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SUBJECT: Aid to the Contras: Dealing with the Misconceptions

The debate on the renewal of aid to the contras has demonstrated vast misperceptions on the role and effectiveness of armed resistance to oppressive government. We hear it said that there is no way the United States could ever match the many hundreds of millions the Soviets have provided the Sandinista regime or the billions of support they have provided the Angolan government.

The truth is that "matching" assistance totally misses the point. It can cost as much as ten times more to counter an insurgency than to support one. Recruiting, training and equipping an adequate security force becomes a monumental task in situations where the government faces an insurgent force. For example, the Angolan regime, with about 150,000 regular troops and with massive aid from the Soviets and Soviet surrogates, is beleaguered by a 50,000-60,000 insurgency. Because the government cannot choose the battlefield in an insurgency, it must provide security throughout the country. Because extensive fortification networks--maintained by troops that patrol the countryside--are needed to provide such protection, large numbers of troops are tied down. A country's economic infrastructure--transportation networks, electrical power systems, major industries--is comprised of a number of facilities and ancillary support structures that are difficult to secure. By their very nature, powerlines, oil pipelines, or railroads cannot be well guarded unless a government expends large numbers of troops. Countering an effective insurgency force with airpower (helicopter gunships or transports), heavy weapons and tactical communications equipment is very expensive. Large quantities of ammunitions are needed when fighting an "invisible" enemy.

Far fewer people are required to destabilize a government than are needed to protect it. An insurgent force does not really need sophisticated and expensive weapons except to defend against air and tank attacks by an oppressive government. The insurgents can pick their opportunities to strike at vulnerable strategic targets. This can inflict physical and psychological damage at a low cost. Much of the insurgents' appeal to the populace comes from their efforts to improve living conditions within the country. Programs to provide education and improve sanitation and health facilities are cheaper to fund than programs to upgrade the military capabilities of the government.

We also hear that the insurgents will never have the military power to defeat the government's superior military might. This ignores history and misrepresents the way revolutions work. Because insurgency is a protracted conflict, involves a number of stages and is pursued through a variety of tactics, progress is made through small, numerous achievements. A full-blown offensive is not required to gain momentum in the insurgency, for small-scale tactics can gradually erode the stability of the government. Most insurgent conflicts are not decided on the battlefield. Insurgencies force the collapse

of regimes that, either through an erosion of popular support or international pressure, are already weakened. A decisive insurgent military victory is not required. In Uganda, for example, the recent success of Musaveni--who led a small resistance movement against a government force six times its size and succeeded without fighting a major engagement--shows the vulnerability of brutal, corrupt governments.

In the case of Algeria in the late 1950s and South Yemen in the 1960s, neither Paris nor London had the perseverance or domestic support to continue their counterinsurgency efforts and a stalemated situation ensued, resulting in eventual withdrawal by the foreign forces and victory for the insurgents.

We also hear that the Nicaraguan resistance should be totally self-reliant; that external support somehow will undermine the legitimacy of the moment and its long-term chance of success. The truth is that external material support and international recognition of a shadow government are key factors in most successful insurgencies.

-- External support played a key role in the successful rise to power of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola. Without massive support from the Cubans and Soviets, the Popular Movement would not have been able to defeat the other groups vying for power.

-- Moreover, the Sandinistas' victory was achieved in large measure through Cuban assistance in the form of advice, training, arms and funds.

-- International pressure was a key factor in bringing about the negotiations between the white regime and the insurgents in Rhodesia which ultimately led to a peaceful insurgent victory. An insurgency gains support and international recognition of the shadow government.

Withdrawal of external support can destroy or greatly diminish an insurgency's capabilities, at least initially. This occurred in:

-- The Philippines, where the communist Chinese withdrew support from the Huks during 1946-1954.

-- Venezuela, where Cuba, after becoming disillusioned with the insurgents in the mid-1960s, withdrew support.

-- Greece, where Tito terminated support for the Greek insurgents and closed the Yugoslav borders in the late 1940s.

-- Angola, where the US stopped its support of the National Front for the Liberation of Angola following the Clark Amendment in 1975 and the Soviet-backed Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola gained power.

We also hear that there is no significant popular support for the resistance inside Nicaragua and that, by contrast, the Sandinista regime enjoys broad international backing. Simply not so.

History shows that progressive withdrawal of domestic support for the government and gradual erosion of international support for the government is what brings down or alters oppressive governments. This process is under way in Nicaragua. The insurgents have made gains among rural peasants who resent agricultural collectivization and resettlement programs as well as the government's mandatory military draft and anti-church policies. The heavy financial burden of the counterinsurgency effort--about half of the Nicaraguan budget last year--combined with poor economic management has created mounting discontent with the Sandinista regime.

Until recently, Western nations viewed the Sandinista revolution as a reaction to socioeconomic problems endemic to dictatorial regimes; Latin American nations saw it as a triumph over US political and economic dominance. But as evidence of government abuses and internal unrest have surfaced, other nations have become more critical of the Sandinistas and official and multilateral financial aid to Nicaragua has been decreasing. The general rule in Latin America is that the closer the country is to Nicaragua, the greater the fear and dislike of the Sandinista regime becomes. This is evidenced by recent USIA public opinion surveys. These surveys, conducted between June and November 1985, found:

-- Nicaragua is seen as a military threat by 9 out of 10 in Costa Rica and Honduras and by about half in Guatemala.

-- Sixty percent of the people polled in these countries say that the United States interferes in Central America, but that the net result is good. Cuba, the USSR, and Nicaragua are together named as interfering more often than the United States with their interference being unanimously described as negative.

-- Public opinions of Nicaragua, Cuba, and the USSR are overwhelmingly negative, with most regarding Nicaragua as a tool of Cuba and the USSR.

-- A large percentage of those who responded in Costa Rica and Honduras approve of US aid to the Nicaraguan insurgents, with an approval rating of two to one in the other two countries.

We hear it said that the Nicaraguan resistance simply has had no real impact--has achieved nothing! This is certainly not the way the Sandinistas see it. On the contrary, they undoubtedly see the insurgency as a major obstacle to their consolidation of a totalitarian Marxist-Leninist state.

Marxist regimes try to move quickly to consolidate power to thwart internal opposition and to develop close ties with the Soviet bloc to discourage external intervention.

-- Castro was able to eliminate virtually all internal opposition in Cuba within the first two years.

-- Within two and one-half years of Selassie's overthrow in Ethiopia, Mengistu had consolidated power, severed relations with the United States, and begun receiving Soviet military support.

On the other hand, where the West has provided at least a degree of support to opposition forces--such as in Nicaragua--consolidation of the Marxist regime has been much slower. After almost seven years in power, the Sandinistas--faced with a continuing insurgency that enjoys only very modest US support--have not been able to complete the consolidation process and eliminate the internal political opposition. In addition, both the Soviets and Cubans are cautious about provoking a confrontation with the United States over Nicaragua. Unlike the Angola and Ethiopia cases, the USSR has not signed a friendship treaty or made other formal commitments to Nicaragua, and the Cubans have refrained from sending in large numbers of combat troops.

Finally, skeptics question whether US support for the Nicaraguan resistance makes sense in a geopolitical sense. The answer is that US support of insurgent movements fighting Marxist-Leninist regimes has to be seen in the context of countering greater Soviet subversive involvement in the Third World. Moscow and Havana currently support high cost, long-term efforts to the regimes they installed in Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Nicaragua. In each case, the Soviets now find themselves supporting a Marxist-Leninist government that is combatting an insurgency--a clear reversal of the roles experienced by the United States and the Communists in Vietnam.

Given the nature of insurgent conflicts, the cost to Moscow and its allies of countering an insurgency is considerably greater than the cost to the West of aiding the insurgents. Yet, at present Moscow appears committed to holding these gains and is likely to exploit any low cost opportunities to further consolidate power. Part of this resolve may reflect Soviet belief that America's post-Vietnam reluctance to become embroiled in Third World conflicts will eventually force the United States to withdraw because the results of any US commitment are not immediate enough to sustain public support. The United States can block this form of Soviet aggression even while maintaining relatively low levels of support to insurgent groups. In El Salvador, for example, a low-level US commitment in support of the government has been a major factor in reversing the fortunes of Nicaraguan and Cuban-backed insurgents. By requiring Moscow to counter multiple insurgencies, the risks and costs to Moscow are increased substantially, alternatives to Soviet domination are kept alive in several Third World arenas, and Marxist-Leninist regimes in countries such as Nicaragua are prevented from quickly consolidating their revolution.