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ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT  
TO THE NATION



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The Oval Office

8:00 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: My fellow Americans, I must speak to you tonight about a mounting danger in Central America that threatens the security of the United States. This danger will not go away; it will grow worse, much worse, if we fail to take action now. I am speaking of Nicaragua, a Soviet ally on the American mainland only two hours flying time from our own borders. With over a billion dollars in Soviet-bloc aid, the communist government of Nicaragua has launched a campaign to subvert and topple its democratic neighbors.

Using Nicaragua as a base, the Soviets and Cubans can become the dominant power in the crucial corridor between North and South America. Established there, they will be in a position to threaten the Panama Canal, interdict our vital Caribbean sea lanes, and, ultimately, move against Mexico. Should that happen, desperate Latin peoples by the millions would begin fleeing north into the cities of the southern United States, or to wherever some hope of freedom remained.

The United States Congress has before it a proposal to help stop this threat. The legislation is an aid package of \$100 million for the more than 20,000 freedom fighters struggling to bring democracy to their country and eliminate this communist menace at its source. But this \$100 million is not an additional \$100 million. We are not asking for a single dime in new money. We are asking only to be permitted to switch a small part of our present defense budget -- to the defense of our own southern frontier.

Gathered in Nicaragua already are thousands of Cuban military advisers, contingents of Soviets and East Germans and all the elements of international terror -- from the PLO to Italy's Red Brigades. Why are they there? Because, as Colonel Qaddafi has publicly exulted: "Nicaragua means a great thing, it means fighting America near its borders -- fighting America at its doorstep."

For our own security the United States must deny the Soviet Union a beachhead in North America. But let me make one thing plain. I am not talking about American troops. They are not needed; they have not been requested. The democratic resistance fighting in Nicaragua is only asking America for the supplies and support to save their own country from communism.

The question the Congress of the United States will now answer is a simple one: will we give the Nicaraguan democratic resistance the means to recapture their betrayed revolution, or will we turn our backs and ignore the malignancy in Managua until it spreads and becomes a mortal threat to the entire New World?

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Will we permit the Soviet Union to put a second Cuba, a second Libya, right on the doorstep of the United States?

How can such a small country pose such a great threat? Well, it is not Nicaragua alone that threatens us, but those using Nicaragua as a privileged sanctuary for their struggle against the United States.

Their first target is Nicaragua's neighbors. With an army and militia of 120,000 men, backed by more than 3,000 Cuban military advisers, Nicaragua's armed forces are the largest Central America has ever seen. The Nicaraguan military machine is more powerful than all its neighbors combined.

This map represents much of the Western hemisphere. Now let me show you the countries in Central America where weapons supplied by Nicaraguan communists have been found: Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala. Radicals from Panama to the south have been trained in Nicaragua. But the Sandinista revolutionary reach extends well beyond their immediate neighbors. In South America and the Caribbean, the Nicaraguan communists have provided support in the form of military training, safe haven, communications, false documents, safe transit and sometimes weapons to radicals from the following countries: Columbia, Ecuador, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and the Dominican Republic. Even that is not all, for there was an old communist slogan that the Sandinistas have made clear they honor: The road to victory goes through Mexico.

If maps, statistics and facts aren't persuasive enough, we have the words of the Sandinistas and Soviets themselves. One of the highest-level Sandinista leaders was asked by an American magazine whether their communist revolution will -- and I quote -- "be exported to El Salvador, then Guatemala, then Honduras, and then Mexico?" He responded, "That is one historical prophecy of Ronald Reagan that is absolutely true."

Well, the Soviets have been no less candid. A few years ago, then Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko noted that Central America was, quote, "boiling like a cauldron" and ripe for revolution. In a Moscow meeting in 1983, Soviet Chief of Staff, Marshal Ogarkov, declared: "Over two decades -- there are Nicaragua" -- I should say, "there was only Cuba in Latin America. Today there are Nicaragua, Grenada, and a serious battle is going on in El Salvador."

But we don't need their quotes; the American forces who liberated Grenada captured thousands of documents that demonstrated Soviet intent to bring communist revolution home to the Western hemisphere.

So, we're clear on the intentions of the Sandinistas and those who back them. Let us be equally clear about the nature of their regime. To begin with, the Sandinistas have revoked the civil liberties of the Nicaraguan people, depriving them of any legal right to speak, to publish, to assemble or to worship freely. Independent newspapers have been shut down. There is no longer any independent labor movement in Nicaragua nor any right to strike. As AFL-CIO leader Lane Kirkland has said, "Nicaragua's headlong rush into the totalitarian camp cannot be denied but -- by anyone who has eyes to see."

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These have been only the most horrifying consequences. Other outgrowths of Soviet policies have been the colonial presence of tens of thousands of Cuban troops in Africa; the activities of terrorists trained in facilities in the Soviet bloc; and the effort to use Communist Nicaragua as a base from which to extinguish democracy in El Salvador and beyond.

These are not isolated events. They make up the disturbing pattern of Soviet conduct in the past fifteen years. The problems it creates are no less acute because the Soviet Union has had its share of disagreements with some of its clients, or because many of these involvements have proved very costly. That the Soviet leadership persists in such policies despite the growing burden they impose only testifies to the strength of Soviet commitment. Unless we build barriers to Soviet ambitions, and create incentives for Soviet restraint, Soviet policies will remain a source of danger -- and the most important obstacle to the future spread of freedom.

In my meetings and other communications with Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev, and in my address before the UN General Assembly last October, I have made clear the importance the United States attaches to the resolution of regional conflicts that threaten world peace and the yearning of millions for freedom and independence -- whether in Afghanistan or in southern Africa.

For the United States, these conflicts cannot be regarded as peripheral to other issues on the global agenda. They raise fundamental issues and are a fundamental part of the overall U.S.-Soviet relationship. Their resolution would represent a crucial step toward the kind of world that all Americans seek and have been seeking for over forty years.

Joining Others' Strength to Ours. The second reality that shapes America's approach to regional security is the need to join our own strength to the efforts of others in working toward our common goals.

Throughout the postwar period, our country has played an enormous role in helping other nations, in many parts of the world, to protect their freedom. Through NATO we committed ourselves to the defense of Europe against Soviet attack. Through the Marshall Plan we helped Western Europe to rebuild its economy and strengthen democratic institutions. We sent American troops to Korea to repel a Communist invasion. America was an ardent champion of decolonization. We provided security assistance to help friends and allies around the world defend themselves. We extended our hand to those governments that sought to free themselves from dependence on the Soviet Union; success in such efforts -- whether by Yugoslavia, Egypt, China or others -- has contributed significantly to international security.

Despite our economic and military strength and our leading political role, the pursuit of American goals has always required cooperation with like-minded partners. The problems we face today, however, make cooperation with others even more important. This is in part a result of the limits on our own resources, of the steady growth in the power of our adversaries, and of the American people's understandable reluctance to shoulder alone burdens that are properly shared with others. But most important, we want to cooperate with others because of the nature of our goals. Stable regional solutions depend over the long term on what those most directly affected can contribute. If interference by outsiders can be ended, regional security is best protected by the free and independent countries of each region.

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How did this menace to the peace and security of our Latin neighbors, and ultimately ourselves, suddenly emerge? Let me give you a brief history.

In 1979, the people of Nicaragua rose up and overthrew a corrupt dictatorship. At first the revolutionary leaders promised free elections and respect for human rights. But among them was an organization called the Sandinistas. Theirs was a communist organization and their support of the revolutionary goals was sheer deceit. Quickly and ruthlessly they took complete control.

Two months after the revolution, the Sandinista leadership met in secret, and, in what came to be known as the "72-hour Document," described themselves as the "vanguard" of a revolution that would sweep Central America, Latin America and finally the world. Their true enemy, they declared: The United States.

Rather than make this document public, they followed the advice of Fidel Castro, who told them to put on a facade of democracy. While Castro viewed the democratic elements in Nicaragua with contempt, he urged his Nicaraguan friends to keep some of them in their coalition, in minor posts, as window dressing to deceive the west. And that way, Castro said, you can have your revolution and the Americans will pay for it.

And we did pay for it. More aid flowed to Nicaragua from the United States in the first 18 months under the Sandinistas than from any other country. Only when the mask fell, and the face of totalitarianism became visible to the world, did the aid stop.

Confronted with this emerging threat, early in our administration I went to Congress and, with bipartisan support, managed to get help for the nations surrounding Nicaragua. Some of you may remember the inspiring scene when the people of El Salvador braved the threats and gunfire of communist guerrillas, guerrillas directed and supplied from Nicaragua, and went to the polls to vote decisively for democracy. For the communists in El Salvador it was a humiliating defeat.

But there was another factor the communists never counted on, a factor that now promises to give freedom a second chance -- the freedom fighters of Nicaragua.

You see, when the Sandinistas betrayed the revolution, many who had fought the old Somoza dictatorship literally took to the hills, and like the French Resistance that fought the Nazis, began fighting the Soviet Bloc communists and their Nicaraguan collaborators. These few have now been joined by thousands.

With their blood and courage, the freedom fighters of Nicaragua have pinned down the Sandinista army and bought the people of Central America precious time. We Americans owe them a debt of gratitude. In helping to thwart the Sandinistas and their Soviet mentors, the resistance has contributed directly to the security of the United States.

Since its inception in 1982, the Democratic Resistance has grown dramatically in strength. Today it numbers more than 20,000 volunteers and more come every day. But now the freedom fighters' supplies are running short, and they are virtually defenseless against the helicopter gunships Moscow has sent to Managua.

Now comes the crucial test for the Congress of the United States. Will they provide the assistance the freedom fighters need to deal with Russian tanks and gunships, or will they abandon the Democratic Resistance to its communist enemy?

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In answering that question, I hope Congress will reflect deeply upon what it is the resistance is fighting against in Nicaragua. Ask yourselves, what in the world are Soviets, East Germans, Bulgarians, North Koreans, Cubans and terrorists from the PLO and the Red Brigades doing in our hemisphere, camped on our own doorstep? Is that for peace?

Why have the Soviets invested \$600 million to build Nicaragua into an armed force almost the size of Mexico's, a country 15 times as large, and 25 times as populous. Is that for peace?

Why did Nicaragua's dictator, Daniel Ortega, go to the Communist Party Congress in Havana and endorse Castro's call for the worldwide triumph of communism? Was that for peace?

Some members of Congress ask me, why not negotiate? That's a good question, and let me answer it directly. We have sought, and still seek, a negotiated peace and a democratic future in a free Nicaragua. Ten times we have met and tried to reason with the Sandinistas. Ten times we were rebuffed. Last year, we endorsed church-mediated negotiations between the regime and the resistance. The Soviets and the Sandinistas responded with a rapid arms buildup of mortars, tanks, artillery and helicopter gunships.

Clearly, the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact have grasped the great stakes involved, the strategic importance of Nicaragua. The Soviets have made their decision -- to support the communists. Fidel Castro has made his decision -- to support the communists. Arafat, Qaddafi and the Ayatollah Khomeini have made their decision -- to support the communists. Now, we must make our decision. With Congress' help, we can prevent an outcome deeply injurious to the national security of the United States. If we fail, there will be no evading responsibility -- history will hold us accountable. This is not some narrow partisan issue; it is a national security issue, an issue on which we must act not as Republicans, not as Democrats, but as Americans.

Forty years ago Republicans and Democrats joined together behind the Truman Doctrine. It must be our policy, Harry Truman declared, to support peoples struggling to preserve their freedom. Under that doctrine, Congress sent aid to Greece just in time to save that country from the closing grip of a communist tyranny. We saved freedom in Greece then -- and with that same bipartisan spirit we can save freedom in Nicaragua today.

Over the coming days I will continue the dialogue with members of Congress, talking to them, listening to them, hearing out their concerns. Senator Scoop Jackson, who led the fight on Capitol Hill for an awareness of the danger in Central America, said it best: on matters of national security, the best politics is no politics.

You know, recently one of our most distinguished Americans, Clare Boothe Luce, had this to say about the coming vote. "In considering this crisis," Mrs. Luce said, "my mind goes back to a similar moment in our history -- back to the first years after Cuba had fallen to Fidel. One day during those years, I had lunch at the White House with a man I had known since he was a boy -- John F. Kennedy. 'Mr. President,' I said, 'no matter how exalted or great a man may be, history will have time to give him no more than one sentence. George Washington -- he founded our country. Abraham Lincoln -- he freed the slaves and preserved the Union. Winston Churchill -- he saved Europe.' 'And what, Clare,' John Kennedy said, 'did you believe -- or do you believe my sentence will be?' 'Mr. President,' she answered, 'your sentence will be that you stopped the communists -- or that you did not.'"

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Well, tragically, John Kennedy never had the chance to decide which that would be. Now, leaders of our own time must do so. My fellow Americans, you know where I stand. The Soviets and the Sandinistas must not be permitted to crush freedom in Central America and threaten our own security on our own doorstep.

Now the Congress must decide where it stands. Mrs. Luce ended by saying, "Only this is certain. Through all time to come, this, the 99th Congress of the United States, will be remembered as that body of men and women that either stopped the communists before it was too late -- or did not."

So tonight I ask you to do what you've done so often in the past. Get in touch with your Representative and Senators and urge them to vote yes; tell them to help the freedom fighters -- help us prevent a communist takeover of Central America.

I have only three years left to serve my country, three years to carry out the responsibilities you entrusted to me, three years to work for peace. Could there be any greater tragedy than for us to sit back and permit this cancer to spread, leaving my successor to face far more agonizing decisions in the years ahead? The freedom fighters seek a political solution. They are willing to lay down their arms and negotiate to restore the original goals of the revolution, a democracy in which the people of Nicaragua choose their own government. That is our goal also but it can only come about if the democratic resistance is able to bring pressure to bear on those who have seized power.

We still have time to do what must be done so history will say of us, we had the vision, the courage and good sense to come together and act -- Republicans and Democrats -- when the price was not high and the risks were not great. We left America safe, we left America secure, we left America free -- still a beacon of hope to mankind, still a light unto the nations.

Thank you and God bless you.

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8:22 P.M. EST