the buildup is in response to American aggression. And that is the most cynical lie of all. The truth is they announced at their first anniversary, in July 1980, that their revolution was going to spread beyond their own borders.

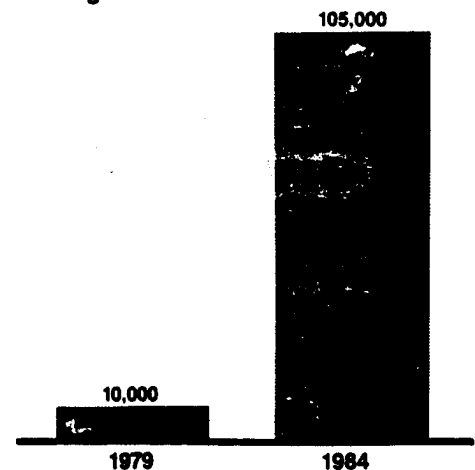
When the Sandinistas were fighting the Somoza regime, the U.S. policy was hands off. We did not attempt to prop up Somoza. The United States did everything to show its openness toward the Sandinistas, its friendliness, its willingness to become friends. The Carter Administration provided more economic assistance to the Sandinistas in their first 18 months than any other country did. But in January 1981, having concluded that the Sandinistas were arming the Salvadoran guerrillas, the Carter Administration sent military aid to El Salvador.

As soon as I took office, we attempted to show friendship to the Sandinistas and provided economic aid to Nicaragua. But it did no good. They kept on exporting terrorism. The words of their official party anthem describe us, the United States, as the enemy of all mankind.

So much for our sincere but unrealistic hopes that if only we'd try harder to be friends, Nicaragua would flourish in the glow of our friendship and install liberty and freedom for their people.

The truth is: they haven't.

### Nicaraguan Forces



Back in 1958, Fidel Castro pledged that, once his revolution had triumphed, he would start a much longer and bigger war—a war against the Americans. That war, Castro said, “will be my true destiny.” For 26 years, during Republican and Democratic Administrations, Castro has kept to his own path of revolutionary violence. Today, Cuba even provides safe passage for drug traffickers who poison our children. In return, of course, Cuba gets hard cash to buy more weapons of war.

We're in the midst of what President John F. Kennedy called “a long twilight struggle” to defend freedom in the world. He understood the problem of Central America. He understood Castro. And he understood the long-term goals of the Soviet Union in this region.

Twenty-three years ago, President Kennedy warned against the threat of communist penetration in our hemisphere. He said: “I want it clearly understood that this government will not hesitate in meeting its primary obligations which are to the security of our nation.” And the House and Senate supported him overwhelmingly by passing a law calling on the United States to prevent Cuba from extending its aggressive or subversive activities to any part of this hemisphere. Were John Kennedy alive today, I think he would be appalled by the gullibility of some who invoke his name.

### The Need for U.S. Support

I have told you that Cuba's and Nicaragua's present target is El Salvador. And I want to talk to you about that country because there is a lot of misunderstanding about it.

El Salvador, too, had a revolution several years ago, and is now struggling valiantly to achieve a workable democracy and, at the same time, to achieve a stable economic system and to redress historical injustices. But El Salvador's yearning for democracy has been thwarted by Cuban-trained and -armed guerrillas, leading a campaign of violence against people and destruction of bridges, roads, power stations, trucks, buses, and other vital elements of their economy. Destroying this infrastructure has brought more unemployment and poverty to the people of El Salvador.

Some argue that El Salvador has only political extremes—the violent left and the violent right—and that we must choose between them. That's just not

true. Democratic political parties range from the democratic left, to center, to conservative. Trade unions, religious organizations, civic groups, and business associations are numerous and flourishing. There is a small, violent rightwing as opposed to democracy as are the guerrillas, but they are not part of the government. We have consistently opposed both extremes, and so has the Government of El Salvador. Last December, I sent Vice President Bush to El Salvador with a personal letter in which I again made clear my strong opposition to both violent extremes. And this had a positive effect.

Land reform is moving forward. Since March 1980, the program has benefited more than 550,000 peasants or about a quarter of the rural population. But many can't farm their land; they'll be killed by the guerrillas if they do.

The people of Central America want democracy and freedom. They want and hope for a better future. Costa Rica is a well established and healthy democracy. Honduras made a peaceful transition to democracy in 1982. And in Guatemala, political parties and trade unions are functioning. An election is scheduled for July there, with a real prospect that that country can return to full-constitutional government in 1985.

In fact, 26 of 33 Latin American countries are democracies or striving to become democracies. But they're vulnerable.

By aiding the communist guerrillas in El Salvador, Nicaragua's unelected government is trying to overthrow the duly elected government of a neighboring country. Like Nicaragua, the Government of El Salvador was born of revolution, but unlike Nicaragua it has held three elections, the most recent a presidential election last Sunday. It has made great progress toward democracy. In this last election, 80% of the people of El Salvador braved communist threats and guerrilla violence to vote for peace and freedom.

Let me give another example of the difference between the two countries—El Salvador and Nicaragua. The Government of El Salvador has offered amnesty to the guerrillas and asked them to participate in the elections and democratic processes. The guerrillas refused; they want to shoot their way into power and establish totalitarian rule.

By contrast, the *contras*, the freedom fighters in Nicaragua, have offered to lay down their weapons and take part in democratic elections; but there the communist Sandinista government has refused.

That's why the United States must support both the elected Government of El Salvador and the democratic aspirations of the Nicaraguan people.

If the communists can start war against the people of El Salvador, then El Salvador and its friends are surely justified in defending themselves by blocking the flow of arms. If the Soviet Union can aid and abet subversion in our hemisphere, then the United States has a legal right and a moral duty 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 depending on our help be overwhelmed by brute force if we have any capacity to prevent it.

If our political process pulls together, Soviet- and Cuban-supported aggression can be defeated. On this, the centennial anniversary of President Harry Truman's birth, it's fitting to recall his words spoken to a joint session of the Congress in a similar situation: “The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms. If we falter . . . we may endanger the peace of the world, and we shall surely endanger the welfare of this nation.”

The speech was given in 1947. The problem then was 2 years of Soviet-supported indirect aggression against Greece. The communists were close to victory. President Truman called on the Congress to provide decisive aid to the Greek Government. Both parties rallied behind President Truman's call. Democratic forces succeeded and Greece became a parliamentary democracy.

Communist subversion is not an irreversible tide. We've seen it rolled back in Venezuela and, most recently, in Grenada. And where democracy flourishes, human rights and peace are more secure. The tide of the future can be a freedom tide. All it takes is the will and resources to get the job done.

In April 1983, I addressed a joint session of the Congress and asked for bipartisan cooperation on behalf of our policies to protect liberty and democracy in Central America. Shortly after that speech, the late Democratic Senator Henry Jackson encouraged the appointment of a blue-ribbon, bipartisan commission to chart a long-term course for democracy, economic improvement, and peace in

Central America. I appointed 12 distinguished Americans from both political parties to the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America.

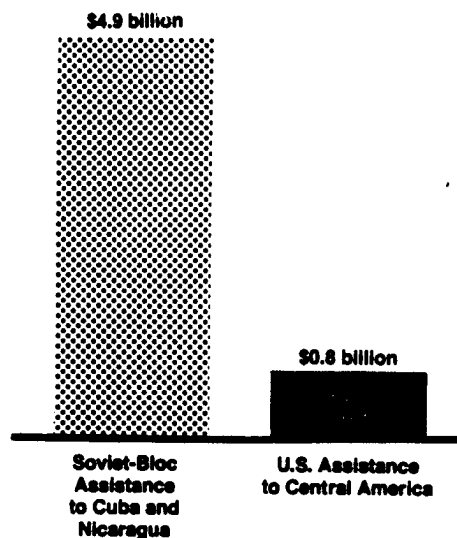
The bipartisan commission rendered an important service to all Americans—all of us from pole to pole in this Western Hemisphere. Last January, the commission presented positive recommendations to support democratic development, improve living conditions, and bring the long-sought dream for peace to this troubled region so close to home. The recommendations reinforce the spirit of our Administration's policies that help to our neighbors should be primarily economic and humanitarian but must also include sufficient military aid.

In February, I submitted a comprehensive legislative proposal to the Congress which would implement the commission's recommendations. And because this report presented a bipartisan consensus, I am hopeful that the Congress will take prompt action. This proposal calls for an increased commitment of resources beginning immediately and extending regularly over the next 5 years. The program is a balanced combination of support for democracy, economic development, diplomacy, and security measures, with 70% of the dollars to be used for economic and social development. This program can get the job done.

The National Bipartisan Commission on Central America has done its work. Our Administration has done its work. We now await action by the Congress. Meanwhile, evidence mounts of Cuba's intentions to double its support to the Salvadoran guerrillas and bring down that newly elected government in the fall. Unless we provide the resources, the communists will likely succeed.

Let's remember, the Soviet bloc gave Cuba and Nicaragua \$4.9 billion in assistance last year, while the United States provided all its friends throughout all of Central America with only a fraction of that amount.

### 1983 Economic and Military Assistance



The simple questions are: will we support freedom in this hemisphere or not? Will we defend our vital interests in this hemisphere or not? Will we stop the spread of communism in this hemisphere or not? Will we act while there is still time?

There are those in this country who would yield to the temptation to do nothing. They are the new isolationists, very much like the isolationists of the late 1990s, who knew what was happening in Europe but chose not to face the terrible challenge history had given them. They preferred a policy of wishful thinking that if they only gave up one more country, allowed just one more international transgression, then surely, sooner or later, the aggressor's appetite would be satisfied.

Well, they didn't stop the aggressors; they emboldened them. They didn't prevent war; they assured it.

Legislation is now before the Congress that will carry out the recommendations of the National Bipartisan Commission. Requests for interim appropriations to give the soldiers fighting for their country in El Salvador and the freedom-loving people of Central America the tools they need also await action by the House of Representatives.

For the last 4 years, only half of the military aid requested for El Salvador has been provided—even though total aid for El Salvador is only 5% of our worldwide assistance. I am asking the Congress to

provide the funds I requested for fiscal year 1984 and also to enact the entire National Bipartisan Commission plan for democracy, economic development, and peace in Central America.

As I talk to you tonight, there are young Salvadoran soldiers in the field facing the terrorists and guerrillas in El Salvador with the clips in their rifles the only ammunition they have. The lack of evacuation helicopters for the wounded and the lack of medical supplies if they're evacuated have resulted in one out of three of the wounded dying. This is no way to support friends—particularly when supporting them is supporting ourselves.

Last week, as we returned across the vast Pacific to Alaska, I could not help being struck again by how blessed has been our land. For 200 years, the oceans have protected us from much that has troubled the world. But clearly, our world is shrinking. We cannot pretend otherwise if we wish to protect our freedom, our economic vitality, and our precious way of life.

It's up to all of us, the Administration, you as citizens, and your representatives in the Congress. The people of Central America can succeed if we provide the assistance I have proposed. We Americans should be proud of what we're trying to do in Central America, and proud of what, together with our friends, we can do in Central America, to support democracy, human rights, and economic growth, while preserving peace so close to home. Let us show the world that we want no hostile, communist colonies here in the Americas: South, Central, or North. ■

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