

4 June 1986

SUBJECT: Aid to the Contras: Dealing with the Misconceptions

There are in the debate on the aid to the resistance in Nicaragua, and Angola as well, vast misperceptions on the role and effectiveness of armed opposition to oppressive regimes. We hear that there is no way the United States could ever match the money and weapons the Soviets have provided the governments installed in Nicaragua and Angola--no way the resistance could "defeat" them militarily.

This argument totally misses the point. It is not necessary to "match" Soviet military support to a government. Resistance forces rarely defeat a government army. Indeed, it is usually foolish to attempt that.

The purpose of an insurgent force is first to prevent an oppressive regime from achieving irreversible consolidation, and secondary to peel off popular support.

A relatively small force can initiate this process, as we have seen in Nicaragua with both the Sandinistas in 1979 and the Contras currently, as well as in Angola with Savimbi. The fundamental thing is that it costs much more to counter an insurgency than to support one. Recruiting, training and equipping an adequate security force is a monumental task for a regime facing an insurgent force. Today we see the Angolan regime, with 150,000 Angolan and Cuban troops and massive aid from the Soviets, beleaguered by the insurgency which started with a few thousand men and has now grown to about one-third the size of the defending government force. Because the government cannot choose the battlefield, 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 to protect defense installations and economic facilities in all parts of the country to counter insurgent forces capable of moving quickly and silently. This requires very expensive _____ to carry the heavy expense of maintaining helicopter gunships, other heavy weapons, and communications and transport. 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. Insurgent forces do not really need sophisticated and expensive weapons except to defend against air and tank attacks. They can pick their opportunities to strike at vulnerable strategic targets. This can inflict physical and psychological damage on the regime at a low cost.

Their purpose is not to defeat a superior military force, but to take popular support away from the regime. 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.

To argue that the insurgents will never have the military power to defeat the government's superior military might 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. 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 Algeria in the late 1950s, in South Yemen in the 1960s, and in Vietnam in the 1970s, neither Paris nor London nor Washington 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.

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

-- The same can be said of Soviet support for the Vietcong in the 1970s and French support for George Washington in the 1770s.

-- International pressure and external support were key factors in bringing about the negotiations between the white regime and the insurgents in Rhodesia which ultimately led to a peaceful insurgent victory. To succeed, an insurgency must gain international support and recognition.

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.

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, and Marxist-Leninist regimes in countries such as Nicaragua are prevented from quickly and irreversibly fixing their totalitarian grip on the people.