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Why the Big Debate?

Debate over aid to Nicaragua's contras is bitter and intense. One wonders why, of the \$15-plus billion in economic and military assistance that the United States provides annually to diverse governments in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, this particular \$100 million is so hotly contested.

Such opponents as Arizona's Democratic Gov. Bruce Babbitt say it is because "Nicaraguan rebels are not democrats," but that is demonstrably wrong. The contra leadership is drawn almost wholly from men who actively opposed Somoza, fought to overthrow him and sought to bring democracy to Nicaragua. Can it be that Babbitt—who bothered to write an op-ed piece that opposed aid to the contras and was published in *The New York Times* on March 12—has not bothered to inform himself about the background and beliefs of top Nicaraguan resistance leaders Adolfo Calero, Alfonso Robelo and Arturo Cruz?

Then, again, Babbitt says the contras have fought a "notably dirty little war." But that is also not true. War is violent and terrible. But the contras have a record of working hard to avoid harming civilians. They have done nothing that compares with the systematic brutality the Sandinista government visits on dissenters and opponents. Is it possible that Babbitt has not read the 1985 report of the Nicaraguan Commission on Human Rights, which documents the shocking denial of rights and spread of terror in Nicaragua?

Babbitt tells us to "begin from the premise that the contras are not going to win." And he argues strenuously against giving them the arms necessary to defend themselves against Soviet armored helicopters, missiles and heavy weapons. Babbitt asserts that U.S. aid to the contras helps the Sandinista government justify its repression. Apparently he does not know that the repression of Nicaraguans preceded the contras. Repression caused the contras, not the contras repression.

Babbitt asserts that the contras' struggle has a negative impact on Nicaragua's neighbors, all of whom now enjoy democratic governments. Apparently Babbitt is unaware that large majorities of neighboring populations regard the Sandinista government as a threat to stability in their own countries.

A poll conducted this winter by the highly reliable Consultoria Interdisciplinaria in Desarrollo reveals that 92 percent of Costa Ricans, 89 percent of Hondurans and 63 percent of El Salvadorans regard Nicaragua as a military threat to their respective countries. Unlike Babbitt, a majority of Costa Ricans, El Salvadorans and Hondurans want the United States to provide military assistance to the contras, according to the same poll.

Like many other opponents of U.S. aid, Babbitt believes the United States

should negotiate a settlement with Nicaragua and agree to "sever our bonds with the contras provided the Sandinistas agree to expel Russians and Cubans, reduce their armed forces and forswear the support of Marxist rebels among their neighbors." He does not explain why the Sandinistas should agree to make such concessions when he and so many other congressional Democrats are willing to forswear unilaterally U.S. aid. In fact, Babbitt's "deal" has already been rejected by the Sandinistas, who rely on public relations firms and the Democrats to block aid for Nicaragua's freedom fighters.

But why should the Democrats be so reluctant to help freedom fighters so close to our borders?

They—at least many of them—understand that Nicaragua's rulers have established a harshly repressive, Marxist-Leninist dictatorship. They understand that there has been a massive flow of Soviet and Soviet-bloc arms and material—totaling approximately \$500 million to \$700 million. They understand that Nicaragua has actively provided weapons and other support to guerrillas in El Salvador, Guatemala, Colombia and elsewhere, and participates in the drug and terror network that wreaks havoc in the hemisphere. They understand that neither the U.S. government, nor the countries of Central America, nor the Contadora group has been able to persuade the Marxist commandantes who govern Nicaragua to cease the militarization, Sovietization and totalitarianization of Nicaragua.

The Democrats in Congress know that the Sandinistas already lend their country as a base for Soviet intelligence gathering and other military ac-

tivities. What the Democrats in Congress apparently do not understand is that the Sandinistas use prolonged negotiations to further consolidate their power over the economy, church, schools, press, military—and all other aspects of Nicaraguan society.

Nicaragua's exiled democratic political parties and other democratic groups, including trade union councils, have formed a single umbrella organization called the Coordinacion Opositora Nicaraguense. CON recently addressed a letter to the foreign ministers of the Contadora countries in which they pointed out that by prolonging negotiations the Sandinistas give themselves time for definitive consolidation of power. "This is very important. Every day that they acquire at the expense of your good intentions is a day that our country loses in its just struggle to achieve its independence and liberty."

Unilateral disarmament of the contras in the face of the Sandinistas' Soviet arms can eventually stop the war in Nicaragua. But it cannot stop the terror that advances day by day.

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