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Nicaragua: We Can't Remake It in Our Own Image

The Reagan administration poses a fair question when it asks opponents of its Nicaraguan policy to come up with a better one. As I see it, the heart of our policy should be the negotiation of an agreement with the Sandinistas, the key provision of which would be our promise to "live and let live" in exchange for Sandinista concessions in important areas of their foreign policy.

We would insist that the Sandinistas expel foreign military advisers, keep all foreign military bases and modern offensive weapons out of their country, and stop exporting revolution and trafficking in arms. In return, we would abandon our efforts to interfere in their internal affairs or change their form of government. This is a formula that promotes our national interest and sets out objectives that the American people are willing to support.

As part of this agreement we should insist on verification provisions encompassing intelligence, technological means, and on-site inspection where necessary. We would judge by our own standards the data that we collected. While enforcement of an agreement might be a problem, there are diplomatic and political steps that can be taken to make it more enforceable.

In this respect a strong regional policy is important. We should continue to strengthen Honduras, Costa Rica and El Salvador so that they can resist any attempt by Nicaragua to threaten or destabilize them. We should help them with military equipment and intelligence. We also would need to give priority to addressing the economic problems that cause so much turmoil in the region. Our economic aid to Honduras, Costa Rica and El Salvador should be complemented by other efforts to build and preserve peaceful democratic societies that respect human rights. We should use our influence with international organizations and banks to promote long-term development, and try to remove all trade barriers between ourselves and our friends in Central America.

Concerning Nicaragua, pressure on the Sandinista government to change its policies will work only if we use both carrots and sticks. We should be prepared to offer Nicaragua the benefits that we offer its neighbors if its domestic and foreign policies change. However, if the Sandinistas continued those external actions that we did not like, or if any agreement that we reached with Nicaragua were violated,

all bets would be off and all options, including a return to hostilities, would be reserved.

By now the Sandinistas must understand just how difficult we can make their lives if they do not live up to an agreement. To begin, we could isolate them diplomatically within the hemisphere, using the Organization of American States as a platform for voicing our concerns, and working as closely as possible with our Rio Treaty partners in developing a unified policy. We have the Rio Treaty available to us as the legal foundation for the use of military force against Nicaragua, should it prove necessary. We can also increase economic pressure on Nicaragua, working with our allies to deny it World Bank loans and assistance from the International Monetary Fund. A policy of increased economic pressure on Nicaragua could also include a trade cutoff. We are still Nicaragua's largest trading partner despite a 64 percent falloff in trade since 1980. Stopping Nicaragua airlines from flying to the United States, denying visas to its citizens or breaking off diplomatic relations—these are other potential options that should be considered, should they prove necessary.

Supporters of the rebels argue that if we cease military action against Nicaragua, we will not be able to get the Sandinistas to negotiate seriously. The argument is an interesting one, but we have to regard it as inconclusive unless we also believe that ending the covert war is the only real goal that the Sandinistas hope to achieve in talks with the United States. I believe that the Sandinistas have detailed economic and political agendas that they think could be advanced in productive discussions with the United States.

A second point is of equal weight. The United States will be unable to change Nicaragua's behavior in any significant way as long as the Sandinistas are persuaded that we seek either to destroy them or to substitute our ideals of government and society for theirs. Despite years in the field, much killing and millions of dollars spent, the rebels are as far from Managua as they have ever been. Another \$14 million would not help the rebels very much, but it would be another down payment on deeper American involvement. It is a dubious tactic on behalf of a doubtful policy.

Supporters of the rebels argue that military action is essential to force the Sandinis-

tas to keep the promise of free elections that they made to the OAS in 1979. We certainly should continue to press the Sandinistas to keep the promise, but their failure to do so to date is no excuse to fund a war against them. We have good relations with dozens of undemocratic nations around the world, and my guess is that the Sandinistas simply never would cry "uncle" and allow the United States to dictate the form that Nicaraguan government and society would take.

It would be nice if Nicaragua were a liberal democracy, but that is not a matter that affects our national interest directly unless the Sandinistas persist in trying to export revolution. There is little that we can do about internal politics there in the short term—short of invading Nicaragua, occupying it and remaking it in our image.

It is my belief that an end to our involvement in the covert war, rather than undermining the prospect for successful negotiations, may help to energize them. The current impression among participants in the Contadora process is that the United States does not attach much importance to negotiations. Ending support for the rebels will increase our credibility and bring leverage if it is obvious that we intend seriously to achieve a diplomatic settlement. Similarly, we will have greater success in obtaining the detailed verification procedures that we seek if it is apparent that this is the only barrier to an agreement.

Nicaragua must be watched closely so that we can be sure that it poses no direct or immediate threat to our national security. Should that happen, we would want to follow the Reagan administration's lead and respond vigorously to such a threat. Our decision, however, should be based not on ideology, but on a clearly defined assessment of how best to protect our national interest.

The writer, a Democratic representative from Indiana, is chairman of the Permanent Intelligence Committee and ranking majority member of the Foreign Affairs Committee.