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Secret operations can go awry, says former US ambassador

By a staff correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

Washington

A former US ambassador to Nicaragua warns that secret operations against Nicaragua could get out of control and create more problems than benefits for the United States.

Lawrence Pezzullo, who served in Nicaragua from mid-1979 through the summer of 1981, says that while such operations may start with the aim of simply harassing or cutting off an arms supply, the Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries in charge of carrying them out may have larger purposes in mind, such as the overthrow of a government.

Now a Washington consultant, the former ambassador says that once the US places its main focus on the flow of arms from Cuba and Nicaragua to El Salvador, it says, in effect, to the Salvadoran government and military men: "This is a problem beyond your control." Mr. Pezzullo says he believes that Cuban involvement in Central America's turmoil is undeniable but overstated by the Reagan administration, and that this focus of concern removes the pressure on threatened governments to carry out reforms.

In the struggle for Nicaragua, says Pezzullo, it was not Cuban support for the Sandinista revolutionaries which was decisive, but the sanctuary and supply base of democratic Costa Rica which made the difference. Some Costa Ricans made a fortune from trafficking in arms, he adds.

In an interview, Pezzullo said that the US ought to foster centrist forces, encourage talks between Honduras and Nicaragua, and seek regional ways of dealing with the traffic in arms and related problems.

"The US in its own interest has to learn how better to deal with radical change," says Pezzullo. "It's essential, because we're living in a world where governments, especially in smaller countries with weak institutions, face radical change.

"These radical changes are going to usher in movements which rhetorically at least are going to be anti-American. We can throw up our hands and say this is a creature of the Soviet Union, but that's not a policy. That's an emotional outcry.

"We're going to have to realize there are ways in which you can deal with it. No particular pattern will work. But you're going to have to have a flexible, very pragmatic kind of policy."

Pezullo says the US has more to offer a small nation undergoing change than does the USSR. To oppose such change, he says, "reinforces the myth that the US supports the status quo, no matter how corrupt governing elites may be."

But if it wants to, Pezzullo says, the US can assist any new regimes in ways that the Soviet Union cannot match. In the fields of agriculture, health, education, and public administration, the US can provide resources and experienced professional help.

"The Soviets," he says, "don't deliver."
"Whether changes occur in an Iran or a Nicaragua, none of them are going to be easy to cope with," says the former ambassador. "They're going to test the patience and pragmatism and ingenuity of everybody who deals with them.

"But we either deal with change or run for cover every time we see it and leave the turf to the so-called professional revolutionaries."

Regarding allegations that the Reagan administration has supported former Somoza guardsmen in cross-border raids against the Sandinista regime, Pezzullo says: "It is almost a classical example of how the original concept of intercepting an arms flow leads you into problem areas, because the people you start to deal with on the intercept issue are more interested in doing other things.

"Our foreign policy cannot stray too far from American ideals and a sense of fair play."