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First, 'Latinize' It

The debate over aid to the Nicaraguan contras is at last coming to an end. It is probable that the Reagan administration will receive much of what it requested for military aid. One must hope it will not be so hedged with conditions as to make coherent policy nearly impossible.

The administration has put forth an analysis that logically implies the need to overthrow the Sandinista regime. But the means it has requested for the next 18 months, \$100 million of aid in various categories, are clearly inadequate to achieve this or perhaps any other goal. And the administration's repeated assertion that the use of American force is totally excluded underlines the incompatibility of rhetoric and policy.

Critics have used this inconsistency not to ask for a larger effort but to deny the need for any military effort whatever. This leaves the national debate suspended between a demand for victory without resources and a commitment to diplomacy without incentive.

History offers no example of successful negotiations with communists sustained exclusively by persuasiveness. If negotiations over Central America begin with a renunciation of U.S. military pressure, a diplomatic stalemate and ultimately consolidation of unrestrained communist rule in Central America will be certain. Dismantling the contras is therefore the surest way to wreck negotiations.

Many well-meaning Americans have sought to rely entirely on the so-called Contadora process—the mediation effort on the part of Mexico, Colombia, Panama and Venezuela, recently reinforced by Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Uruguay. But neither the domestic structure of these countries nor their history allows them to serve as vehicles for what Latin Americans consider U.S. unilateral dominance.

The fundamental facts are no longer contested. The Sandinista regime came to power promising democratic renewal. It is now well on the way to turning itself into a Marxist-Leninist regime on the Cuban and Soviet model. It has built up an army larger than that of all the other Central American countries combined. It is sustained by a minimum of 8,000 Cuban advisers, of whom at least 3,000 are military; Bulgarians, East Germans, Libyans and the largest Soviet embassy in the hemisphere, outside of Washington, provide the military, administrative and intelligence sinews. It is this Soviet and Cuban presence and the size of its armed forces, not just its internal arrangements, that make the Managua regime a strategic threat.

This state of affairs gives the United States three broad choices:

- It can let existing trends in Nicaragua continue and then seek to contain the resulting military, intelligence and political machine. The National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, of which I was chairman, rejected this approach unanimously two years ago as being beyond the physical resources of the Central American countries and requiring a large, permanent major U.S. military presence that neither Central American nor U.S. public opinion would sustain. Public opinion is all the more critical because, for the first time in history, all the countries of Central America, except Nicaragua, are democracies, albeit at the fragile initial phase.

Topic A

The Contra Aid Quarrel

- It can seek to overthrow the Sandinista regime. This is impossible without direct U.S. military intervention. At the beginning of the Reagan administration, and even as late as the invasion of Grenada, the costs of such a policy might have been sustainable. But nothing in the present policy of the administration—from the scale of aid requested to the president's repeated public disavowal of the use of American force—suggests that it has the stomach for such a move, which would guarantee that the remainder of the president's term would be marred by implacable congressional opposition and by domestic and international upheavals.

- The most realistic course is a combination of negotiation and pressure designed to deprive the Sandinista regime of the capability to subvert or to undermine its neighbors.

The congressional vote will settle the issue of what pressures are available to support this policy. Debate has produced a bipartisan consensus on the need to negotiate. The focus of debate must now shift to what should be the content of negotiations, and what should be done if, despite all best efforts, they fail.

A new bipartisan diplomacy should seek the cooperation of the democratic nations of Latin America. My own sense of what serious and well-disposed Latin leaders believe—indeed, what they have told me—goes something like this:

The present course of the United States is doomed. It provides neither enough incentives nor enough pressure to prevent the consolidation of the Nicaraguan regime. Its inevitable failure will encourage all the radical elements in the Western Hemisphere.

At the same time these leaders believe that eventually Washington will be driven by its very failure to invade Nicaragua. This would confront them with the near certainty of domestic upheavals.

Those Latin American leaders who seek to avoid both U.S. failure and U.S. military intervention will have to deal with two realities: contra pressures supply the indispensable incentive for negotiation, and Latin American leaders have a stake in a concrete negotiating program. They cannot wish in the end to sponsor a phony negotiation that will make all the dilemmas intractable and sooner or later produce a blowup.

An understanding U.S. policy should attempt to "Latinize" the process to the greatest degree possible.

Continued

The message issued by the Contadora nations and the four supporting nations at Caraballeda, Venezuela, in February, was much more explicit than previous Contadora efforts on the need for Nicaragua to open its political system. It was also more balanced and precise on the demilitarization of Central America—though there is still a way to go on both issues. The collapse of the most recent Contadora meeting as a result of Nicaraguan intransigence should facilitate a joint approach between the United States and the Contadora group.

A joint strategy should seek to separate the issue of Nicaragua's internal arrangements from its ability to project its purposes across its frontiers. The former issue can be given a longer time-span for solution than the latter. The immediate goal must be for Nicaragua to reduce its Cuban and Soviet connections to traditional state-to-state relations and rely for its economic and security support on the nations of the Western Hemisphere. Without Soviet and Cuban military and economic support, Nicaragua would be a nuisance, not a threat.

This will not be liked by some in the administration any more than by many in Congress. But it is the only way to gain Latin support and to give us options other than abdication or direct U.S. military intervention.

A program to achieve a bipartisan consensus in the United States and to "Latinize" the Central American problem could have the following components:

1. Nicaragua would terminate its special relationship with Cuba and the Soviet Union. It would renounce all loans and credits from Eastern-bloc countries. These would be replaced by a special fund set up by the nations of Latin America, perhaps with West European and Japanese support.

2. The United States would commit itself to carrying out the unanimous recommendations of the National Bipartisan Commission for the development of the democratic nations of Central America. This would include the five-year commitment of economic assistance,

stalled in Congress, and the creation of a Central American Development Organization, stalled by bureaucratic foot-dragging. Nicaragua could join this program as soon as it met the criteria for democratic processes applying to the other nations.

3. All Cuban, Soviet, Libyan and other radical advisers in Nicaragua would be replaced by experts from Latin American countries.

4. The armed forces of all Central American countries would be limited to levels generally comparable to those of 1979 when the Sandinistas came to power. There would be strict limitations on types and numbers of weapons.

5. All signatories would commit not to attack other countries in the hemisphere; not to transfer arms covertly or openly to insurgents; not to practice subversion. This would, of course, require the end of U.S. military support for the contras and of Nicaraguan assistance to the Salvadoran guerrillas.

6. A process of conciliation would begin between insurgent groups and existing governments under the auspices of other countries of Latin America.

7. The whole process, including verification, would be guaranteed by either the major regional powers or by the Contadora countries and their support group, the Organization of American States.

The leaders of Latin America have a special right to ask the United States to be sensitive to the difficulties of their position, and they have a special claim on U.S. concern. But it is in their own long-run interest to transform the abstract generalities of the current Contadora process into detailed programs to forestall pressures for a showdown.

The administration's contribution to national unity must be to put forward a constructive and farsighted negotiating program. But Congress cannot go on year after year with a debilitating rear-guard action. It has an obligation to provide the means to sustain a negotiation its leaders have so insistently demanded.

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