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Q&A

U.S. goal with Contras should be limited

Sen. Richard Lugar on foreign policy.

The new chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. Richard Lugar, R.-Ind., discussed foreign policy with The Washington Times' editors and senior reporters.

Q: In Nicaragua, where we have been aiding the anti-government guerrillas known as the Contras, the Nicaraguans believe that we might invade their country. We currently have a treaty of friendship and commerce with Nicaragua. Under the circumstances, should we withdraw from that treaty?

A: I suspect that each of our activities with regard to Nicaragua has to be framed in terms of how we're going to bring pressure on the Sandinista government to arrive at conclusions that we think are very important. Basically, I think that . . . they will not try to destabilize their neighbors, and . . . they will not become a Soviet base.

I think for the moment, as Secretary [of State George] Shultz has expressed it to me, the negotiations in which we were involved in a bilateral way with the Nicaraguans are dead in the water. Our negotiator has retired from the field momentarily because he's making no headway. We're back to square one.

The Nicaraguans also apparently have contempt for the Contradora group [which includes representatives from most Central nations who are trying to develop a regional peace plan] altogether and see no point in dealing with any of their neighbors. That being the case, there has to be some reason, some pressure, to get the Nicaraguans back to negotiations.

That is the approximate cause for the administration, at least momentarily, saying they plan to renew their request for $14 million more for the Contras, while at the same time also saying that we may need to explore other avenues. And I've encouraged that, though I would probably vote again in favor of more aid for the Contras.

Although the Senate Intelligence Committee might vote for the $14 million, there is little chance it could pass the House Intelligence Committee so some other means must be found to keep pressure on the Nicaraguans.

I'm going to continue to explore with both the National Security Council and the State Department what other options we may have in pressuring the Nicaraguans.

Q: What are some of the options you see?

A: I'm not going to surface any until I think we've got something that makes a difference. Every time I get into this — and if there's a group of reporters present — they'll say does it involve money, does it involve third countries, does it involve changing treaty obligations or maybe all of the above, or some combination. This is not very useful or responsible to get into until you know what you want to do.

All I'm saying is that I think we'll have to find ways to apply pressure on the Sandinistas if there is to be movement in the negotiations with us or with others. But the formula isn't at hand. If it were, I suspect the administration would have adopted it more freely as opposed to continuing on the current tack.

Q: Judged strictly in military terms, do you think the Contra program was a success while we were backing it?

A: It was successful at meeting the original finding that led to the activity and that finding was that Nicaragua's supplies to the rebels in El Salvador ought to be interdicted — or, for that matter, Nicaraguan efforts to destabilize Costa Rica or Guatamala ought to be stopped. And I think clearly they were.

Of course, the opponents' argument used to be, well, how much is actually going in? Those who were sort of apologists for Nicaragua said barely a trickle — the odd person or piece of equipment and so forth.

Then you very rapidly get into the question of how do we know and all the rest of it. In my own judgment, the aid by Nicaragua to the guerrillas was substantial and essentially it was stopped.

Nicaragua became preoccupied with defending its own situation, that is, the Sandinistas did, as opposed to having the option of going out and causing trouble willy-nilly everywhere else.

The dilemma of our policy always came down to this: that critics even within the intelligence committee — quite apart from when we got out to the floor of the Senate — said that although your purpose is interdiction, in your heart of hearts you really have overthrow of the Nicaraguan government in mind.

CIA Director [William P.] Casey and others said, "No, we don't. It's interdiction, that's the finding, that's what the president has said and we're not involved in overthrow."

Democrats were co-opted in the Intelligence Committee — [Sens. Daniel] Moynihan, D-N.Y., Sam Nunn, D-Ga., Lloyd Bentsen, D-Texas, and others — to support the program based on a goal of interdiction. It was a bipartisan thing on the Senate side but it became very partisan on the House side.

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But things became fuzzy when there were reports that some administration figures indeed did see just the odd chance that the Sandinistas might topple — you know, we might pick up one on the cheap.

That was always, I think, a forlorn hope, militarily. The Contras just didn't have the numbers. They were not of a status to march on Managua. They were nibbling around the fringes and burning crops and harassing people and what have you, and that was about what they could do.

Q: Do you agree that to date the impact of the Contras has mainly been psychological rather than actual?

A: Well, yes, although the actual part has come now into play pretty heavily in terms of the economy of Nicaragua — which is always in bad shape but is apparently getting much worse. There are just enough disruptions in an economy that was already fragile.

We saw the same thing in El Salvador during the guerrilla activities there. It's hard to get a handle on these, but the GNP of El Salvador may have gone down by 25 percent a year or two ago, which is pretty bad given the fact it was pretty low to begin with. Now Nicaragua may be undergoing a similar situation because the Contras are at least effective in disrupting.

Q: Is there a dilemma for the United States that if we drop support for the Contras we will be perceived as having used a group then dropped it when our particular interest was over?

A: That could be a valid perception. Our policy early on was never one of in any way giving the Contras a feeling that we were going to march with them into Managua. Now they were making statements to the press on occasion that that's what they were all about. That was not our view of them, and this is the dilemma, I suppose, when covert becomes debated on the floor of both houses of Congress — that it is no longer covert.

Furthermore, if we get into a more overt situation, we could be skirting around our obligations under international law, whatever they may be. Do we want to control the situation? Or do we say to the Contras, here is sort of a sum of money lying out here, you can pick it off the table and do with it what you want because we have a feeling whatever you do with it will be helpful.

But we haven't really decided that, I think, in policy terms. Is this something over which we really want to maintain control, and are we prepared to take the liabilities of the Contras?

Contras have done a lot of things that are not very tidy, and once you get into a probe of the internal workings of the Contras you may find that they have killed various people who were out of sorts with them, maybe committed an atrocity or two in the process of going about their work.

And the question is: How much of this do we countenence, how much are we responsible for and do we want to control it?

Q: You said earlier that the flow of Nicaraguan aid to El Salvador had been successfully interdicted. Does that mean that the insurrection, rebellion, whatever you want to call it, in El Salvador presently is domestic, self-sustaining, etc?

A: Pretty much so. I think that's one reason that the Salvadoran army is doing better. There are other reasons: Training has gotten better; the confidence in the [President Napoleon] Duarte government probably has increased over time; the fact that there could be a government at all and that it commanded some respect and made conciliatory overtures.

The El Salvador economy has gotten not well, but it's gotten better. There is at least some basic hope on the part of a lot of poor people that the government may be able to produce, and they're less willing perhaps to care and feed for the guerrillas that are in the hills.

Q: What is your feeling about the negative effects of America's secret war? Isn't there a flip side to the Contra program — that it has given the Sandinista government a wonderful excuse for all it's economic woes; that it has unified the Nicaraguans, under an otherwise very unpopular government, against an external foe?

A: There are negative effects, just about as you've stated them. But even after you say that, our policy is still one of trying to make sure Nicaragua doesn't destabilize its neighbors and become a Soviet base.

Q: So on balance, you think the program is probably worthwhile?

A: I think so.

Q: Do you think it advisable to consider a security pact or a permanent base there or any of these options?

A: Well, it might be useful to consider them, but whether we want to come to that in light of our other negotiations . . . in other words, we've been trying to take a point of view with the Central American countries that we would agree that nobody ought to be having bases in Central America so that it's clear that there's grounds for keeping Soviets or Cubans or somebody else out of there, that we have not sought bases but we want to make sure nobody else is seeking them either. It's more of an even-handed situation.

Q: It's relatively easy for a revolutionary regime to go acquiescent and in a sense it would be relatively easy to cooperate on the first two goals in the face of a hard-line administration. Do you think that the current regime could be trusted, and how do you think an agreement could be structured?

A: Both the verification problem and the reaction to violation are important, and this is why the United States has insisted upon a Contadora group process or a multi-lateral process involving the neighboring nations, because they have the most at stake initially if Nicaragua decides to take a different tack after acquiescence, and we must have their cooperation in any event if we are to be successful in the intermediate, quite apart from the long, run.

I don't know, in terms of these negotiations, [if] we're talking about what sort of trigger points or check-offs that you have. I think they're important, however, as a part of that, as opposed to just simply a pledge that they're going to cease and desist.

The Nicaraguan ambassador wrote to me about a month ago, following some speech in which I made similar points, that they would be fully prepared to pledge to cease and desist harm to their neighbors, and under no circumstance would they become a Soviet base and saw no problems — he agreed to both of those things. By the way, this leaves logically the question that you've raised because maybe they'll say that to our negotiators sometime, too.

What's the problem? They're all ready to do this, but somehow we don't know whether that's the change of heart that's merely temporary until we cease and desist whatever the pressures are that led to this frame of mind. All I'm saying is we're having a hard time right now even getting to the contents of the letter the Nicaraguan ambassador wrote to me in the field.